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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Women's Reservation and Delimitation — Fast-Tracking Representation or Reopening Pandora's Box?

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

24 March 2026

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

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Women's Reservation and Delimitation — Fast-Tracking Representation or Reopening Pandora's Box?

 The Indian Express 24 March 2026

GS2

ESSAY

IE

The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

Essay Paper



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If delimitation based on 2011 Census increases northern states' seats disproportionately, how do you reconcile democratic representation with the incentive for population control?"

Women's Reservation and Delimitation — Fast-Tracking Representation or Reopening Pandora's Box?

Indian Express editorial examines the government's proposal to fast-track the Women's Reservation Act (106th Amendment, 2023) by conducting delimitation based on 2011 Census data instead of waiting for the yet-to-be-conducted 2026 Census, potentially increasing Lok Sabha seats from 543 to approximately 816.

THE CENTRAL TENSION

The 106th Constitutional Amendment links women's reservation to a Census and subsequent delimitation. This linkage creates a dilemma:

- **Wait for 2026 Census:** Delays women's reservation by several more years (Census → delimitation → implementation → possibly 2034 elections)
- **Use 2011 Census:** Enables faster implementation but reopens the deeply contentious delimitation question

The editorial argues this is not merely a procedural choice — it is a **fundamental recalibration of India's federal compact**.

THE NORTH-SOUTH FAULT LINE

Why This Is Explosive

STATE	POPULATION GROWTH (1971-2011)	CURRENT LS SEATS	LIKELY NEW SEATS
Uttar Pradesh	130%+	80	120+
Bihar	120%+	40	55+
Rajasthan	130%+	25	38+
Tamil Nadu	55%	39	42
Kerala	45%	20	22
Karnataka	75%	28	35

States that invested in education, healthcare, and family planning would see their **proportional voice in Parliament diluted** relative to states that did not.

The Argument for Southern States

- Tamil Nadu's Total Fertility Rate (TFR): **1.4** (below replacement)
- UP's TFR: **2.4** (above replacement)
- Kerala's HDI indicators rival developed countries
- Southern states contribute disproportionately to GDP — Tamil Nadu and Karnataka together produce ~20% of India's GDP
- Rewarding population growth with more seats creates a **perverse incentive**

The Counterargument

- Democracy is based on **one person, one vote** — population must determine representation
- Northern states have younger populations that need representation
- The 84th Amendment (2002) freeze was always temporary — meant to end after 2026
- Not increasing seats would mean each MP in UP represents 2.5 million people vs 1.5 million in Kerala

THE "EXPANSION-ONLY" MODEL

The government's proposal attempts to split the difference:

- **No state loses existing seats** — only new seats are added
- Total Lok Sabha seats: 543 → ~816
- Women get 33% (~273 seats) through the reservation

- Southern states retain current representation but lose **proportional weight**

The editorial questions whether this is a genuine compromise or merely a political strategy to avoid confrontation while still shifting the balance northward.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

The 1971 Freeze

The original delimitation freeze (42nd Amendment, 1976) was based on 1971 Census figures. This was done **as an incentive for population control** — states that reduced population growth would not be penalised.

The 2002 Extension

The 84th Amendment (2001) extended the freeze until “the first Census taken after the year 2026.” This was meant to give more time for northern states to catch up on population control.

Now (2026)

With the freeze about to expire, the question can no longer be deferred. The use of 2011 Census is a **pragmatic middle ground** — more current than 1971 but avoids waiting for a Census that has not been conducted.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION — THE REAL URGENCY

While the delimitation debate is important, the editorial warns against letting it **hijack the women's reservation agenda**:

- Women's representation in Parliament: **~14%** (among lowest in the world)
- Global average: **26%**
- Rwanda: **61%** (highest)
- India's rank: **143rd out of 190** countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union)
- The 106th Amendment took **27 years** from first introduction (1996) to passage (2023)
- Further delay would be unconscionable

THE WAY FORWARD

The editorial suggests a **phased approach**:

- 1 **Phase 1:** Implement women's reservation in existing 543 seats immediately (no delimitation needed — just reserve 181 existing seats)
- 2 **Phase 2:** Conduct the 2026 Census
- 3 **Phase 3:** Full delimitation with expanded seats and integrated women's reservation
- 4 This avoids both the delay problem and the North-South explosion

UPSC RELEVANCE

106th Amendment, Article 81, Article 82, Article 170, 84th Amendment, 42nd Amendment (delimitation freeze), IPU rankings

MAINS GS-I:

Social empowerment, women and politics, regional disparities

MAINS GS-II:

Federal tensions, delimitation, Centre-State relations, democratic representation

ESSAY:

“Can demographic justice and gender justice coexist in India’s federal framework?”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

WOMEN'S RESERVATION ACT:

Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023

Passed: September 20-21, 2023 (new Parliament building)

Provides: 33% reservation in LS + State Assemblies + Delhi Assembly

Pre-condition: Census + Delimitation

Duration: 15 years from commencement

Original bill: 81st Amendment Bill, 1996 (PM Deve Gowda)

DELIMITATION HISTORY:

42nd Amendment (1976): Froze delimitation at 1971 Census

84th Amendment (2001): Extended freeze until after 2026 Census

87th Amendment (2003): SC/ST reserved seats re-delimited based on 2001 Census

Last delimitation: 2008 (Justice Kuldeep Singh Commission)

POPULATION AND REPRESENTATION:

Current LS seats: 543 (530 states + 13 UTs)

Proposed expansion: ~816

UP current: 80 seats; Proposed: 120+

TN current: 39 seats; Proposed: 42

WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT:

India: ~14% (143rd globally, IPU)

Global average: 26%

Rwanda: 61% (highest)

73rd/74th Amendments: 33% women reservation in Panchayats/Municipalities

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Delimitation Commission: Headed by retired SC judge + CEC + State EC

Article 81: Lok Sabha composition (max 550 states + 20 UTs)

TFR: Tamil Nadu 1.4, Kerala 1.5, UP 2.4, Bihar 2.98 (NFHS-5)

Southern states GDP share: TN + Karnataka ~20% of India's GDP

Sources: [Indian Express](#), [PRS Legislative Research](#), [IPU](#)

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