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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INDIA'S RESERVATION POLICY

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ABSTRACT:

In patriarchal societies, women have historically occupied marginalized positions across various spheres of life—including the political, social, economic, and cultural. Consequently, seat reservation and participation are crucial for ensuring and safeguarding equal status for women within the framework of gender rights, equality, and social justice. This article discusses the issue of seat reservation for women in India, specifically focusing on quota systems in the realms of political representation, education, and employment. Additionally, this article discusses the objectives of women's empowerment, gender equality, the impact of women's empowerment, and the challenges facing this process.

Key words: Women Reservation, Gender Equality, Women Entrepreneurship, Women Participation.

INTRODUCTION -

Women have historically been marginalized in many areas of life—such as politics, society, the economy, and culture. To ensure equal status and protect gender rights, it is important to increase women's participation and provide them with reservations in different sectors. This article looks at various initiatives, gives a detailed analysis, and discusses the debates and government efforts related to women's reservation in India. This presentation explores the intricate relationship between women entrepreneurs and broader women's empowerment, particularly within the framework of reservation policies. Women's empowerment through entrepreneurship drives economic growth, social stability, and individual autonomy by enabling women to overcome traditional barriers and achieve financial independence. While entrepreneurship provides a vital platform for women's participation in the economy.

Reservation in India represents a unique experiment in affirmative action designed to remedy centuries of social exclusion, particularly due to the rigid caste system. At its core, the policy is both corrective and transformative—it seeks to redress historical injustices and simultaneously create pathways for equal participation in national development.

In a nation as diverse as India, where caste, class, gender, and regional disparities intersect, the reservation system has emerged as a cornerstone of inclusive democracy. However, debates surrounding its necessity, scope, and fairness continue to shape the political and socio-economic discourse. This article provides a socio-economic perspective, analysing both achievements and challenges of the policy.

UNDERSTANDING RESERVATION POLICIES: A FOUNDATIONAL APPROACH:

Reservation policies, often enacted in contexts seeking to address historical inequalities, aim to provide affirmative action for marginalised groups. For women, these policies typically guarantee a certain percentage of seats in educational institutions, public sector employment, or political bodies.

In the context of entrepreneurship, reservations can manifest as preferential access to government contracts, land allocation, financial schemes, or incubation support. The underlying intent is to level the playing field, ensuring that women, who traditionally face greater barriers to business ownership, have a guaranteed pathway to resources and opportunities.

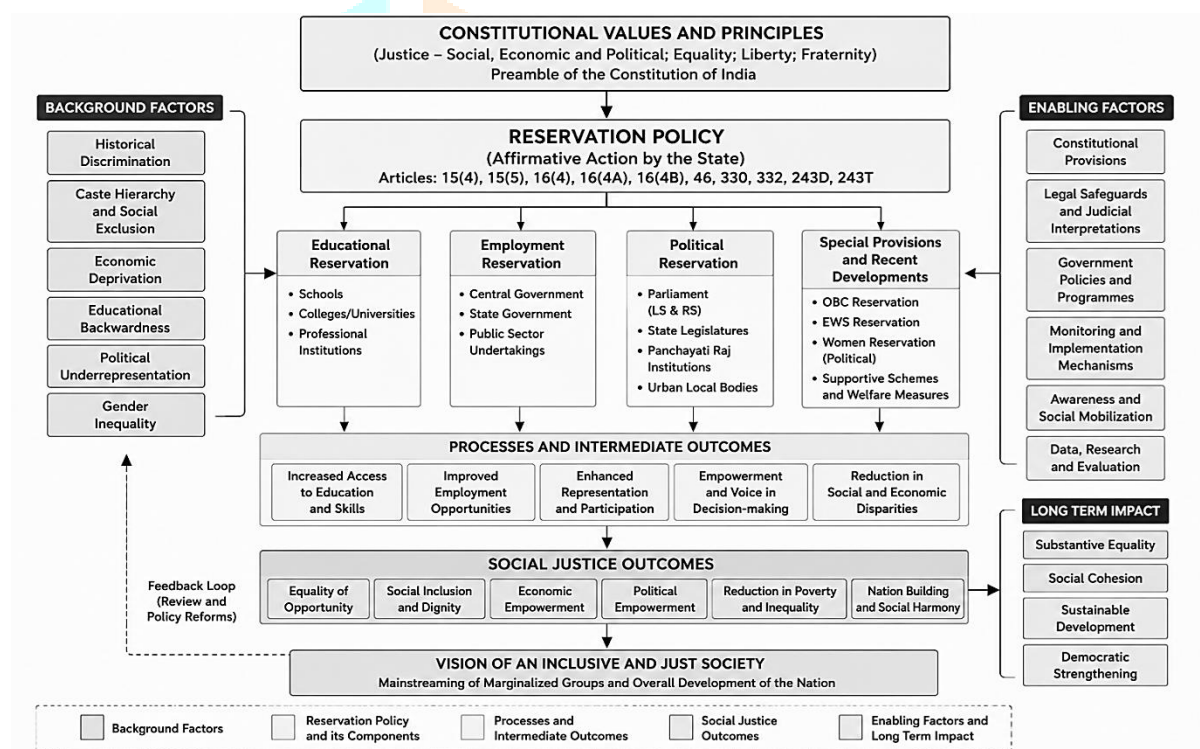


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework of Reservation and Social Justice

Figure 1.1 shows the conceptual framework of reservation and social justice in India, illustrating how various forms of reservation, including caste-based, economic-based, and women's reservation, contribute to educational access, employment opportunities, political representation, and economic empowerment. These outcomes enhance social mobility, social inclusion, and political empowerment among disadvantaged groups. The framework further highlights the role of reservation in promoting women entrepreneurship and reducing socio-economic inequalities. Ultimately, the process leads to inclusive development and the achievement of social justice in society.

Historical Evolution of Reservation Policy:

The origins of reservation policy can be traced to efforts undertaken during the colonial period to address social inequalities and improve representation of marginalized communities. The traditional caste hierarchy restricted access to education, employment, and public life for large sections of society. These inequalities generated demands for corrective measures aimed at promoting social inclusion and equal opportunities.

Several princely states-initiated reservation policies before independence. The Kingdom of Mysore introduced reservations in government employment for backward communities in 1921. Similar measures were adopted in the Madras Presidency and the princely state of

Kolhapur. These initiatives represented early attempts to improve representation and reduce social disparities.

The British administration also introduced forms of communal representation through constitutional reforms. The Government of India Acts and other administrative measures recognized the need for representation of diverse social groups. A major turning point occurred with the Communal Award of 1932, which proposed separate electorates for depressed classes. The subsequent Poona Pact between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar replaced separate electorates with reserved seats for disadvantaged communities.

These developments laid the foundation for the affirmative action policies adopted after independence. The experiences of social discrimination and political exclusion highlighted the necessity of institutional safeguards to ensure equality and representation.

Reservation Policy in Post-Independence India

Following independence, the Constituent Assembly recognized that political freedom alone could not eliminate social inequalities. The framers of the Constitution believed that special measures were necessary to uplift historically disadvantaged groups and facilitate their integration into mainstream society.

The Constitution incorporated provisions enabling the state to make special arrangements for socially and educationally backward classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. Reservation was viewed as a temporary but essential mechanism for promoting social justice and reducing inequalities.

During the initial years after independence, reservation primarily focused on SCs and STs. Over time, demands from other socially and educationally backward communities led to the expansion of affirmative action policies. The recommendations of various commissions, including the Mandal Commission, significantly influenced the development of reservation policy.

The implementation of OBC reservation in central government services and educational institutions in the 1990s marked a major milestone in India's affirmative action framework. Subsequent constitutional amendments further expanded the scope of reservation to address emerging social and economic concerns[17].

Constitutional Framework of Reservation:

The constitutional framework provides the legal and philosophical foundation for reservation policy in India. The Constitution seeks to establish a society based on equality, justice, and dignity while recognizing the need for special measures to address historical disadvantages.

The Preamble emphasizes social, economic, and political justice as fundamental objectives of the Republic. Reservation policies derive legitimacy from these constitutional principles and serve as instruments for achieving substantive equality.

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. However, equality does not imply identical treatment in all circumstances. The Constitution permits reasonable classification and special provisions for disadvantaged groups to achieve genuine equality.

Article 15 empowers the state to make special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. Article 16 allows reservation in public employment for underrepresented backward classes. These provisions form the cornerstone of educational and employment reservations.

Article 46 directs the state to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections of society, particularly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Articles 330 and 332 provide for reservation of seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies.

Table 1.4: Constitutional Provisions Governing Reservation in India

Constitutional Provision	Description	Significance for Reservation Policy
Article 14	Equality before law and equal protection of laws	Establishes the principle of equality while permitting reasonable classification for disadvantaged groups.
Article 15(3)	Special provisions for women and children	Enables affirmative action measures for women and children.
Article 15(4)	Special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes, SCs, and STs	Constitutional basis for reservation in educational institutions.
Article 15(5)	Reservation in educational institutions, including private aided institutions	Expands access to education for disadvantaged communities.
Article 15(6)	Special provisions for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)	Provides constitutional support for EWS reservation in education.
Article 16(4)	Reservation for backward classes inadequately represented in public services	Forms the basis for reservation in public employment.
Article 16(4A)	Reservation in promotion for SCs and STs	Facilitates career advancement and representation in higher positions.
Article 16(4B)	Carry forward of unfilled reserved vacancies	Ensures reserved vacancies are not lost due to non-availability of candidates.
Article 16(6)	Reservation for EWS in public employment	Extends reservation benefits to economically weaker sections in government jobs.

Article 17	Abolition of Untouchability	Eliminates caste-based discrimination and promotes social equality.
Article 46	Promotion of educational and economic interests of weaker sections	Directs the State to protect and advance the welfare of SCs, STs, and weaker sections.
Article 243D	Reservation in Panchayats	Ensures representation of SCs, STs, and women in rural local governance.
Article 243T	Reservation in Municipalities	Provides representation for disadvantaged groups and women in urban local bodies.
Article 330	Reservation of seats for SCs and STs in Lok Sabha	Guarantees political representation in the House of the People.
Article 332	Reservation of seats for SCs and STs in State Legislative Assemblies	Ensures political participation at the state level.
Article 335	Claims of SCs and STs in public services	Balances administrative efficiency with adequate representation.
Article 338	National Commission for Scheduled Castes	Safeguards the rights and interests of Scheduled Castes.
Article 338A	National Commission for Scheduled Tribes	Protects the welfare and interests of Scheduled Tribes.
Article 338B	National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC)	Monitors safeguards and welfare measures for backward classes.

Table 1.4 shows the key constitutional provisions that govern the reservation system in India and provide the legal framework for affirmative action policies. The table highlights various Articles that support reservations in education, public employment, political representation, and local governance for socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged groups. These provisions aim to promote equality, social justice, and inclusive development by ensuring adequate representation and opportunities for marginalized communities. Collectively, they demonstrate the constitutional commitment to reducing historical inequalities and strengthening democratic participation across all sections of society.

The constitutional framework has evolved through amendments that have strengthened and expanded reservation policies. These amendments reflect the state's commitment to addressing social and economic inequalities.

Constitutional provisions:

The Indian Constitution empowers women through Articles 14, 15, and 16, which guarantee equality before the law, prohibit discriminations, and ensure equal opportunity in public employment. Additionally, Directive Principles of State Policy (Articles 39, 42) mandate securing equal livelihood, equal pay for equal work, and just maternity conditions. The 73rd Amendment also provides for women's reservation in local governments, promoting their participation in decision-making. **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Act) 2023** has added new articles providing for women reservation in Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies:

- **Article 330A** provides for reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women in Lok Sabha
- **Article 332A** provides for reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women in State Legislative Assemblies.

IMPLEMENTATION ACROSS SECTORS:

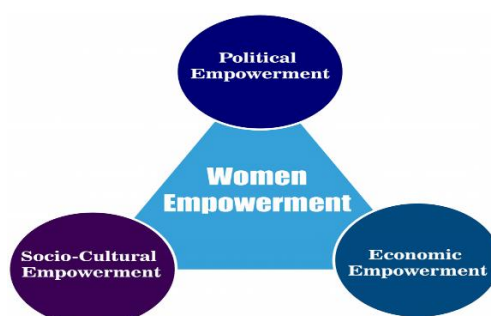
- Gender inequality remains a significant challenge in Indian society. Women often face barriers in education, employment, entrepreneurship, and political participation. Reservation has emerged as an important strategy for promoting women's empowerment and representation.
- Recent legislative initiatives aimed at increasing women's representation in Parliament and State Legislatures reflect growing recognition of gender equality as a critical dimension of democratic governance.
- Mandatory reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. This has led to millions of women holding elected positions. Women leaders have played important roles in addressing community issues and promoting social development.
- Some states and central government departments have implemented quotas for women in public sector jobs.
- Reservation for women also contributes to economic empowerment by encouraging participation in education, employment, and entrepreneurship. Greater representation of women in public institutions promotes inclusive decision-making and social progress.
- The recent 106th Amendment aims to extend reservation to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, pending delimitation.

These policies are designed to accelerate women's participation in spheres where they have been historically underrepresented, aiming for a more inclusive and equitable society.

OBJECTIVES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The goals and contributions of women entrepreneurship include:

- **Economic Independence**
Enable women to earn a living and support themselves and their families.
- **Self-Confidence**
Boost self-esteem and confidence through business ownership and management.
- **Decision-Making**
Empower women to make decisions and take control of their lives and businesses.
- **Social Status**
Enhance women's social standing and recognition in society.
- **Role Modelling**
Inspire other women and girls to pursue entrepreneurship and leadership role.



LEGAL PROVISIONS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA:

Some of the major statutory provisions promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India can be seen as follows:

- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: Provides a civil remedy for victims of domestic violence and empowers them to seek protection orders and residence rights.
- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961: Prohibits the giving or taking of dowry and prescribes punishment for violations.
- Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006: Raises the legal age of marriage for girls to 18 years, aiming to eradicate child marriage and its associated harms.
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976: Prohibits discrimination in matters of wages and salaries based on sex, hence promoting the cause of gender equality in the workplace.
- Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013: Creates a mechanism for preventing and redressing sexual harassment at workplaces, both public and private, thus it helps the cause of gender equality.
- The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023: Provides for a one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies, including the Delhi Assembly. This law approaches women's representation at the national and state levels, with the goal of empowering women in public life and ensuring their participation in policy-making.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA:

Women empowerment in India focuses on enhancing women's social, economic, and political status to ensure equality and dignity in society.

Efforts include promoting education, healthcare, and economic independence, alongside laws addressing gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and inequality.

Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, self-help groups, and reservation policies aim to empower women and enable them to contribute to the nation's development.

Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana (SSY) is a government-backed savings scheme launched in India under the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao initiative. It's designed to help parents or guardians build a financial corpus for the future education and marriage of their girl child. This scheme not only encourages long-term savings but also promotes gender equality by empowering families to invest in their daughters' futures.

IMPACT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA:

- Women empowerment in India has significantly contributed to the nation's progress by fostering gender equality and boosting economic growth.
- Empowered women actively participate in decision-making, both within families and in public life, leading to stronger social and political systems.
- Their increased presence in education, entrepreneurship, and the workforce has enhanced household incomes and national productivity.
- Women's leadership in various sectors has inspired positive change and social reform.
- Additionally, empowered women advocate for health, education, and sustainable practices, uplifting entire communities.
- However, consistent efforts are required to address remaining disparities and ensure inclusive development.

CHALLENGES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Discriminatory Social Norms: Historical legacies mean that socio-cultural norms for men and women continue to remain discriminatory in many parts of India, especially in rural regions. While men are allowed to be “loud”, women are expected to be soft-spoken, calm, and quiet.

Role Stereotyping: A large section of Indian society still considers that women are meant to stay limited to taking household chores. All the financial responsibilities and work outside are considered exclusive for males.

Low Literacy: Traditional practices like dowry, and other factors mean that many families find it economically unviable to educate the girl child. Thus, the literacy rate of women in India, especially in rural areas, still remains poor.

Lesser Employment Opportunities: Gender role stereotyping attributed to women leads to prejudice and discrimination against women in the economic sphere. For example, women may be considered to be less reliable as workers because of their child-rearing and other household responsibilities.

Glass Ceiling: The prevalence of the “Glass Ceiling Effect” means that women not only in India but across the globe face unsaid barriers, preventing them from reaching higher levels of professional success.

Economic Disparities: Lesser work opportunities as well as access to finance mean that women in India suffer from economic disparity vis-a-vis men. This remains a major barrier to making them independent.

Low Political Representation: The representation of women in different legislative bodies, including the Parliament as well as State Legislative Assemblies, remains low across India.

CONCLUSION:

In view of the above discussion, it can be said that the reservation system cannot be a tool for the development of society, but this reservation system is supported with the aim of establishing justice and equality in society. While, representation and reservation policies have significantly brought significant success in various fields, particularly in local government systems, and education. Despite of this success, women still need to face different challenges and there are lot more to done for them.

This reservation has been taken with the aim of bringing the backward women community back to the mainstream of society. As a result, we see that women's empowerment has increased and along with the women entrepreneurship has also increased.

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