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The 850-Seat Question: Why Delimitation Keeps Testing India's Federal Bargain

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The 850-Seat Question: Why Delimitation Keeps Testing India's Federal Bargain

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Congress MP Shashi Tharoor publicly questioned the government's reported plan to revive an 850-seat Lok Sabha expansion in the Monsoon Session, warning it could turn Parliament into "an echo chamber," months after the original Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026 was defeated and the accompanying Delimitation Bill withdrawn.

THE FREEZE, AND WHY IT WAS IMPOSED

AMENDMENT	YEAR	EFFECT
42nd Constitutional Amendment	1976	Froze the number of Lok Sabha and State Assembly seats at 1971 Census levels until the first Census after 2000
84th Constitutional Amendment	2001	Extended the freeze to the first Census after 2026, while permitting redrawing of existing constituency boundaries based on 1991 population data
87th Constitutional Amendment	2003	Allowed the 2001 Census (rather than 1991) to be used for redrawing boundaries, without disturbing the total seat count

The freeze was originally imposed for an explicitly instrumentalist reason: States that succeeded at population stabilisation, largely in the south, would otherwise be penalised with fewer seats relative to States with higher population growth, punishing exactly the **demographic** performance the Union was simultaneously incentivising through family-planning policy. Freezing total seats while still allowing internal boundary redrawing let each State's own constituencies reflect its internal population shifts without changing its share of the national total.

WHY 2026 REOPENS THE QUESTION

The 84th Amendment's freeze runs out with "the first Census taken after the year 2026," meaning delimitation based on updated population figures becomes constitutionally due once that Census occurs. The government's first attempt to legislate for this used the **Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026**, introduced in the Lok Sabha on **16 April 2026**, alongside a companion **Delimitation Bill, 2026** and a **Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026**. The 131st Amendment Bill, requiring a two-thirds majority as a constitutional amendment, was put to a vote on **17 April 2026** and **defeated**, securing only 298 of the 352 votes needed, the first constitutional amendment of this government's tenure to fail in Parliament. The government subsequently **withdrew** the two companion bills as well. As of late July 2026, reports indicate the government is planning a **revival push** during the Monsoon Session (20 July to 13 August 2026), and it is this reported revival, not a still-pending original bill, that Shashi Tharoor's remarks respond to. The figure receiving the most political attention throughout, an expansion from the current **543 seats** to as many as **850**, remains the flashpoint regardless of the bill's on-again, off-again legislative status.

CONCERN	SUBSTANCE
Southern-state anxiety	States with lower fertility rates (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh) fear their seat share falls relative to higher-fertility northern States, despite having met national population-stabilisation goals earlier
Representation dilution	A much larger House means each MP represents a similar or larger constituency population on average only if seats scale with population growth broadly, but individual floor time and committee capacity shrink as the House grows
Interaction with women's reservation	The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 reserves one-third of Lok Sabha and State Assembly seats for women, but its implementation is itself tied to the delimitation exercise following the next Census, meaning delay or dispute over delimitation also delays reservation rollout

THE CONSTITUTIONAL MECHANICS

PROVISION	CONTENT
Article 82	Empowers Parliament to enact a Delimitation Act after each Census, under which a Delimitation Commission readjusts constituency boundaries and, where the law provides, seat allocation
Article 170	Parallel provision for State Legislative Assemblies
Delimitation Commission	An independent body, its orders having the force of law and not open to challenge in any court

Historically, delimitation exercises have been conducted after the 1951, 1961 and 1971 Censuses, with the 1976 freeze halting further seat-count changes even as the 2001 and 2008 exercises redrew boundaries within the frozen totals. The scale of the coming exercise, if it does move to something like 850 seats, would be unprecedented in independent India's history, roughly a 56 per cent increase over the current 543.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: Indian Constitution, historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments; Parliament, structure and functioning; representation of people; [federalism](#) and Centre-State relations.

Prelims pointers:

- Seat freeze imposed by the **42nd Amendment (1976)**; extended by the **84th (2001)** and **87th (2003)** Amendments.
- Freeze runs until the **first Census after 2026**.
- The **Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026** was introduced **16 April 2026** and **defeated 17 April 2026**, falling short of the two-thirds majority (298 of 352 votes needed); the companion **Delimitation Bill, 2026** and **Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026** were subsequently **withdrawn**.
- A **revival push** is reported for the **Monsoon Session (20 July-13 August 2026)**.
- Current Lok Sabha strength: **543**; figure under debate for post-delimitation expansion: **850**.
- Constitutional basis: **Article 82** (Lok Sabha/State delimitation after Census), **Article 170** (State Assemblies).
- **Delimitation Commission** orders have the force of law and cannot be challenged in court.
- **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023**: women's reservation, implementation tied to post-Census delimitation.

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DELIMITATION TIMELINE:

42nd Amendment (1976): froze seat count at 1971 Census levels.

84th Amendment (2001): extended freeze to the first Census after 2026; allowed boundary redrawing on 1991 data.

87th Amendment (2003): allowed 2001 Census data for boundary redrawing.

Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026: introduced 16 April 2026, defeated 17 April 2026 (298 of 352 votes, short of the required two-thirds); companion Delimitation Bill and UT Laws Amendment Bill withdrawn thereafter.

Revival reported for the Monsoon Session, 20 July to 13 August 2026.

THE DEBATE:

Current Lok Sabha: 543 seats; proposed expansion figure under discussion: 850.

Southern/lower-fertility States' concern: reduced relative political weight despite meeting population-stabilisation goals.

Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 (women's reservation) rollout is contingent on this delimitation exercise.

CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS:

Article 82: Parliament's power to enact a Delimitation Act and readjust Lok Sabha/State seats after each Census.

Article 170: parallel provision for State Legislative Assemblies.

Sources: PRS Legislative Research, Election Commission of India, Lok Sabha

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