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The Role of Women in Political Leadership

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Abstract

The present study is about the role of women in political leadership in the present context of India and puts the issue in the context of constitutional, electoral and social framework which governs and who governs. The study, which is based on the general elections of 2024, the composition of the state assemblies and the legislative process of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (the Women's Reservation Act of 2023), reveals a paradox that lies in the working of Indian democracy. Although India has had some of the most significant women leaders in the modern world, it has been 30 years since they started implementing the provision of 30% of local government seats for women, but the representation of women in its national and state legislatures remains very low. In the 18th Lok Sabha elected in 2024, the women representation (13.6 per cent) was lower than 2019. The paper argues that the symbolic prominence-structural presence divide can be explained by the interaction of intra-party mechanisms determining who runs in elections, the costs of contesting the elections, and institutional changes and social norms. It explores the contributions of women leaders to governance and policies, the potential and limitation of reservation as a tool for change and what the upcoming delimitation and implementation of the reservation law means for the next ten years. The analysis concludes that the need for quotas is insufficient and change must occur within political parties, investment in women's political careers must be made, and norms that continue to consider leadership to be a male domain must be changed.

Keywords: women's political leadership, gender and governance, Women's Reservation Act, Lok Sabha, panchayati raj, descriptive and substantive representation, contemporary India.

1. Introduction

In most democratic governments, the paradox of women and power is as stark as anywhere else in the world, India included. Before any major democracy in the west appointed a woman Prime Minister, the country appointed a woman Prime Minister in 1966 and had women as the President, Chief Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, and Finance Minister of the country. The Constitution mandates that more than a million women be elected to village-level councils and municipal bodies in India, in one of the largest experiments in the world to ensure that women lead. According to the definition of visibility, women seem to be at the helm of Indian politics.

But, if the lens shift from exceptional to structural, then the image is overturned. Women are still a small minority in the legislatures that are making national and state law. The membership of women in the first Parliament of free India is still in low double digits and decreased in 2024 after 70 years. According to the international league table of Inter-Parliamentary Union, India is among the lowest nations in terms of representation of women in the national legislative body. The country that produced Indira Gandhi has had difficulty creating a Parliament that reflects the country.



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Contradiction is the main issue of this paper. It raises issues like: why a polity which has been able to produce individual women leaders at the highest levels, is unable to expand the base of women in elective leadership, what influence do women in elective leadership have on governance and policy and do the changes under way, most notably the reservation of one-third of seats in the legislature for women help to reduce the gap? The issue isn't about celebrating or bemoaning, it's about explaining and from that, about eliciting what would need to happen for parity to move from rhetoric to reality.

The discussion unfolds in steps. In the first part the scope and method is outlined and thereafter the question is set into the literature of descriptive and substantive representation of the subject. It is a journey from freedom movement till today, it shows the present status of women in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, State Assemblies and Local Government and then moves onto causes, looking into the party, economic and social barriers which hinder women's entry. It reviews the contributions women leaders have made, looks at the Women's Reservation Act, presents a review of the cumulative evidence on quotas and presents a discussion on the way forward.

2. Scope, Objectives, and Methodology

The study is centered on the contemporary India, since the early 90s when the amendments to the Constitution were implemented and local reservation was made, up to the present and the intervening years of the general election in 2024 and the reservation law in 2023. Previous history is used as a backdrop and not as a subject of study.

2.1 Research objectives

The paper pursues four linked objectives:

1. To document the current state of women's representation across the tiers of Indian government, from the village council to the national parliament, using the most recent available data.
2. To explain the persistent under-representation of women in legislatures by identifying and weighing the institutional, economic, and social factors that shape candidate selection and electoral success.
3. To assess the contributions of women in political leadership, distinguishing between their symbolic presence and their substantive influence on governance and policy outcomes.
4. To evaluate the likely effect of the Women's Reservation Act and related reforms, drawing on the established evidence from the panchayat experience.

2.2 Method and sources

It is not an experimental study but is an analytical and interpretive study. Combines quantitative information and qualitative evidence. All quantitative data has been obtained from records kept by the Election Commission of India and Association for Democratic Reforms analysis and PRS Legislative Research analysis and comparative data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The sources for qualitative evidence include studies on gender and Indian politics, gendered case studies on women leaders and panchayat presidents, and the histories of the reservation debate in the legislature. In cases where the numbers vary from source to source (because of by-elections,



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when counts were completed, or because of different interpretations of contested seats), the interval is indicated instead of pretending to offer any greater degree of accuracy.

Two caveats apply. First, here representation is mostly measured in elected office, and influence of women in movements and other forms of representation, as well as in bureaucracy and civil society is real but largely beyond the scope of this study. Second, the analysis is national and the large variations across the States is relevant in itself but are not analysed state-wise.

3. Conceptual Framework

Representation of women in legislatures is a perennial issue in political theory and the most relevant binary categorization for this paper is that between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation is about the quality of representation: a perfectly descriptively representative legislature would have women, who make up about half the population, in about half the seats. Substantive representation relates to the extent to which the interests and priorities of a group are pursued in the legislative process, by whom.

Although they are similar, they are not the same and one of the main empirical problems in the field. But the argument is not only one of justice—namely, a democratic society is not equal if it routinely denies equal citizenship to half of its members by failing to include women in its governing bodies—but also on the grounds that descriptive representation will bring about substantive results: women in power will bring about different ways of allocating resources, identifying problems, and amplifying issues than if they were not there. The skeptical view suggests that the link is weak, party discipline and common class interest can be more powerful than gender, and that token representation might not lead to much change.

There is a third idea, critical mass, that is between these positions. It argues that the effects of women's presence are not necessarily linear or direct: a small number of women in a large chamber can be marginalised or assimilated, but when they are at a critical mass (typically one third) they can be powerful enough to shift the agenda, to change the culture of the institution. This idea has been adopted in various democracies, including India, in the resolution of the target of one third in the reservation policy, despite the opposition in the scholarship.

The subsequent analysis is based on this. The data sections are used for descriptive representation measurement. The substantive representation testing is done on the panchayat, contribution. The critical-mass hypothesis is put into discussion directly in the discussion of reservation and the one-third threshold.

4. Historical Context: From the Freedom Movement to the Republic

Women's participation into the public life in India started even before independence and was linked to the nationalist movement. In the early 20th century, the mass mobilizations of women into the political arena brought more women than ever before in the subcontinent into the political arena, with the likes of Sarojini Naidu leading the Indian National Congress, and the many women who were arrested during the civil disobedience movement establishing a presence that the constitution makers could not ignore. The CA itself had women who participated in the drafting of the



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Constitution, and India, from its inception, has adopted the universal adult suffrage, unlike the western democracies which had a long and arduous struggle for women's suffrage.

But this early promise was not reflected in the new republic's legislatures' proportional representation. The proportion of women, however, was quite low in the first Lok Sabha and rose over the decades, albeit in a piecemeal manner. The very prominent figure of exception was Indira Gandhi who held and exercised the paramount executive authority in India for decades, but it was her own and a dynastic affair, not the culmination of a new wave of women joining the elective process. Their individual female figures have been accentuated and the overall female visibility is sparse and has been decided from the beginning.

It was the early 90s when the critical institutional move had to be made. One-third of seats in the village councils and urban local bodies were reserved for women, leading to the emergence overnight of a large number of elected women at the grassroots level; and India became a laboratory for the study of mandated women's leadership. The contrast which forms the character of India today, of assured and ample female representation in local government and the virtual absence of women from the higher legislatures, starts here and gives form to all that comes after.

5. The Current Landscape of Representation

The figures speak for themselves: the situation of women in India today with regard to the size of the representation gap at the top, as well as the extent of the representation gap between the different levels of government.

5.1 The Lok Sabha

The overall results of the first general election post the Women's Reservation Act were less than desired in terms of the spirit of the law to move towards more women candidates. Of the 543 members of the 18th Lok Sabha, 74 were women, amounting to a mere 13.6 per cent, down from 78 women and 14.4 per cent of the 17th Lok Sabha. There were a total of 8,300 candidates for the seven phases, of which less than 10% were women, with women's success rate, defined as the number of female candidates that won, being lower than in the previous contest. So the first election following the enactment of a landmark reservation law was a step back in the very thing the law was supposed to be better.

There were unequal shares between the parties. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had the highest number of Women members (around 31), followed by Indian National Congress (INC) and Trinamool Congress (TMC). Trinamool Congress is one party which has maintained the ratio of men and women almost in equal proportions – 40% women in the Lokpalaya as compared to smaller proportion of women in larger parties of the nation. Most of the women elected were first time members and, as a whole group, they were on average younger than the house as a whole and as educated as the men.

Table 1. Women in the Lok Sabha across selected elections

Lok Sabha (year)	Women members (approx.)	Share of seats (approx.)
First (1952)	22	≈ 5%
15th (2009)	59	≈ 11%



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16th (2014)	64	≈ 12%
17th (2019)	78	≈ 14.4%
18th (2024)	74	≈ 13.6%

Figures are approximate and drawn from Election Commission of India data and independent analyses; small variations across sources reflect by-elections and differing counts.

5.2 The Rajya Sabha and state assemblies

Women's representation in the upper house of the parliament, the Rajya Sabha is also not high, in a broad range same as that of the Lok Sabha. The situation is much worse in state legislative bodies, which are involved in everything that happens to a citizen, whether he is in the field of health, education, police or land. Women represent about 10 percent of all legislative assembly members, nationally, and some states have a considerably higher percentage than others – some states have almost none and some states have a very noticeable number of women. This is the level most likely to deliver the maximum absolute increase in women's legislators as the reservation law would be applicable at both the Lok Sabha and state assemblies.

5.3 Local government

The other story comes from under the legislatures. The reservation of seats for women in the panchayats and municipalities, which is at one-third and more than half in several states, has led to the election of more than one million women in local governments. The difference from the legislatures above is not too much different, and the membership of women here is not a marginal but a guaranteed and often majority presence. In the local sphere, the leadership of women has become a norm, and a women chief is not conspicuous in most of the country; whereas the same political process that fails to engender women at the parliamentary level. This gradient of the abundance at the base and thinness at the apex is the one most important piece of structural information about women's political leadership in contemporary India and the next section is dedicated to explaining this gradient.

6. Explaining the Deficit: Barriers to Women's Entry

So why is it that the higher legislatures, where there is no such assurance as yet, are so resistant to women's presence in office in such numbers as at the local level is the case at present? The reason is that it is due to several barriers of which none is, by itself, causative, but all of which, when combined, cause the actual deficit.

6.1 The party gatekeeping problem

The first limitation is the political parties that possess the ultimate and only very limited and critical resource, namely, the nomination to run for a certain office. First-past-the-post voting systems leave the decision on who to select to party leaders and selection committees, which continue to be highly male dominated and often deter women. These attributes—of incumbency, financial muscle, established local networks—read as winnable, and are distributed unequally by gender. This is where women are nominated in smaller numbers and as the evidence shows time and time again they are nominated for seats where the party knows they will lose and thus it is a



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'tokenism'. In those regional parties where parties nominated women to contest winnable seats, women have succeeded and it is a matter of selection and not electability.

6.2 The economics of contesting

Elections are costly in India and, the resources that are necessary to conduct a credible campaign act as a filter to weed out those with poor capitalisation. Women are filtered out at higher rates than men, since, on average, women have less access than men to informal networks of donors and patrons, who fund campaigns. The cost is not just the actual cost of campaigning, but the whole apparatus of patronage, mobilisation and visibility, which a serious candidacy demands. This financial obstacle exacerbates the party obstacle; just as gatekeepers assess and determine which candidates are winnable, they also make such judgments based on who is able to pay their own way.

6.3 Social norms and the double burden

But behind the institutional and economic hurdles are the social norms that continue to link political leadership to men and women's primary role in household. A woman seeking political office has to deal with people's expectations of what is acceptable for her and how much time she should spend at home and with her family, which her male counterpart may not have to deal with, and also often the way she's looked at as an office-seeker – something that is normally reserved for men. Political climate might also be physically threatening, rhetorically threatening and so that's threatening to enter. It's the first set of filters in the pipeline, which shape who even considers running for office, and it plays alongside the other filters in the pipeline -- party and money -- and is responsible for the deficit.

6.4 The proxy phenomenon

One barrier which is worth mentioning but which does not relate to the question of the extension of the reservation up, is the barrier peculiar to the reserved tiers. In some places, where seats are reserved for women, there are indeed women but there is a real woman, the local idiom for which is sarpanch-pati, which means "the husband of the sarpanch is in charge in her place." It is indeed real, but, as a phenomenon, there is also evidence that it is a transitory one – one that goes away as women gain experience over successive terms and the novelty of women in leadership fades. It's a reason to design a reservation carefully, to invest in the capacity of the people elected, but NOT to withhold the opportunity.

7. The Contributions of Women in Leadership

The quantitative disadvantage is compensated for by a history of contribution relevant to the substantive gains question. Evidence shows that women in office matter – and the more women there are in office, the more impact they have, at the local level.

7.1 Evidence from local government

Women's compulsory membership ensured that the impact of panchayat was subject to careful examination and the results are among the most quoted in the literature. Village councils run by women are more likely to direct investments towards the goods and services women in those communities value, such as drinking water and sanitation, and local infrastructure, and are more



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likely to be responsive to women and girls' issues. It is essential to capture visibility of women in leadership beyond resource allocation, as there is evidence that the visibility of a female leader strengthens girls' dreams to learn, look for employment opportunities and diminishes the gap between family dreams for their sons and daughters. They are substantive, and they are the strongest evidence that we have that women in office equals outcomes, in addition to doing the right thing.

7.2 Women leaders in executive and legislative office

Naturally, the evidence at the higher levels is more about individuals than aggregates since the numbers are not large enough to lend themselves to the type of analysis that the data of the panchayats allow. However, the performances of women chief ministers, women at the helm of the major ministries like finance and women becoming the Lok Sabha Speaker has definitely proved their capabilities in all spheres of governance and has widened the scope of confidence in the public about women's capability to do everything.

Women legislators have also contributed in moving issues such as domestic violence, harassment in the workplace and child protection onto the agenda, and – if not proof – some evidence that greater female representation would do so. The outer edge of this evidence is precisely the paper's description, namely, that at the national level a test of the critical mass hypothesis has not yet been applied, due to the small number of women in the legislatures.

8. The Women's Reservation Act and the Politics of Quotas

The seat reservation policy is the main policy solution in addressing the representation deficit and has undergone a process of nearly 30 years before it is now approved but not yet implemented.

8.1 A long road to enactment

First mooted in the 1990s, the proposal for creating reservation for women, one-third in Lok Sabha and assembly, had been stalled several times because of opposition, including demands for reservation within reservation, or sub-quotas for women from disadvantaged castes and communities, and parties' reluctance to cede winning seats. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, which was a constitutional amendment bill, was finally passed through the legislature and is a guarantee to provide 33% seats to women in the Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies.

8.2 The implementation gap

Timing is a condition of the promise of the law. There is a link between the coming into force of it and the new census and the new delimitation (redrawing of constituency boundaries) and it will not come into force for a few years and may not come into force for election after next. This gap was in part responsible for the fact that the 2024 result, despite the statute being in effect, saw a decrease in the proportion of women, since there was no requirement on the parties in that case. The postponement has come under criticism from those who claim "a guarantee delayed is a guarantee diluted, meaning that the issue of when the guarantee will happen is still a live political issue.



8.3 What the evidence says quotas can and cannot do

Panchayat experience gives a good idea of what results can be obtained from the type of higher level reservation. In the minimal sense that is the most crucial, quotas are a fact: They achieve the result of often and quickly filling seats in public bodies with women, where voluntary systems have failed. It also reports that the proxy problem is a reality, but a transitory reality and that women are more effective the more they do it. At the same time, the experience points to the fact that a quota can only provide a floor on the number, but not a solution to the situation, the party organizations, the money and the norms that have contributed to the deficit. Reservation thus can be best understood as necessary but not sufficient, it provides a mechanism to be present and is the precondition for substantive influence, but deeper work on reform is done along with it.

8.4 The debate over quotas

It's important to say what quota skeptics say, which have an impact on the politics of the question: They say that it could tarnish the images of those who are elected through quota, it could be a way to perpetuate family and proxy candidatures, it could override the voters' choice, and merit should be the criterion to be elected. Those who opposed the measure say the existing selection method isn't a neutral merit-based approach, that stigma and proxy voting are not omnipresent and pervasive (as the panchayat evidence shows), and that the absence of a guarantee has actually proved to be very durable. The bottom line of this paper is that the Indian evidence bears out the proponents of quotas on the question of whether quotas lead to presence, and the skeptics on the question of whether the presence is sufficient.

9. Comparative Perspective and the Road Ahead

In an international comparison, the situation of India is alarming. It has fewer women in Parliament than other countries and the world average and has a low ranking on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's scale. States (and some less developed than India) have achieved parity or nearly parity through quotas and changed party practice, and evidently change can be rapid, and the Indian situation need not be inevitable because of its level of development.

There are a number of factors in India's journey ahead. The first is the timing and design of the implementation of the reservation, including the resolution of the long pending issue of sub-quotas that will have an impact on the legitimacy of the law, and the distributional impact of the law. The second is what parties do in anticipation of the quota before the election, and a grudging quota that only achieves women's presence through proxy and unwinnable-seat placements will not confer women's presence with influence, but a positive quota approach will pave the way to getting women to win seats. The third is the slower progress on tackling economic and social obstacles, on funding for women's campaigns, on nurturing women's political careers from local to national and on the gradual change in norms through the visibility of women in office. A virtuous circle could be on the horizon. The evidence of aspirations of girls being raised by female leaders in the panchayats suggests that if there is a large number of women in the legislatures, they could over time help to normalise the role of women, as the local reservation has done in the village level,



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thereby helping to break the social barrier that holds back the next generation of women. Whether or not that circle will turn remains to be decided.

10. Conclusion

This paper has tried to expound the paradox of women's role in political leadership in contemporary India instead of merely taking it as a statement. While India has an amazing history of women taking the highest offices, it has also ensured a high number of women are in the local government, but it has not been the case with the legislatures that make national and state laws, and this small number was further reduced in 2024. Once you understand the paradox, there's no puzzle. The result of superb (mainly dynastic) visibility and no base widening is Top. The constitutional security is the source of abundance at the foot. The thinness in between is due to the open door selection process, party gatekeeping, and the economic barrier to challenge the system and social norms all of which work to exclude women.

This document shows three points from the facts presented. First, the underrepresentation of minorities in India at the legislative level is quite low and will not improve at the rate seen over the last seven decades. Second, the link between descriptive and substantive representation – which does not easily measure when women are not in significant quantity – is established in the places where women are in larger numbers, such as the panchayats, where women's leadership is linked to what governments offer and what girls desire. Third, whilst essential to closing the gap, reservation as a tool that brings presence is not sufficient to close the gap, as it does not address the deficits created by the party structures, the financing and the norms themselves.

The next decade will be a real test for the Women Reservation Act – will it become a game-changer as hoped by its advocates or a right that gets deferred and defused in slow and grudging motions. Whether the political class views the statute as a "speed limit" or a "floor" will be the answer rather than the statute itself. The women grassroots of a democracy that has shown how women's leadership contributes to a change in governance have every reason and now the legal mandate to extend that to the parliament. The question whether or not it does this will be an open question and this will determine the future of women's political leadership in India.

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