

REWRITING THE MAP OF DEMOCRACY: WOMEN, DELIMITATION, AND THE REFORM THAT RESHAPES POWER

by

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Introduction

Democracy is not just about elections; it is about ensuring fair representation for every section of society in governance. India has a long history of demographic inequalities and the marginalisation of women in legislative bodies, eroding the idea of equal representation. The two main constitutional mechanisms to address these issues are delimitation and the Women's Reservation Bill 2023. Delimitation is about redrawing electoral boundaries to reflect population changes,¹ while the Women's Reservation Bill is about gender equality in political participation.² Together, they constitute a transformative effort to reshape India's democratic architecture. This underrepresentation is not merely historical. Even after the passage of the 2023 Bill, the eighteenth Lok Sabha convened in 2024 with only seventy-four women among five hundred and forty-three members, or about 13.6 per cent of the House, a share that leaves India well behind the global average for women's parliamentary representation.³ The persistence of this gap helps explain why delimitation and reservation are increasingly examined together, rather than as separate reforms. In this blog, I discuss both these ideas, the constitutional and legal basis for each, and what they mean for India's democratic future.

Understanding Delimitation in India

Delimitation is the process of redrawing the boundaries of parliamentary and legislative assembly constituencies to reflect population changes. The main goal is to ensure that each constituency has about the same number of people to ensure the principle of "one person, one vote, one value." In India, delimitation is done by an independent body called the Delimitation Commission of India. It draws its power from the Delimitation Commission Act 2002 and the

¹ Drishti IAS, 'Delimitation' (Drishti IAS, To the Points) <<https://www.drishtias.com/to-the-points/Paper2/delimitation-1>> accessed 2 July 2026.

² Drishti IAS, 'Women's Reservation Bill 2023' (Drishti IAS, 23 September 2023) <<https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/women-s-reservation-bill-2023>> accessed 2 July 2026.

³ Association for Democratic Reforms, 'Lok Sabha Elections 2024: On Women's Representation, a Step Backwards' (ADR India) <<http://adrindia.org/content/lok-sabha-elections-2024-women%E2%80%99s-representation-step-backwards>> accessed 2 July 2026.

relevant constitutional provisions, namely, Articles 82 and 170 of the Constitution of India.⁴ The Commission itself is composed of a retired Supreme Court judge as chairperson, together with the Chief Election Commissioner and the State Election Commissioners of the states concerned. Its orders acquire the force of law once notified by the President and cannot be challenged before any court, a feature intended to insulate the exercise from partisan interference.⁵

In the past, delimitation exercises have been carried out from time to time, but the process was frozen in 1976 through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment to incentivise population control measures.⁶ The 84th Amendment later extended this freeze until 2026.⁷ Thus, the current constituency boundaries do not adequately reflect the current population realities, especially in states that have undergone substantial demographic changes. The next delimitation exercise, which will likely take place after the first census held after 2026, is expected to considerably alter political representation across states. Population growth could mean more seats for faster-growing states, which could shift the balance of power in Parliament.

This freeze very nearly came to an end in April 2026, when the Union government introduced the Constitution (One Hundred and Thirty-First Amendment) Bill, 2026, together with the Delimitation Bill, 2026, seeking to base the next delimitation on the 2011 Census rather than waiting for the first census after 2026, and to expand the Lok Sabha from five hundred and forty-three to eight hundred and fifty seats.⁸ The Constitution Amendment Bill was defeated in the Lok Sabha on 17 April 2026, securing only two hundred and ninety-eight of the three hundred and fifty-two votes required for a two-thirds majority, after opposition parties from the southern and north-eastern states argued that the change would penalise states that had successfully controlled population growth.⁹ Following this defeat, the accompanying Delimitation Bill also could not proceed, leaving the freeze on inter-state seat allocation, and the timeline for delimitation, unchanged for the present.¹⁰

⁴ (n 1).

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ PRS Legislative Research, 'The Delimitation Bill, 2026' (PRS India, 16 April 2026) <<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-delimitation-bill-2026>> accessed 2 July 2026.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ 'Delimitation Bill 2026: Introduced in Lok Sabha, Constitution Amendment Bill Voted Down' (VoterList, 18 April 2026) <<https://voterlist.co.in/lok-sabha-seat-increase-543-to-850-women-reservation-bill/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ 'Delimitation and Women's Reservation Reveal an Underlying Constitutional Tension in India' The Diplomat (27 April 2026) <<https://thediplomat.com/2026/04/delimitation-and-womens-reservation-reveal-an-underlying-constitutional-tension-in-india/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

The Women's Reservation Bill: A Step Towards Gender Equality

The Women's Reservation Bill 2023 is a historic step toward giving women a stronger voice in Indian politics.¹¹ With this Bill, one out of every three seats in the Lok Sabha (India's lower house of Parliament) and State Legislative Assemblies will be set aside for women—including in the seats already reserved for those from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Both Houses of Parliament passed this Bill in 2023, showing a strong national commitment to supporting women's participation in government.¹² India is the world's largest democracy, but women have long been underrepresented in its legislative bodies. This Bill aims to change that by giving more women the chance to shape decisions at the highest levels, both nationally and in every state. Even so, the scale of the gap the Bill seeks to close remains considerable: of the roughly eight thousand three hundred candidates who contested the 2024 Lok Sabha election, fewer than ten per cent were women, and more than a quarter of constituencies fielded no woman candidate at all.¹³ Comparative research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union suggests that legislated quotas of this kind, rather than voluntary party action, have historically been the more reliable driver of women's representation in national legislatures.¹⁴

It is important to note, however, that the Bill's provisions will not be implemented immediately. The reservation for women will become operative only after the next delimitation exercise, which involves redrawing constituency boundaries based on the most recent population data. This linkage means that the actual increase in women's reserved seats will take effect only once this process is completed, potentially delaying the practical impact of the legislation.¹⁵ This conditional commencement acquired fresh significance in April 2026, when the Ministry of Law and Justice formally notified the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 into force, even though the underlying reservation remains inoperative until the delimitation exercise contemplated by the new Article 334A is actually carried out.¹⁶

¹¹ (n 2).

¹² PRS Legislative Research, 'The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023' (PRS India) <<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-constitution-one-hundred-twenty-eighth-amendment-bill-2023>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹³ Association for Democratic Reforms, 'Women's Political Participation and Representation in India' (ADR India, 2026) <<https://adrindia.org/content/Womens-Political-Participation-and-Representation-in-India-2026>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'In a Super Election Year, Will Women Come Out on Top?' (IPU News in Brief, March 2024) <<https://www.ipu.org/news/news-in-brief/2024-03/in-super-election-year-will-women-come-out-top>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹⁵ (n 12).

¹⁶ (n 8).

Legislative tracking of the associated 2026 delimitation Bills accordingly continues to record them as unable to proceed, leaving the reservation's effective date tied to the outcome of the still-pending census and delimitation process.¹⁷

The Interconnection Between Delimitation and Women's Reservation

The linkage between delimitation and the Women's Reservation Bill is both practical and political. From a legal standpoint, implementing reservations requires a clear demarcation of constituencies to determine which seats will be reserved for women. Without updated constituency boundaries, the reservation process may lead to inconsistencies and inequities.¹⁸

From a governance perspective, this linkage ensures that the reservation system is applied to a modern and representative electoral framework. It prevents the allocation of reserved seats based on outdated population data, which could undermine the effectiveness of the policy.¹⁹

However, this interdependence has also attracted criticism. Some argue that tying women's reservation to delimitation may delay its implementation indefinitely, especially if the delimitation process faces political or administrative hurdles. Others contend that this approach reflects a cautious and structured method to ensure fairness and transparency. Opposition parties have pressed this criticism further, faulting the 2023 Act for extending reservation within Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe seats without creating a corresponding sub-quota for women from Other Backward Classes, a gap that had also contributed to the lapse of an earlier version of the Bill in 2014. Proponents respond that embedding the reservation within an already established delimitation mechanism, rather than adopting an immediately operative but administratively untested formula, was intended to protect the legitimacy of the eventual allocation of reserved seats.²⁰

Key Issues and Challenges

When we look at how delimitation and the Women's Reservation Bill interact, a few real-world challenges stand out:

Delay in Implementation

¹⁷ 'Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam: The Law, Delimitation, and 2026' (BharatDocs) <<https://bharatdocs.com/nari-shakti-vandan-adhiniyam-explained/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹⁸ (n 12).

¹⁹ (n 6).

²⁰ 'Women's Reservation Act of 2023: A Symbolic Gesture or a Significant Stride Towards Empowerment?' Economic and Political Weekly Engage (4 February 2025) <<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/womens-reservation-act-2023-symbolic-gesture-or-0>> accessed 2 July 2026.

Delimitation isn't expected until after 2026, and it relies on the next census. That means it could be years before women's reservation actually takes effect. This long wait has led some people to question whether the government is truly committed to gender equality, or if progress is being put off yet again. According to legislative tracking of the pending Bills, the reference date for the census currently underway is 1 March 2027, and since the next general election is due in 2029, a delimitation exercise based on that census is unlikely to be completed in time to apply to that election.²¹ On present projections, therefore, the reservation may not take practical effect until the 2029 or even the 2034 general elections.

Political Implications

Redrawing boundaries could change how many seats each state gets in Parliament. States with faster population growth might end up with more seats, which could spark political friction—especially between northern and southern states, since they've had very different experiences with population control. The scale of this shift was illustrated by projections prepared during the debate on the 2026 Bills: had seat allocation been recalculated using 2011 Census data while keeping the size of the Lok Sabha unchanged, Tamil Nadu's seats were projected to fall from thirty-nine to thirty-two and Kerala's from twenty to fifteen, while Uttar Pradesh's seats were projected to rise from eighty to eighty-nine and Bihar's from forty to forty-six.²² Estimates presented by opposition leaders during the debate suggested that the five southern states as a group could lose roughly twenty-six seats under such a recalculation.

Rotation of Reserved Seats

Under the Bill, the reserved seats for women will rotate with every election. This means women will get a chance to represent many different areas over time, but it could also make it hard for them to build strong ties with their communities or focus on long-term projects. This design departs from the model proposed in the lapsed 2008 Bill, under which reserved seats would have rotated after every general election rather than after every delimitation exercise; because delimitation occurs far less frequently than elections, the 2023 formula gives women MPs a comparatively longer, but less certain, tenure in any given constituency.²³ Analysts have cautioned that such infrequent rotation could weaken re-election incentives for sitting women

²¹ (n 6).

²² (n 8).

²³ (n 17).

representatives, even as it reduces the risk of any single constituency remaining permanently reserved.

Representation vs. Tokenism

There's still a lot of debate about whether this Bill will lead to genuine empowerment for women or just increase their numbers on paper. Critics worry that unless political parties change from within, women might still be kept away from real leadership and decision-making roles. Empirical research on panchayat-level reservation, in place since the early 1990s, offers a partial answer to this concern: women elected under reservation at the local level have been found to invest more heavily in public goods such as water, sanitation and primary schooling than their male counterparts, and a parliamentary Standing Committee reviewing local body reservations in 2009 found that fears of women serving merely as proxies for male relatives were largely unsubstantiated.²⁴ Whether these findings translate to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, where the scale of constituencies and the intensity of party control differ considerably from panchayats, remains an open empirical question.

Legal and Constitutional Significance

The Women's Reservation Bill is more than just a policy change—it's a big step forward for India's Constitution. By pushing for more women in politics, India is showing its commitment to gender equality and joining a global movement for fairer representation.²⁵

Delimitation, on the other hand, is about making sure every vote counts equally. It's a reminder that democracy isn't just about numbers, but about making sure everyone's voice has the same weight.²⁶

When you put these two ideas together, you see how India's Constitution isn't static—it changes and adapts to the needs of society. Striking the right balance between fairness, representation, and what's practical has always been at the heart of these changes, and that spirit continues today.

Conclusion

²⁴ 'Women's Reservation Bill — Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023 & UPSC Notes' (Anantam IAS) <<https://anantamias.com/women-reservation-bill-upsc/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

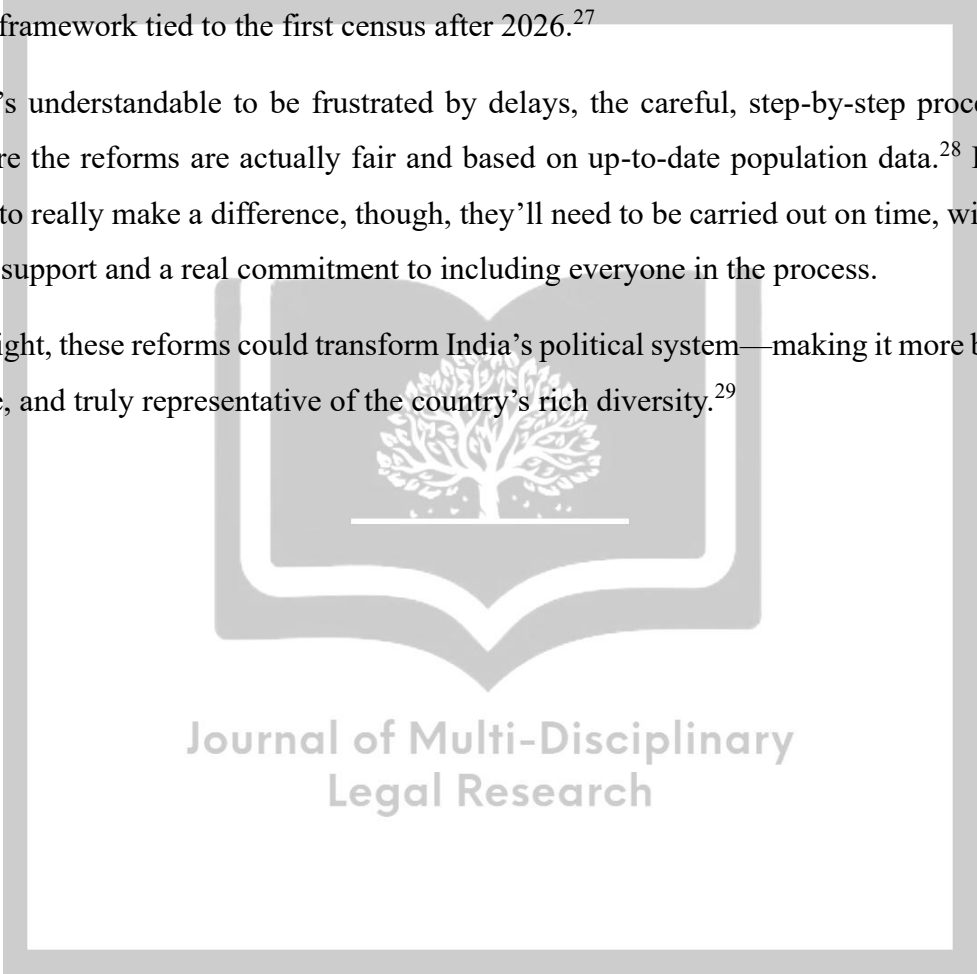
²⁵ (n 14).

²⁶ (n 1).

Delimitation and the Women's Reservation Bill are both major steps in India's journey toward a fairer democracy. Delimitation is about making sure every region gets the right amount of representation, while the Women's Reservation Bill is about giving women a stronger voice in politics. The way these two reforms are linked shows just how complicated big constitutional changes can be. The events of April 2026 illustrate this complexity concretely: an attempt to accelerate both reforms together was defeated in Parliament, meaning that, for now, the reservation and the redrawing of constituencies it depends on remain governed by the pre-existing framework tied to the first census after 2026.²⁷

While it's understandable to be frustrated by delays, the careful, step-by-step process helps make sure the reforms are actually fair and based on up-to-date population data.²⁸ For these changes to really make a difference, though, they'll need to be carried out on time, with strong political support and a real commitment to including everyone in the process.

If done right, these reforms could transform India's political system—making it more balanced, inclusive, and truly representative of the country's rich diversity.²⁹



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²⁷ (n 8).

²⁸ (n 20).

²⁹ (n 14).