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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Delimitation 2026 — Expanding Democracy or Deepening North-South Divide?



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Delimitation 2026 — Expanding Democracy or Deepening North-South Divide?

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Will delimitation based on population penalise southern states that controlled population growth? How can India ensure federal balance?"

Delimitation 2026 — Expanding Democracy or Deepening North-South Divide?

The Union Government announced plans to convene a special two-day session of Parliament to pass constitutional amendments expanding the Lok Sabha from 543 to 816 seats, using the 2011 Census as the basis. The move is designed to fast-track implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women Reservation Act), 2023, with 273 of the 816 seats (one-third) to be reserved for women. The proposal has reignited the north-south representation debate.

What is Delimitation?

Delimitation literally means “the act of fixing boundaries.” In the Indian electoral context, it refers to the process of redrawing the boundaries of Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly constituencies to reflect changes in population. The objective is to ensure that every citizen has roughly equal representation — the principle of “one person, one vote, one value.”

The process is carried out by an independent **Delimitation Commission** constituted by the Central Government. Its orders have the force of law and **cannot be challenged in any court of law** — a provision designed to insulate the exercise from political manipulation.

FEATURE	DETAILS
Purpose	Redraw constituency boundaries to ensure equal representation
Authority	Delimitation Commission (independent, quasi-judicial body)
Legal basis	Delimitation Commission Act (most recent: 2002)
Judicial review	Orders cannot be challenged in any court
Frequency	After every Census (frozen since 1971 for inter-state allocation)

Constitutional Provisions

The Constitution provides for delimitation through several key articles:

Article 82 — Readjustment After Each Census: Upon completion of each Census, Parliament shall by law provide for the readjustment of (a) the allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha to the States, and (b) the division of each State into territorial constituencies. Such readjustment shall not affect representation in the existing House until its dissolution.

Article 81 — Composition of the Lok Sabha: The House of the People shall consist of not more than 530 members chosen by direct election from territorial constituencies in the States, and not more than 20 members to represent the Union Territories. The current constitutional ceiling is **550 elected members** (plus 2 nominated Anglo-Indians, now discontinued after the 104th Amendment, 2020).

Article 170 — Composition of State Legislative Assemblies: The total number of members in a State Assembly shall not be more than 500 and not less than 60. Seats are allocated proportionally based on population within the State.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Since the current constitutional cap under Article 81 is 550 seats, expanding the Lok Sabha to 816 seats will require a

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

— specifically amending Article 81(1) to raise the ceiling. This is the same mechanism used by the

31ST AMENDMENT ACT, 1973

, which raised the cap from 525 to 545 seats (530 from states + 20 from UTs).

History of Delimitation in India

India has constituted **four Delimitation Commissions** since independence:

COMMISSION	ACT	CENSUS USED	CHAIRMAN	KEY OUTCOME
First (1952)	Delimitation Commission Act, 1952	1951 Census	Justice N. Chandrasekhara Aiyar (retired SC Judge)	Lok Sabha seats set at 494; first ever constituency mapping
Second (1963)	Delimitation Commission Act, 1962	1961 Census	Justice J.L. Kapur	Seats increased to 522
Third (1973)	Delimitation Act, 1972	1971 Census	Justice J.L. Kapur	Lok Sabha seats increased to 543 (current strength); 31st Amendment raised cap to 525 from states
Fourth (2002)	Delimitation Act, 2002	2001 Census	Justice Kuldeep Singh	Internal boundary readjustment only — total state-wise allocation frozen at 1971 levels; orders effective February 19, 2008

No delimitation was conducted after the 1981 and 1991 Censuses. This was deliberate — the Indira Gandhi government froze seat allocation in 1976 through the **42nd Amendment** to ensure that states which successfully controlled population growth would not be penalised with reduced representation.

The 2026 Trigger — Why Now?

The freeze on inter-state seat allocation was originally imposed in 1976 (42nd Amendment) until the year 2000. It was subsequently extended twice:

AMENDMENT	YEAR	FREEZE EXTENDED UNTIL	CENSUS BASIS FOR INTERNAL READJUSTMENT
42nd Amendment	1976	Year 2000	1971 Census
84th Amendment	2001	Year 2026	1991 Census (for internal boundaries)
87th Amendment	2003	Year 2026 (unchanged)	2001 Census (replaced 1991 for internal boundaries)

The **84th Amendment Act, 2001** is the critical provision. It states: *“Until the relevant figures for the first Census taken after the year 2026 have been published, it shall not be necessary to readjust the allocation of seats in the House of the People to the States.”*

This freeze expires after 2026. The first Census conducted after 2026 — scheduled for **March 1, 2027** (reference date) — will trigger a mandatory readjustment of seats among States under Article 82.

The government has now proposed using the **2011 Census** (the most recent completed Census) rather than waiting for the 2027 Census results, in order to fast-track the delimitation and implement the Women Reservation Act before the 2029 general elections.

The North-South Population Imbalance

The core tension in the delimitation debate arises from starkly different demographic trajectories between northern and southern India.

Population Growth Rates (Census 2011 — Decadal Growth 2001-2011):

STATE/REGION	2011 POPULATION (CRORE)	DECADAL GROWTH (2001-11)	CURRENT LOK SABHA SEATS	PROJECTED SEATS (816 MODEL)
Uttar Pradesh	19.96	20.2%	80	120
Bihar	10.41	25.4%	40	60
Madhya Pradesh	7.27	20.3%	29	44
Rajasthan	6.86	21.3%	25	38
Maharashtra	11.24	15.99%	48	72
West Bengal	9.13	13.8%	42	63
Tamil Nadu	7.21	15.6%	39	59
Kerala	3.34	4.9%	20	30
Karnataka	6.11	15.6%	28	42
Andhra Pradesh	4.93	—	25	38
Telangana	3.52	—	17	26

The problem is structural: Southern states — Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana — invested heavily in education, healthcare, and family planning from the 1970s onward. They achieved near-replacement-level fertility (TFR below 2.1) decades before northern states. If seat allocation is based purely on population, these states will see their **proportional share of Lok Sabha seats decline**, even as they contribute disproportionately to India’s GDP and tax revenue.

For instance, the five southern states contribute approximately **30-35% of India's GDP** but would hold a shrinking share of parliamentary seats under a purely population-based model.

The Women Reservation Act Connection

The **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam** — officially the **Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023** — is the direct trigger for the current expansion proposal.

Key Provisions of the 106th Amendment:

FEATURE	DETAILS
Reservation quantum	One-third (33%) of all seats in Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and Delhi Assembly
Sub-reservation	Within the one-third quota, proportional reservation for SC and ST women
New Articles inserted	Articles 330-A and 332-A
Duration	15 years from the date of commencement (extendable by Parliament)
Rotation	Reserved seats to be rotated after each delimitation exercise
Implementation trigger	Comes into effect only after (a) the first Census post-commencement is published, AND (b) delimitation based on that Census is completed

The catch: The 106th Amendment explicitly links implementation to a post-commencement Census and delimitation. Since the 2021 Census was never conducted (delayed due to COVID-19 and still pending), and the next Census is scheduled for 2027, the women reservation could be delayed until 2031-32 if the standard timeline is followed.

The government solution: Rather than waiting for the 2027 Census, the government proposes to amend the relevant constitutional provisions to allow delimitation based on the **2011 Census**, thereby enabling the women reservation to take effect by the **2029 general elections**.

The proposal to expand the House to 816 seats (a 50% increase) serves a dual purpose:

- 1 **No state loses its current number of seats** — the expansion adds 273 new seats rather than redistributing the existing 543
- 2 **All 273 new seats can be reserved for women** — implementing 33% reservation without displacing any sitting male MPs

Proposed Expansion to 816 Seats — The Model

The 816-seat model works as follows:

PARAMETER	CURRENT	PROPOSED
Total Lok Sabha strength	543	816
Seats for women	No reservation	273 (33% of 816)
Increase	—	273 new seats (50% expansion)
Census basis	1971 (inter-state allocation)	2011 Census
Target election	—	2029 General Elections

Constitutional amendments required:

- ❶ **Amendment to Article 81(1)** — Raise the ceiling from 550 to 816+ elected members
- ❷ **Amendment to Article 82 proviso** — Allow 2011 Census (instead of post-2026 Census) as the basis for readjustment
- ❸ **Amendment to 106th Amendment provisions** — Delink women reservation from the “first Census after commencement” requirement
- ❹ **New Delimitation Act** — To constitute a fresh Delimitation Commission

Two constitutional amendment bills are expected to be introduced in a special session of Parliament, likely in April 2026. If passed by the required two-thirds majority in both Houses and ratified by at least half the State Legislatures, the expanded Lok Sabha would come into effect from **March 31, 2029**.

Arguments For and Against Expansion

Arguments in Favour:

- ❶ **Fast-tracks women reservation** — Without expansion, the 106th Amendment would remain a dead letter until 2031-32 at the earliest. The 816-seat model enables implementation by 2029.
- ❷ **No state loses seats** — Every state retains its current 543 seats. The 273 additional seats are distributed proportionally based on 2011 population, ensuring no state is worse off in absolute terms.
- ❸ **Reduces constituency size** — India currently has one MP for approximately 25 lakh citizens — among the worst ratios in the world. The UK has one MP per 1 lakh citizens; the US has one Representative per 7.6 lakh. Expansion improves representative accessibility.
- ❹ **Democratic legitimacy** — A larger House is more representative of India’s 1.44 billion population and allows for finer-grained constituency boundaries.
- ❺ **Addresses historic demand** — Women have constituted only about 15% of Lok Sabha members historically. The 816-seat model guarantees 273 women MPs — more than quadrupling current numbers.

Arguments Against:

- ❶ **Proportional share still shifts northward** — While no state loses absolute seats, northern states with higher populations will gain proportionally more seats. UP moving from 80 to 120 seats means its vote share in the House rises from 14.7% to 14.7% (proportional), but its absolute bloc grows — strengthening Hindi-belt political dominance.
- ❷ **Penalises population control success** — Southern states that invested in family planning from the 1970s onward get fewer additional seats per existing seat than northern states that did not. Tamil Nadu gains 20 seats (from 39 to 59) while UP gains 40 seats (from 80 to 120) — a 2:1 ratio reflecting population disparity.
- ❸ **Fiscal federalism imbalance** — Southern states contribute 30-35% of India's GDP and a disproportionate share of central taxes, but will have diminishing say in how those resources are allocated. The 15th Finance Commission already reduced their share — reduced parliamentary representation compounds the grievance.
- ❹ **Infrastructure and governance burden** — 273 additional MPs mean 273 new constituencies, new parliamentary infrastructure, expanded MP-LADS funds, and administrative costs. The new Parliament building (inaugurated 2023) was designed for 888 seats in Lok Sabha — suggesting this expansion was pre-planned.
- ❺ **2011 Census is 15 years old** — Using outdated data for a major constitutional exercise raises accuracy concerns. The 2011 Census does not capture migration patterns, urbanisation, or demographic changes of the last 15 years.
- ❻ **Federal trust deficit** — Southern chief ministers (including Revanth Reddy of Telangana and M.K. Stalin of Tamil Nadu) have warned that population-based delimitation without compensatory mechanisms threatens the federal compact. The Supreme Court has also observed that population-based delimitation could be “unfair to southern states.”

Way Forward

Balancing democratic representation with federal equity requires creative constitutional engineering. Several models have been proposed:

- ❶ **Weighted Voting or Degressive Proportionality** — The European Parliament model, where smaller member states get proportionally more seats per capita than larger ones. India could apply this to ensure southern states retain a floor of representation.
- ❷ **Bicameral Rebalancing** — Strengthen the Rajya Sabha (Council of States) to give smaller and southern states a stronger voice. Currently, Rajya Sabha seats are also roughly proportional to population. A reformed Rajya Sabha with equal state representation (like the US Senate) could offset Lok Sabha population-weighting.

- 3 **Fiscal Compensation** — Link tax devolution more closely to economic contribution rather than population. The 16th Finance Commission could build in mechanisms ensuring that states losing proportional representation are not also losing fiscal share.
- 4 **Composite Index for Delimitation** — Rather than using population alone, factor in indicators like literacy rate, sex ratio, per capita income, and population control achievement. This would reward developmental performance alongside demographic weight.
- 5 **Phased Implementation** — Implement women reservation immediately using the 2011 Census, but defer full inter-state seat readjustment to the 2027 Census. This separates the women reservation question from the north-south representation question.
- 6 **Constitutional Guarantee of Floor** — Amend Article 82 to guarantee that no state shall have fewer seats than a specified baseline, regardless of population changes. This would protect southern states from erosion.

UPSC Angle

Prelims: Articles 81, 82, 170, 327; 84th and 87th Amendment Acts; 106th Amendment (Women Reservation); Delimitation Commission Act, 2002; composition and powers of Delimitation Commission; 42nd Amendment (freeze of seats); 31st Amendment (increase of Lok Sabha cap); 104th Amendment (discontinuation of Anglo-Indian nomination)

Mains GS-2: Federal structure and inter-state relations; representation and democratic legitimacy; women empowerment through political reservation; constitutional amendment process; role of Census in governance; north-south socio-economic divergence; comparative analysis with European Parliament model

Essay: “Population growth should not be rewarded at the cost of developmental success” / “Can India be a true federation when population determines power?”

Interview: “Will delimitation based on population penalise southern states that controlled population growth? How can India ensure federal balance?” / “Is the 816-seat Lok Sabha a genuine reform or a political strategy?” / “Should the Rajya Sabha be reformed to counter population-weighted Lok Sabha?”

UPSC RELEVANCE

Articles 81, 82, 170, 327 of the Constitution; 42nd, 84th, 87th, 106th Constitutional Amendments; Delimitation Commission Act 2002; composition and powers of Delimitation Commission; Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023; 31st Amendment Act 1973.

MAINS GS-2:

Delimitation and federal structure; women reservation in legislatures; north-south representation imbalance; Census-based governance; constitutional amendment process; comparative federal models (EU Parliament, US Senate).

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

DELIMITATION — CORE DATA:

Current Lok Sabha strength: 543 elected members (constitutional cap: 550 under Article 81)

Proposed expanded strength: 816 seats (273 new seats reserved for women)

Constitutional amendment required: Article 81(1) ceiling must be raised from 550 to 816+

Delimitation Commissions constituted: 4 (1952, 1963, 1973, 2002)

Current seat allocation frozen at: 1971 Census level (42nd Amendment, 1976)

Freeze extended by: 84th Amendment (2001) until first Census after 2026

87th Amendment (2003): Replaced 1991 Census with 2001 Census for internal boundary readjustment

Delimitation Commission under 2002 Act: Chairperson (retired SC judge) + CEC/EC nominee + State Election Commissioner

Orders of Delimitation Commission: Cannot be challenged in any court of law

NARI SHAKTI VANDAN ADHINIYAM (106TH AMENDMENT, 2023):

Reservation: 33% seats for women in Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, Delhi Assembly

Sub-reservation: Proportional SC/ST women reservation within the one-third quota

New Articles inserted: 330-A and 332-A

Duration: 15 years from commencement (extendable by Parliament)

Implementation trigger: First Census after commencement + delimitation based on it

Passed in: Special session of Parliament, September 2023

President assent: Given by President Droupadi Murmu

NORTH-SOUTH POPULATION DISPARITY (2011 CENSUS):

Uttar Pradesh population: 19.96 crore (decadal growth 20.2%) — current 80 seats, proposed 120

Bihar population: 10.41 crore (decadal growth 25.4%) — current 40 seats, proposed 60

Tamil Nadu population: 7.21 crore (decadal growth 15.6%) — current 39 seats, proposed 59

Kerala population: 3.34 crore (decadal growth 4.9%) — current 20 seats, proposed 30

Karnataka population: 6.11 crore (decadal growth 15.6%) — current 28 seats, proposed 42

Maharashtra population: 11.24 crore (decadal growth 15.99%) — current 48 seats, proposed 72

Southern states contribute approximately 30-35% of India's GDP

CONSTITUTIONAL CAP HISTORY:

Original Constitution (1950): Maximum 500 Lok Sabha members

31st Amendment Act (1973): Cap raised from 525 to 545 (530 from states + 20 from UTs, reduced from 25)

Current cap under Article 81: 530 from states + 20 from UTs = 550

104th Amendment (2020): Discontinued nominated Anglo-Indian seats

Proposed: Raise cap to 816+ (requires constitutional amendment with special majority + state ratification)

KEY CONSTITUTIONAL ARTICLES:

Article 81: Composition of Lok Sabha (maximum strength, population-based allocation)

Article 82: Readjustment of seats after each Census

Article 170: Composition of State Legislative Assemblies

Article 324: Election Commission (independent constitutional body)

Article 327: Power of Parliament to make laws on elections and delimitation

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

India's MP-to-citizen ratio: approximately 1:25 lakh (among the worst globally)

UK ratio: approximately 1:1 lakh; US ratio: approximately 1:7.6 lakh

New Parliament building (inaugurated May 2023): Lok Sabha chamber designed for 888 seats

2021 Census: Never conducted (delayed due to COVID-19; still pending as of March 2026)

Next Census scheduled: Reference date March 1, 2027

Women in 18th Lok Sabha (2024): approximately 74 out of 543 (about 13.6%)

Target implementation: 2029 General Elections

15th Finance Commission: Shifted tax devolution formula — southern states flagged reduced share

Supreme Court observation: Population-based delimitation could be “unfair to southern states”

Sources: [The Indian Express](#), [PRS Legislative Research](#), [Constitution of India — Article 82](#), [Election Commission of India](#), [Organiser](#), [Business Standard](#), [Vajiram & Ravi](#)



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