

**Review Article****Women and Politics in India: A Perspective****Mayengbam Nandakishwor Singh****Author Affiliation**

Faculty of Political Science, National  
Law University and Judicial  
Academy, Assam, Hazo Road,  
Amingaon, Kamrup,  
Assam, India  
Guwahati: 781 031.

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**Mayengbam Nandakishwor Singh,**  
Faculty of Political Science, National  
Law University and Judicial  
Academy, Assam, Hazo Road,  
Amingaon, Kamrup,  
Assam, India  
Guwahati: 781 031.  
E-mail: [nkishwors@gmail.com](mailto:nkishwors@gmail.com)

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A detestable political countenance that has been concealed behind the ugly political manoeuvrings for long is women's negligible representation in Indian politics. Whenever invoked about the matter, almost all political parties pay usual lip service sans any substantive actions. Of late, women's reservation bill is largely obscured from getting voted in Indian parliament. This paper first examines the core factors that impede women representation in Indian politics, and then it analyses the impasses around women's reservation bill which would most probably invigorate women's representation in politics.

**Keywords:** Democracy; Reservation; Caste; Sphere; Culture.**Introduction****Women and Political Participation**

Without any doubt, women empowerment has been one of the much discussed themes in India for a long time now. One of the irrefutable reasons for this is that women have been subjugated in all spheres of life for centuries. Amongst many steps, empowering women through a reservation policy for women in politics appears to be one most plausible way today. Women have been under represented in Indian politics and it is the time that this perennial malaise is resolved constitutionally. It must be noted that women's political participation would become meaningful only when they have equitable representations. Political participation is not simply about the right to exercise one's franchise; it also means the ability to influence in the policy and decision making process of a state. Political

participation can be categorized as democratic only when women have fair share of political representations. The fact is that politics is the activity that does affect everyone in society and it is too expensive to keep women aloof from politics. Politics is, to quote Otto Von Bismarck, is the art of possible. It goes without saying that for every political system to be characterised as democratic, women representation in politics is a requisite essentiality. As Joni Lovenduski rightly argues that 'political representation underpins the legitimacy of democratic states [1].' The true ideals of democracy can never be realised as long as women are outside the realm of politics. As it goes without saying that politics determines all; woman being part of the political decision making bodies democratises the entire set up.

**Status of Women in Indian Politics**

It is not a unique phenomenon confined to any specific country that women are not significantly

represented in politics. This is a global scenario and women are underrepresented around the world. In the advanced countries, women representation in politics is below satisfaction. Even in the most developed country like the United States of America, not a single woman has not been elected as a president. Most importantly, women suffrage in USA was given only in 1920 after much struggles. It is the Nordic countries which have the higher women representations in politics owing to three important factors. In Scandinavian countries, women literacy is high and there is voluntary gender quota system for women in politics. Moreover, these countries adopt welfare state policies that largely enhance women empowerment. But in India, there is an observable paradox about women politics in India. There have been many powerful chief ministers in the Indian states since independence and women have held the position of president and prime minister. What is more, women are the unchallenged heads of many regional political parties. Moreover, it is true that women representation has steadily increased over the years in Indian politics, but still below the satisfactory level. The number of MPs have increased in Indian parliament since the first general election. Even women turn out for voting is high in all elections. Despite all these, the irony here is that women are not in the forefront of Indian politics. The common belief behind it is that major political parties in India do not genuinely promote women to be in the lead.

For instance, the grand old party, that is, the congress has been headed by women on several phases, but the number of women are minimal in the party. Likewise, many parties have a provision in their constitution that certain seats are reserved for women in different committees and yet it is not fully put into practice. Another surprising fact is that the rate of women literacy and women representation in India do not correspond. There are states which have higher female literacy rate and the women representations in those states are relatively low. For instance, Kerala and many North Eastern States have higher level of female education and autonomy. But these states do not necessarily produce higher women representation in politics. On the contrary, states which are tagged as the most backward states such as Bihar, UP, Rajasthan have higher women representation in India. One reason for this paradox is that women are not encouraged to be a part of active politics and the liberal educated women still carry the pang to look down at politics as the dirty activity for power game.

### **What Cripple Women in Indian Politics?**

Looking from the point of population, women are not less than half of Indian demography, and there is no reason why women should not be a part of political decision making bodies. But on the ground, women are not reasonably represented in politics as men predominantly command the shots of political decision making. Apart from women's underrepresentation in Indian politics, women are not adequately represented in all the three wings of government [2]. Besides many fundamental reasons that cripple women to be in politics, illiteracy, pressure from family and society, dependency on men, and various cultural constraints are the visible factors which dissuade women from entering in politics. Traditionally, politics is considered to be a domain of men and it is the competing ground for power among men. So women are eased out of this domain. There is a prevalent patriarchal culture in India since ages and men not only call the shots in all aspects of life, they also dominate the political sphere. Today, politics is highly centralised and the role of civil societies in politics is not vibrant as they should be. Even many of the so called civil societies in India are not deemed to be neutral. Along with it, politics is highly criminalised and as the criminal elements in politics make it onerous, this trend diminishes the scope for women to engage in politics. In addition, politics is seen to be in public sphere which is meant for men while women are to be in the household that comes under private sphere. This mindset still continues to hover around the psyche of Indian men by and large. But the prudent question is if women find it not motivating to enter in politics, then what must be the practical way out? In fact, it is not judicious to say that women's less representation in Indian politics is because of the lack of the interest. This is clearly proven by the fact that women are actively participating in local self-government in large numbers. The question is not about women's interest in politics, but about giving the ample opportunities to take part in politics. An increasing visible trend, according to one study, is that women can actively participate in political party process, they can successfully campaign in elections, they can attend party meeting, and they can defeat male counterparts [3].

### **Why Women Reservation Bill in India?**

Women reservation bill is a hotly debated issue in India and it is the one surest way of inducting women in Indian politics. Women reservation bill is the need of the hour in Indian politics. There are some salient provisions in this bill. Thirty percent of the total seats

in Indian parliament and state legislative assemblies must be reserved for women. This reservation is to be continued for fifteen years followed by a mandatory review. It must be performed through a rotation system. This means a seat must be reserved once in three consecutive elections. And one third of the seats already reserved for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes must be reserved for women. This bill has been passed in the Rajya Sabha in March 2010; but it has not been voted in the Lok Sabha because of the lack of the consensus among political parties. It is also commonly perceived that political parties do not push it sincerely. The rationale behind the women reservation bill is that since women are lagging behind in many aspects which results in women becoming inept to compete openly with men in politics, women must be given some reservation for specific period. Women must be allowed to establish themselves in politics and this bill will set up the stage from where women can leap in politics.

### **Why Women Reservation Bill must be Pushed?**

There are enough reasons why women reservation must be implemented. First, women will be enormously empowered through this bill because women will become part of the highest political decision making which concerns all. Women can address their issues in a much more efficacious way since men cannot frame policies that can effectively tackle women's problems. Women know what their inherent problems are and what their requirements are. Second, there is a long prevailing 'political culture' in India that men is the main engineer of the politics. When women enter the legislatures in fair numbers, the perception about politics will automatically change. In the process, the patriarchal mindset in politics will be summarily transformed. Third, the trend of 'criminalisation of politics' will be drastically minimised because equitable women representatives in legislatures will cut down the space of criminals occupying political spaces in politics. Criminalization of politics is a dangerous trend in Indian politics today. M.P. Jain defines 'criminalization of politics' is the increasing nexus between criminals and politics [4]. For the record, most of the criminals in Indian politics happen to be men. Fourth, with the proposed reservation for at least fifteen years, women will have sufficient time to establish themselves fully in politics. And when the reservation period gets over, women can openly contest men in politics. Sixth, for a meaningful and full-fledged nation building, women should not be left behind in politics. India needs significant women representation in politics for a successful nation building.

### **Basic Lacunas in Women Reservation Bill**

Apart from the merits, women reservation bill looms some lacunas. The first argument is that the bill is elite centric and hence it will benefit only those women who belong to elite class or forward caste. It will not help those women in the periphery to seize their place in politics through reservation as they simply lack those means to be successful in political activities. So chances are very high that discrimination among women will be furthered. One major drawback of this bill is that women reservation without specific quotas for SCs, STs and minority women would only strengthen the position of upper caste women in politics, and thus, this would not promote the status of women in politics as a whole [5]. The reason being that an illiterate, economically poor lower caste woman may not be able to contest against an upper caste woman. Secondly, women will be acting as proxy even after they are elected through reservation. The real power will be exercised by the men and thus it will not bring any substantive effects on women's role in politics. The third point is that all established political families will put up their own women candidates in the elections once the reservation policy is embraced. With the political power centres around the political families, it will lead to the perpetuation of dynastic politics in politics. Another claim is that this bill is opposite to the idea of electoral democracy. Thirty-three percent seats reserved for women combined with the already existing twenty-two percent reserved for SCs & STs will count for more than half of the total seats of all the legislatures. This means that legitimacy of the electoral democracy will be seriously challenged in the case of the more than the total seats in legislatures are reserved. Moreover, the rotation system proposed is flawed in many counts and chaotic as it is random in selecting the seats for reservation. It will keep the candidates in tenterhooks and any interest to chalk out the plan for the development of constituencies may be seriously hampered.

### **Why Some Political Parties Confront the Bill?**

It is one of the rarest bill in which most of the principal political parties in India have given their support, at least in principle. It is a bill in which the ruling party and the opposition do not appear to have much diametric stances. It must not be also forgotten that Indian constitution has already laid down the provisions for women reservation not less than one third of the seats in panchayats [6]. And yet there are some political parties which are vehemently opposing women reservation bill in parliament. These parties are influential regional parties and they

are notably the RJD led by Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar and Samajwadi Party headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav in UP. These parties are essentially backward class based regional parties with considerable MPs in parliament. Their main contention is that the proposed bill fails to reflect the interest of backward class women, Dalit women, and religious minority women. This bill is basically aimed at fulfilling the interest of the elite class women. According to them, instead of this bill, each political party must allocate ten percent of the election tickets to women in every election. It is a common contention, besides all, that the patriarchal culture ingrained in the Indian male psyche prevents this step to move forward. Interestingly, contrary to the common notion that it is the men who resist the bill since its conception, some feminists too do not support the bill on the ground that application of it will justify the myth that women are inferior to men. Like Sarojini Naidu who voiced against any kind of reservation for women, their point is that women are on par with men and they must compete in politics openly.

### **Concluding Remarks**

World is fully globalised today and women's roles in all spheres have increased by leaps and bounds. If India intends to be characterised as a truly democratic country, it must ensure that women have fair representation in politics. Women reservation bill in politics is one feasible step in this direction. Women reservation bill must see the light of the day albeit it has some inner cons and political parties

must wholeheartedly lend their support for the bill. But how this proposed bill, when passed, will impact the caste equation in politics is an area of study worth exploring. One perspective that may emerge is that it will surge upper castes to consolidate their clutch in Indian politics. This is factually correct that the ruling party, either in the centre or most of the states, are dominated by the upper castes. The broad inference therefore is that this bill will bear less significant development in the political equation of lower caste women in India.

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