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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

From Successor to Pathbreaker — Women in Indian Executive Politics

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SUBJECTS COVERED**POLITY****SOCIAL ISSUES****GS PAPERS****GS2****GS1****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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 The Indian Express

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GS2

GS1



The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 1



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Sunetra Pawar became Maharashtra's first woman Deputy Chief Minister following the death of her husband Ajit Pawar. Does India's political system enable women to rise through their own agency, or do most women executive leaders still arrive via dynastic routes — and what structural changes would produce genuine representational equity?"

WHY IN NEWS

Sunetra Pawar was sworn in as Maharashtra's first woman Deputy Chief Minister on January 31, 2026 — following the death of her husband and predecessor Ajit Pawar in a plane crash on January 28, 2026. While the appointment marks a historic milestone, it also renews the debate about how women reach high executive office in India.

THE MILESTONE — AND THE QUESTION IT RAISES

Maharashtra, India's second-most populous state and its largest economy, swore in its first-ever woman Deputy Chief Minister 66 years after its formation in 1960. That Sunetra Pawar's path to this historic office ran through bereavement — she assumed the role her husband held until his sudden death — is not a diminution of the achievement. But it does invite a recurrence of the question that haunts discussions of women in Indian public life: do women reach the top through their own political journeys, or primarily as heirs and surrogates?

WOMEN IN INDIA'S EXECUTIVE OFFICES — THE DATA

Chief Ministers: Since Independence, only **16 women** have served as Chief Ministers of Indian states across 75+ years. The current tally (2026) is two sitting women CMs: **Mamata Banerjee** (West Bengal, TMC) and **Vasundhara Raje** (Rajasthan, BJP, elected 2023).

Women CMs — historical pattern (selected):

Name	State	Period	Path
Sucheta Kripalani	Uttar Pradesh	1963–67	Own political career (Congress veteran, Constituent Assembly member)
Jayalalithaa	Tamil Nadu	Multiple terms 1991–2016	Film star, political apprenticeship under MGR
Sheila Dikshit	Delhi	1998–2013	Party worker, own career
Mamata Banerjee	West Bengal	2011–present	Founded TMC; own political career
Uma Bharti	Madhya Pradesh	2003–04	RSS + VHP activist; own career
Vasundhara Raje	Rajasthan	2003–08, 2013–18, 2023–present	Daughter of Vijayaraje Scindia; own legislative career

Deputy CMs and Cabinet Ministers: Women hold approximately **12%** of state cabinet positions nationally despite constituting ~50% of the population. The **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments** reserve 33% of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies for women — a mandated floor that has not been replicated in state assemblies or parliaments.

Women’s Reservation Bill — the missing piece: The **Constitution (128th Amendment) Bill, 2023** — passed by both Houses of Parliament and ratified as the **Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023** — reserves **33% of seats** in the **Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies** for women. However, this reservation will be implemented **only after the next census and delimitation exercise** — effectively deferring it to **2029 or later**.

THE DYNASTIC ROUTE — STRUCTURAL REALITY OR PATRIARCHAL TRAP?

Political scientists have long noted that women reach high executive office in South Asian democracies disproportionately through familial succession:

Indira Gandhi: Daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru (PM of India)

Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan): Daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (PM of Pakistan)

Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh): Daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (President of Bangladesh)

Chandrika Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka): Daughter of SWRD Bandaranaike (PM), wife of another PM

The pattern does not mean these leaders were not capable or consequential — Indira Gandhi’s record as one of India’s most decisive PMs, and Mamata Banerjee’s three consecutive terms as West Bengal CM, demonstrate genuine political capacity. But it does mean that the primary pathway for women to reach executive power in

South Asia has historically been the inherited political capital of family networks, not an independent political career built from the ground up.

Why this pathway persists:

Voter recognition and trust: Candidates with famous political surnames carry inherited public recognition — reducing the cost of building name recognition independently

Party gate-keeping: Political parties prefer to field candidates with existing constituencies; women who have built independent political careers face higher barriers to being fielded in winnable seats

Gender norms: A woman who presents as a grieving widow or dutiful daughter of a male political patron is less threatening to patriarchal political cultures than an ambitious woman pursuing power independently

Financial barriers: Political campaigns require substantial funds; women have historically lower access to political finance

WHAT WOULD STRUCTURAL CHANGE LOOK LIKE?

Three sets of interventions that would shift the structural odds for women in executive politics:

1. Women's Reservation Act — now, not after delimitation: The 106th Amendment reserves seats but defers implementation. Pre-delimitation implementation — as done with the 33% reservation in PRIs — would bring more women into state assemblies immediately, building the pipeline of experienced legislators from which ministers and CMs are drawn.

2. Internal party democracy: Most Indian political parties have negligible internal democracy in candidate selection. The few parties with transparent, merit-based candidate selection (based on winability, grassroots work, etc.) have higher rates of women in senior positions. Election Commission guidelines and SVEEP campaigns for party internal democracy would help.

3. Decoupling economic independence from political access: Women in rural and semi-urban areas who have built political careers through SHGs (Self Help Groups), MGNREGS, and Gram Sabha participation have created a new model of entry into politics that does not depend on family networks. Scaling up support for women in PRI institutions who aspire to state assembly seats creates an organic, non-dynastic pipeline.

SUNETRA PAWAR — WHAT COMES NEXT

Whatever the circumstances of her appointment, Sunetra Pawar is now Maharashtra's Deputy CM with three significant portfolios. Her performance in those roles — whether she builds an independent political identity or remains primarily a custodian of her late husband's legacy — will determine whether January 31, 2026 is a milestone or merely a footnote in Maharashtra's political history.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Sunetra Pawar (Maharashtra's first woman Deputy CM; Jan 31, 2026; Rajya Sabha MP; NCP Ajit faction); Ajit Pawar death (Jan 28, 2026; Learjet 45; Baramati Airport); Constitution 106th Amendment Act 2023 (Women's Reservation — 33% Lok Sabha + Assemblies; post-census/delimitation); 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (33% reservation in PRIs and ULBs for women); Mamata Banerjee (CM West Bengal); Women CMs of India (16 since Independence).

*Women's political representation in India — constitutional provisions, statutory measures, and structural gaps; 106th Amendment — critique of delayed implementation; dynastic politics and its impact on women's independent political careers; Panchayati Raj and women's political empowerment; constitutional provisions on state ministerial appointments (Articles 163/164). **GS-1:** Position of women in India — political, economic, social dimensions; gender and power in South Asian democracies.*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

SUNETRA PAWAR — KEY FACTS:

First woman Deputy CM of Maharashtra: **January 31, 2026**

Party: **NCP (Ajit Pawar faction)**; Status: **Rajya Sabha MP**

Portfolios: Excise; Sports and Youth Welfare; Welfare and Minorities Development

Predecessor: **Ajit Pawar** (died January 28, 2026 — Learjet 45 crash, Baramati Airport, Pune)

Oath administered by: **Governor Acharya Devvrat** at Lok Bhavan, Mumbai

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION — KEY DATA:

Women CMs since Independence: **~16** (16 individuals, some served multiple times)

Current (2026): **Mamata Banerjee** (West Bengal, TMC), **Vasundhara Raje** (Rajasthan, BJP)

Women's share in state cabinets (national average): **~12%**

Women in Lok Sabha (18th, 2024): **~74 of 543 (13.6%)**

WOMEN'S RESERVATION — CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK:

73rd Amendment (1992): 33% reservation for women in Gram Panchayats (mandatory)

74th Amendment (1992): 33% reservation for women in Urban Local Bodies (mandatory)

Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 (128th Amendment Bill): 33% reservation in Lok Sabha + State Assemblies — **deferred to after census + delimitation** (expected 2029 or later)

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS ON STATE MINISTRIES:

Article 163: Council of Ministers to aid and advise Governor; CM's advice is binding

Article 164: Appointment of state ministers; oath under **Third Schedule**

Deputy CM: Convention only — not a constitutional post; all ministers are constitutionally equal

WOMEN LEADERS — SOUTH ASIAN PATTERN:

Indira Gandhi (India): daughter of Nehru; 2 terms as PM

Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan): daughter of ZA Bhutto; 2 terms as PM

Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh): daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; multiple terms PM

Sucheta Kripalani (UP): independent career (Constituent Assembly; trade unionism)

Mamata Banerjee (WB): founded TMC 1998; 3 consecutive terms as CM

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

NCP (Nationalist Congress Party): Founded 1999 by Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma, Tariq Anwar after expulsion from Congress; split in 2023 (Sharad Pawar faction vs. Ajit Pawar faction — SC ruled Ajit faction holds the party name and symbol)

Maharashtra's Council of Ministers: Constituted under Article 164 — CM + Cabinet Ministers + Ministers of State; total ministerial strength capped at 15% of assembly strength

SVEEP: Systematic Voters Education and Electoral Participation — Election Commission programme promoting voter awareness

Sources: Indian Express, Livelaw, PRS India, InsightsIAS

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