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Women's reservation

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Why is in news? Women's reservation: Seeds of the idea under Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao govts

The chequered legislative history of the Women's Reservation Bill began 27 years ago when the H D Deve Gowda-led government introduced it in Parliament in September 1996.

Almost every government has since tried to push it through — the UPA government even managed to get it passed in Rajya Sabha in 2010 — but the move could not come to fruition for lack of political will and consensus.

Background of women reservation bill:

It was **originated from the pre-Independence era** when several women's organizations demanded political representation for women.

In **1955**, the government appointed committee recommended that **10% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State legislative assemblies** should be reserved for women.

In the **1980s**: demand for women's reservations gained momentum.

The **National Perspective Plan for Women (1988)** recommended that 30% of seats in all elected bodies should be reserved for women.

This recommendation was reiterated in the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, which was adopted in 2001.

The **Panchayati Raj Act (1993)** was amended to reserve 33% of all seats in local government bodies for women.

The **Women's Reservation Bill** proposes to reserve 33% of seats in the **Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies** for women.

It was first introduced in the Lok Sabha as the **81st Amendment Bill** in September 1996.

The Bill failed to get the approval of the House and lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha.

The Bill was reintroduced in 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2004. However, the Bill failed to receive majority votes.

Finally, after lot of dramatic scenes and protest, the **Bill was approved in the Rajya Sabha, in 2010**.

Highlights of the Bill:

The **Constitution (One Hundred and Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2008** seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies. The allocation of reserved seats shall be determined by such authority as prescribed by Parliament.

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One third of the total number of seats **reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes** shall be reserved for women of those groups in the Lok Sabha and the legislative assemblies.

Reserved seats may be **allotted by rotation** to different constituencies in the state or union territory.

Reservation of seats for women shall **cease to exist 15 years** after the commencement of this Amendment Act.

Key Issues and Analysis:

There are **divergent views** on the reservation policy. Proponents stress the necessity of affirmative action to improve the condition of women. Some recent studies on panchayats have shown the positive effect of reservation on empowerment of women and on allocation of resources.

Opponents argue that it would perpetuate the unequal status of women since they would not be perceived to be competing on merit. They also contend that this policy **diverts attention from the larger issues** of electoral reform such as criminalisation of politics and inner party democracy.

Reservation of seats in Parliament **restricts choice of voters to women candidates**. Therefore, some experts have suggested alternate methods such as reservation in political parties and dual member constituencies.

Rotation of reserved constituencies in every election may reduce the incentive for an MP to work for his constituency as he may be ineligible to seek re-election from that constituency.

The **report examining the 1996 women's reservation Bill** recommended that reservation be provided for women of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) once the Constitution was amended to allow for reservation for OBCs. It also recommended that **reservation be extended to the Rajya Sabha and the Legislative Councils**. Neither of these recommendations has been incorporated in the Bill.

Status of Women Reservation in India:

Gujarat – It elected just 8% of women legislators in its 182-member assembly.

Himachal Pradesh – Where every second voter is a female, has elected 67 men and only 1 woman.

National average – The national average of women in all state assemblies **remains around 8%**.

In India, the first Lok Sabha of 1952 had 5 per cent of its Members of Parliament and so, 24 women were elected out of 489 parliamentary seats.

The **current Lok Sabha** has the **highest-ever percentage of women MPs**, at **14 per cent**, which is **lower than the global average of 24 per cent**.

Rankings – India ranks **144 out of 193 countries** in the representation of women in parliament according to **Inter-Parliamentary Union's report**.

Among our immediate neighbours, **India falls behind Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal**.

Arguments supporting the bill:

Women's active political participation is **crucial in their fight against the abuse, discrimination, and inequality** they face, and in promoting gender equality.

Sustainable **progress towards human development indicators** relies heavily on women's political participation.

A **representative and functional democracy** requires political participation from all segments of society.

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Women's political participation can inspire them to work towards creating a more equal and better society, leading to inclusive national development.

Eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women, as outlined in the Preamble and Constitution of India, is integral to promoting equality of rights and freedoms.

Arguments against the bill:

It would **perpetuate the unequal status of women** since they would not be perceived to be competing on merit.

Reservation **may benefit only privileged women**, worsening the situation for marginalized and underprivileged groups.

The **rotation of reserved constituencies** in each election could **reduce the incentive of an MP** to work for their constituency, as they may become ineligible to seek re-election from that same constituency.

Reservation **may lead to a "proxy culture"** or a situation where elected women lack real power and act on behalf of male decision-makers.

Reserving legislative positions for women may result in qualified men losing out on those positions.

Way Forward:

There are 3 essential, non-negotiable concepts that form the basis of women's political empowerment: **gender equality**, the **right of women to realise their full potential**, and the **right of women to self-representation and self-determination**.

There is a gender imbalance in political decision-making, and women leaders must be more visible to have an impact on decisions about positions and to encourage young girls to help create their country.

India **urgently needs to feminise politics to boost the number of women representatives**. It would involve women's participation in decision-making, power sharing, running political parties, holding political office, and formulating policies at all levels of governance.