



Reserved seats, unchanged cages

Women's reservation means little unless society first transforms the lives women actually inhabit.

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Not all change disturbs what it touches. Some of it is just surface movement, a rearranging of faces while the structure underneath remains perfectly still. The seat is offered while the ground that produced the occupant remains unexamined. Numbers are announced while the conditions that shaped those numbers are quietly left in place. What looks like progress from one angle is, from another, the original arrangement wearing a more presentable face.

India's women's reservation debate has arrived at precisely this junction. On Friday, a Constitution amendment bill linked to implementing women's parliamentary reservation fell short of the two-thirds majority it required in the Lok Sabha. For all the speeches, all the procedural maneuvering, all the passionate invocations of women's empowerment, one question went entirely unasked: not how many women should sit in Parliament, but which women? That is the question this moment demands.

The Arithmetic of Appearances

Before any reservation comes into force, it is pertinent to begin with the numbers that already exist. Women currently constitute somewhere between twelve and fifteen per cent of the Lok Sabha, roughly seventy-four members in a house of five hundred and forty-three. A thirty-three per cent reservation would push that figure to approximately one hundred and eighty. The question is: where are the additional hundred-plus women supposed to come from?

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The data, examined carefully, tells a story the debate chose to skip. Of the women who currently reach Parliament, approximately half arrive through what can only be called [^] dynastic passage: they are the wives, daughters, or daughters-in-law of established political figures. Among male MPs, the corresponding figure is around twenty-five per cent. Reservation does not change the pool from which candidates are drawn; it expands the demand placed on it. The extra seats will, in the main, be filled by the same political families.

This pattern is not new. It is already visible in the panchayat system, where seats reserved for women have produced the phenomenon of the proxy sarpanch: a woman holds the title while a husband or father holds the office. The formal position and the actual power occupy different bodies; what the reservation bill proposes is to institutionalise this at scale.

That the society producing these candidates is actively retreating from women's participation, not advancing, makes the gesture at the top all the more striking. One number never appeared in the parliamentary debate: India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate. It has been declining, and today it stands lower than it did a quarter century ago. The same society that is demonstrably less willing to let women hold ordinary jobs than it was a generation back is now offering them Parliament. It is a society staging a spectacular gesture at the top while quietly closing the doors below.

International evidence confirms what the arithmetic already suggests. Rwanda's parliament has for years carried more than sixty per cent women. Yet it remains a country that continues to struggle deeply with violence against women. The number on the door tells you nothing reliable about what happens inside. Political parties, for their part, are not confused about their purposes; women's electoral turnout has been rising, and a bill of this kind harvests votes across the full spectrum. The apparent hypocrisy, the same machinery that sacralises gender hierarchy also championing women's parliamentary seats, dissolves once you stop expecting consistency at the level of values. The ego-machinery that consolidates power has no fixed content. It will be patriarchal when patriarchy serves it, and pro-women when one does, because the content was never the point, the consolidation was.

The Devi Trap

There is a distinction the debate never drew: the distinction between the public stage and the private sphere. The test of whether any move is actually pro-women is this: does it

disturb the private-sphere hierarchy? Reservation in legislatures, delivered through existing party machines, does not. Marital rape remains outside the scope of criminal law; a member of Parliament may be legally unprotected from assault within her own home. Honor killings continue, concentrated in the same belt where the reservation debate has generated some of its loudest enthusiasm: a woman who selects her own partner risks her life in ways a man in identical circumstances does not.

There is also a newer instrument of suppression worth naming. When a woman at the grassroots level raises her voice against the structures that confine her, she rarely faces formal legal consequences. She instead often faces a label: westernised, anti-national, anti-culture and so on. The woman's own family, her neighbours, often other women, become the agents of silencing. Women enforce patriarchy on women with an efficiency that no external authority could match, which is precisely why the system's public face can appear hospitable even as its foundation holds.

Society is entirely willing to venerate women publicly, but what it will not do is treat them as human beings, with the ordinary entitlements that implies: to choose a partner, hold a job, walk outside after dark, speak without clearance. Worship is the most elegant form of control ever devised, because the worshipped object must remain exactly as the worshipper requires: pure, still, and on the pedestal.

The apparent opposite of this trap carries its own version of the same problem. You can be a feminist and a misogynist simultaneously. "My choice, my voice" is not liberation if the choice was assembled by the same conditioning that assembled the cage. Both the patriarch looking at a woman and the social-media feminist presenting herself have, in many instances, arrived at the same destination: the woman as body, as surface, as display. The patriarch wishes to possess it; the feminist claims to own it.

None of this is an argument against reservation in principle; it is a question about what reservation, delivered through this machinery, will actually produce. This is also why the system has no difficulty rewarding certain women with parliamentary seats. The reward, when it comes, is for compliance. A truly self-determining woman, whose choices do not pass through the permission of a father, husband, or party structure, finds every door in Indian political life closing against her. She is, by definition, unmanageable, and the political party that cannot manage its candidate has no use for her. What the reservation bill expands, in practice, is the category of women who fit the mould the system already approves: disciplined, deferential, ideologically aligned.

She can be given a seat in Lok Sabha; she cannot choose her own life partner. She can address Parliament; she cannot step outside at night without a male escort. The seat is the same as the freedom. ^

What the Ground Must First Produce

There is a sequence that cannot be bypassed, however inconvenient its starting point. A woman must first be permitted to be born. India's sex ratios, and the far larger disappearance visible in census comparisons between male and female population, are not incidental anomalies. The figure of women statistically absent from the population is likely to run into crores when the next census data arrives.

Among those who are born, girls drop out of school at rates that no parliamentary reservation addresses, for reasons that careful investigation finds deeply disturbing. The woman who can read a contract, earn independently, and examine the terms of her own existence does not require a benevolent power to place her somewhere: she arrives on her own terms. She must also be able to walk outside. The case for sheltering women within the domestic space has always depended on the street being dangerous; making the street safe is therefore not a women's issue but a governance one.

The current traditional-religious figures, the dharmgurus whose commentary on women has grown increasingly retrograde even as the reservation debate has grown louder, are not an anomaly in any of this, they are its logical expression. What passes for religious tradition in their hands is not the India of the Upanishads, not the voice of Saint Lalleshwari, who walked out of an unbearable home and left behind verse the subcontinent is still reading centuries later. Those heights do not interest the traditionalist; he is not in the business of elevation but of restoration, of returning to an arrangement in which certain groups consumed most of what the society produced. His opposition to female autonomy is not a theological position. It is an economic one.

Even the well-intentioned response to all of this, the demand for gender equality, though it must be insisted upon, remains an insufficient destination. Equality is the floor, not the ceiling. What is actually needed is something harder to legislate and slower to build: a condition in which gender is simply not the first thing that registers when one human being looks at another. That shift does not come from a quota, it comes from a change in what the ego recognises as primary when it encounters another human being.

That change requires something both the dharmgurus and the legislature avoid: an honest confrontation with what that project has done to women's inner lives. ^

The inner wound that generations of this history have produced in women is not reached by any of the instruments the debate has considered. Reservation cannot reach it.

Feminism as ideology cannot reach it. The wound has migrated inward: what the society said about women, women have come to say to themselves, with a conviction no external enforcement could have produced. The ego does not merely accept the cage; it has made the cage its identity, which means the prospect of leaving can feel like the loss of a self rather than the recovery of one. The question is not political, it is the oldest one available: who am I when I am not performing the role I was assigned? Until that question becomes live, every external arrangement remains a rearrangement of the furniture.

Parliament will be transformed in substance when the ground it draws from is transformed. The defeat of today's bill changes nothing about that arithmetic. Nor, had it passed, would its passage have.

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