

# THE DIALECTIC OF LIBERATION AND CONSTRAINT: WOMEN'S AGENCY AT THE CROSSROADS OF STATE POLICY AND CULTURAL NORMATIVITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The ramifications of religious and secular imperatives on women's corporeal agency and liberties are revealed as it closely examines the paradoxical entanglement of women's autonomy amid convergent domains of cultural tradition and official monitoring. The comparative research methodology; which involves multifaceted cases and intricate socio-legal frames, reveals the two pressures: the exemplary sacrosanct doctrines and the secular regulations, that, simultaneously, voice and burden the freedoms of individuals, particularly in consideration of the female subject. At its core, this question conceals the notion of "veiled autonomy," whereby religious activities - a veiling included - are variously conceptualized as forms of personal agency and as instruments of patriarchal hegemony, being determined by the prevailing context of society and culture. This critical lens opens possibilities to trace the tortuous processes through which women negotiate identity, agency, and governance within very strict constraints yet challenge and enable deeply entrenched traditional and institutional constructs. The analysis draws from an impressive range of case studies spread across various geopolitical arenas, through ethnographic interviews and judicial archive research methods tracing how women strategize for agency in freedom-claiming yet structurally limiting contexts. Results: These help to show a spectrum of autonomy that is highly complex and sculpted through the women's convoluted negotiations with the familial, religious, and legal apparatuses. It further states that while the imperatives of culture and edicts of state often wear the guise of bastions of rights of individuals, they are doing so in tandem with creating insidious limitations that disproportionately circumscribe women's corporal autonomy and decision-making prerogatives. Moreover, it also suggests that these frameworks guarantee an inherent (inbuilt) contradiction: they ostensibly safeguard individual freedom(s) in abstract terms while inflicting deleterious constraints in empirical reality, thus engendering a recursive cycle of restricted autonomy. It shows the subtle modalities through which this paradox of autonomy forms or creates women's identities with choices irrevocably governed by the forces that are intertwined between religious ideologies and state dominion.*

**Keywords:** Women's Autonomy, Bodily Agency, Cultural Tradition, State Surveillance, Religious Imperatives, Secular Regulations, Veiled Autonomy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Examining the development of women in the Global South reveals that, rather than promoting their autonomy and well-being, traditional paradigms have frequently maintained their marginalization. The dominant approach to welfare, steeped in its paternalistic underpinnings, effectively reduces women to the passive beneficiary rather than an agent in their own right primarily relegating them to the iconic mother, with their contributions economically being ignored. This sets an ideological underpinning reminiscent of the European post-World War II model of social welfare, this one focused on the needs of women through domestic eyes, thus reinforcing gender roles and biases entrenched in the past. The paradigm of Third World Women's Development has opened out a huge space for poor women-targeted policy interventions. Over time, these policy frameworks have evolved from the 'welfare' orientation that emphasizes women's role in reproductive functions to equity, anti-poverty models, efficiency, and empowerment models. This evolution in policy orientation reflects trends in the general economic approach which began from modernization policy targeting fast growth, later shifting to basic needs that emphasize fair distribution, to 'compensatory measures' in recent times directed towards reducing the negative consequences of neoliberal policies. These compensatory measures, as argued, often constitute an implicit transfer of developmental responsibility from the state to civil society that aligns with neoliberalism's agenda for reducing state agency in favour of market-driven solutions. The challenge now is not merely to transcend compensatory interventions but to build up a transformative framework that works toward the effective integration of women's agency and addresses the structural inequalities within the process of development.

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The equity approach was initiated during the United Nations Women's Decade and aimed to address inequalities by including women in the economy. However, it often perpetuated existing power structures, leading to a short-sighted view of economic upliftment. The efficiency approach, based on neoliberal principles, commodifies women's labour and promotes their integration into the labour force, despite increasing socio-economic imbalances. Empowerment approaches aim to empower women through grassroots mobilization and self-reliance, but success depends on deeply ingrained social norms and structural inequalities. A transformative framework is needed to properly represent women and integrate their contributions into societal progress.

## **2. EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S AGENCY IN DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS**

The history of integrating women within development programs in emergent economies speaks for the contrast between the desirable rhetoric of human development and the harsh realities with which women have to cope. Haleh Afshar (1991) opines that these projects frequently sidelined women, rendering them devoid of control over their resources and reinforcing patriarchal status. Deep in the mid-20th-century welfare paradigm, a woman's life was related to motherhood, women were seen in development plans through the Western perception of social welfare as fewer active doers rather than significant players (Moser 1993). The educative system through missionaries portrayed such perception hence maintaining gender-based division between labor and compelling women solely into caregiving while downplaying their potential in the economics in standby. The basis of a welfare model which placed and emphasized motherhood as the societal core was to deny women a full economic life and their vast economic capability (Snyder & Tadesse 1995). Though these programs improved the health of mothers, their top-down approach led to dependency and bypassed women's strategic interests (Wallace & March 1991). As a result, the equity approach that began with the United Nations Decade of Women in 1976-1985 defined women's roles in the reproductive and productive spheres while advocating for access to work as a means for economic empowerment and equitable resource allocation (Buvinic, 1986). Then, the anti-poverty approach focused its attention on the structural causes of female poverty and tried to strengthen income-earning activities for sustainable development to meet basic needs (Moser 1993). To meet the fiscal requirements of the debt crisis of the 1980s, the efficiency model argued that the highest employment of women was crucial for growth but maintained wage inequality and poor conditions that placed women in a depressed economic category (Heintz 2005). This has led to the empowerment model, which foregrounds grassroots mobilization and self-reliance through strategies such as microcredit. Positioning gender at the heart of development, this approach sought to dismantle systemic exclusions (Molyneux & Razavi 2006), though persistent structural constraints continue to challenge women's comprehensive participation in development. In this context, the confluence between culture, religion, and state apparatus extensively shapes and defines the multiple experiences of women, bringing forth a spectrum of implications over merely theoretical parlance. A close analysis here reveals that women's corporeal existence stands generally at the centre of a matrix of political power play, where state machination and cultural norms meet together. The battles of power being fought and renegotiated tend to continue over women's bodies. These battles or conflicts make it seem so that these concrete implications would have been forgotten in realizing actualized impacts on lived experience. Women's bodies are sites where both state and cultural ideologies converge to control reproductive freedom, sexual agency, and womanly behaviour. In this regard, the paper tries to explain how women's bodies become the most highly contested domains in which women exercise their agency and autonomy. Overcoming such complex terrain, incorporating social conventions, state authority, and personal corporeality makes it instrumental for women's experiences. With this deep understanding of the multi-dimensional interaction, one grasps the living experiences that may be created by women. The discussion here addresses those ways in which cultural religious belief systems perpetuate or create stereotypes around the body of the female and this, therefore, may act to reinforce or potentially be a challenge to the system of patriarchy as in legal frameworks, regulations and institutional paradigms embedded in the same. The text asks how state governance is connected to women's status, as seen in the imposition of cultural norms regulating mobility and apparel, as reflected through the Karnataka uniform code requirement under Indian law

and similar bills passed in France in 2012. It addresses the rights over reproduction and when governmental bodies take upon themselves the role of guardians of the rights of women and bodily autonomy. This analysis further contemplates how women's lived experiences may reflect and contest entrenched cultural norms and values, deeply ingrained within societal constructs. This is a pertinent inquiry in the context of Hindu supremacism in India and the prohibition of women's entry into the Sabarimala temple, where cultural expectations surrounding femininity, behavioural norms, and aesthetic standards clash with state frameworks. This will involve a close analysis of how women negotiate and sometimes subvert these prescriptive norms through acts of agency and resistance.

### **3. TRADITION, EXCLUSION, AND THE STIGMATIZATION OF MENSTRUATION IN INDIA**

Indian customs and culture play a significant role in determining the roles that women play and the social standing that is bestowed upon them, particularly concerning their involvement in religious and ceremonial events. The Sabarimala Temple in Kerala is a prime example that has been the subject of debate because of the harsh limitations placed on women between the ages of 10 and 50, which prevent them from entering the temple's hallowed area. The Sabarimala case exposes a glaring contradiction despite Kerala's image as a stronghold of progressive ideology: the state purports to support equal access to religious expression while enforcing unlawful restrictions that are explicitly directed at women. Here, again, is another reflection of the insidious spread of patriarchal values into the sphere of governance by the state, with patriarchal prerogatives frequently taking precedence over the imperative of gender equity. Such imbalance was taken seriously when five women lawyers came together and initiated a legal battle to challenge these restrictive practices in the courts. Their appeal, filed first in Kerala High Court, made its way up to the Supreme Court of India. After a long legal ride, a 4:1 majority judgment of the Supreme Court puts it out that women of all ages must now be allowed within the Sabarimala Temple. The court interpreted those existing practices violated the rights of Hindu women and defined the exclusion of women from such sacred spaces as systemic gender discrimination. The controversy over the Sabarimala Temple cannot be disengaged from the broader cultural taboos associated with menstruation, which have historically rendered menstruating women impure and socially disruptive (Menon, 2020).

Such cultural prescriptions have not only facilitated the subordination of women within societal hierarchies but also meticulously delineated their roles and influenced their social relations. This imposition of such so-called cultural practices burdens women's bodies, leading to egregious deprivation of fundamental rights in the name of tradition and custom. This case is thus a striking representation of the numerous challenges women face in India due to the widespread influence of cultural and traditional norms. This means the Supreme Court decision allows entry of women of all ages to the temple. This marks an important advancement toward realizing gender equality and protecting the rights of women against archaic customs' intrusion into their lives. The experience of menstruation is an embodied, yet biomedical discourse at the same time experiential aspects are both an issue of the individual body and general biomedical framing. Discourses about menstruating blood abhor the stigma of things placed in private and behind the curtain; however, entry into menarche might dramatically alter the lifestyle of a girl and her mobilities. Bad attitudes about menstruation have been transmitted from generation to generation among mothers and grandmothers. This ultimately leads to ideas that place the menstruating woman in the position of being inherently unclean. Such a cultural model births flawed perceptions about the female body, upon which societal misperceptions rest. In quotidian settings, attitudes manifest themselves visually through how restrictions on urban girls impede access to the "puja" room where their counterparts in rural setup are disallowed from getting into the kitchen (Garg and Anand 2015). Such far-reaching taboos about menstruation profoundly affect the psychosocial condition of girls and women and detract from their well-being and health. Of greatest concern is that the incidence of girls leaving school around the time of menstrual age is a phenomenon more likely to perpetuate cycles of inequality and exclusion within economies of deprivation.

#### 4. IDEOLOGY, AGENCY, AND THE POLITICS OF INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIPS IN INDIA

"Love jihad" has thus emerged as a controversial concept under the socio-political canvas of modern India, essentially among Hindu nationalist elements that make an outcry over interfaith relationships, particularly those in which Hindu women and Muslim men are involved. It essentially encompasses the supposed danger of the Muslim community in threatening the Hindu majority population through forceful conversion and eventual marriage. Such fears began to germinate in the collective psyche as high-profile incidents, particularly the marriage of Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor to Muslim actor Saif Ali Khan in 2012, triggered a love jihad and led to a moral panic among the Hindu nationalists. This ideology was further advanced in the courtroom through Hadiya's case- a Hindu woman who converted to Islam and got married to a Muslim man. A great example of the paternalistic judicial approach that questions her autonomy is the Kerala High Court intervention in 2017, which resulted in an order for surveillance of her marriage. The actions of the court, presented under the guise of protection for Hadiya, reveal deep scepticism towards the Muslim identity and reinforce that the agency of women comes second to the expectations of society and family. This paternalism was reinforced in the subsequent National Investigation Agency inquiry, which characterized Hadiya's conversion and marriage as potential products of indoctrination rather than a free choice.

#### 5. GENDER EQUALITY, RELIGIOUS NORMATIVITY, AND JUDICIAL DISCOURSE IN INDIA

It has been through the more recent judicial pronouncements on gender equality, particularly those tangled with religious contexts, that the Indian judiciary has emerged as the centre for constructing and reproducing normative understandings of gender and religious majoritarianism. Perhaps the most obvious instance to prove this truth is that of the constitutional petition filed in 2017 by Shayara Bano, a Muslim woman and mother of two children, wherein, assisted by the Indian Muslim Women's Movement (Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan), she challenged the constitutionality of the triple talāq as enacted under the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, No. 25 of 1986. It, in defining divorced Muslim women's rights, seems to imply that a husband should return mehr to a wife and that he pays maintenance during iddat however, it remains a form of gendered legal context which has privileged patriarchal readings of the religion all along (Arya, 2006; Menon, 2014; Agnes, 2012). The basic core of the argument is that the Muslim Personal Law Application Act of 1937, upon which most judgments on marital dissolution rest, is violative of the basic rights of Bano under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Indian Constitution. Such an inquiry required an investigation into whether the practice of triple talāq was necessary to Islamic tenets and hence was protected under Articles 25 and 26, which protect the freedom of religion (Sen, 2010; Kapur, 2014). One mechanism through which the Court defined the contours of religious freedom vis-à-vis state intervention was the so-called "essential religious practices test," a doctrine that has developed since India's independence, often straying into theological debates that incidentally freeze religious identities and traditions. The judgment highlighted a deep paradox, in that, while the practice of triple talāq was condemned not only by rights groups fighting for women but more importantly by Muslim women seeking to challenge the unilateral nature of declarations like these—the women, the judgment underlined, are often voiceless amid the majority interpretations championed by organizations like the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. The Board concluded that any form of state intervention in the practice was an offence against religious freedom and hence fixed the practice into a system of cultural legitimacy, ostensibly protective but ultimately exclusionary (Punwani, 2016). It thus followed that the BJP's politicization of this legal challenge reflected a broader strategy: dismantling practices viewed as oppressive but also aligning such endeavours with an assimilationist narrative that valorizes Hindu majoritarianism.

The BJP framed triple talāq as antithetical to secularism and equality and, thus constructed a binary opposition wherein the rights of Muslim women are pitted against the purported threats posed by Muslim male authority (Bacchetta, 2004). This position weakens the more complex battle of Muslim women who envision gender equality within their religion while upholding a sense of identity—finding

a balance between feminist idealism and religious liberties. The Supreme Court decision made it more inclined to uphold the heteronormative family unit, thus being in alignment with what marriage is in terms of a sacred institution that should not be too easily dissolved. Justice Nariman's observation that divorce broke not only the marital relationship but also brought psychological damage to children while becoming an epitome of this court's adherence to monogamy pushed all the complexities of Muslim conjugal lives to the fringes (Shayara Bano, 2017). It was thus laced with the language of protectionism, treating Muslim women as victims who needed rescue from their religious structures, an imagery deeply resonant with the stories propagated by the Hindu Right (Kapur 2014). The judiciary reasserts a frequent obscurantist victimage representing Muslim women mainly as victims of protection negating the very expression of agency and complicity in religious identity. This reduction reduces them merely to being politicized pawns in a war of ideologies and in so doing fuels the narrative which claims to normalize hegemony, and Hindu cultural supremism while ignoring the inherent rights and identities of Muslim women. Therefore, this intersection of gender, religion, and law demands a critical re-examination of how judicial discourses not only reflect but also actively shape socio-political landscapes in India in ways that reveal the delicate ways in which gender equality is negotiated within the paradigms of religious majoritarianism and legal protectionism.

## **6. NATIONALISM, SECULARISM, AND THE POLITICS OF HINDU IDENTITY IN INDIA**

The Bharatiya Janata Party, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad collectively form the leadership of the Hindu Right in India and represent an ideal synthesis of nationalism and religious identity. This coalition, therefore, constructs a vision of Indian nationhood very closely bound to the principles of Hindutva. Influence is here not merely political but rather profoundly ideological and promotes the version of Indian identity whereby Hindutva is tantamount to national identity. While doing so, it spreads an exclusionary ethos by ascribing the Muslim minority an antagonistic "othering" potential of Hindu womanhood in a glorified, yet restrictive, manner, invoking traditional familial roles over autonomy (Udapa 2015; Sharma 2011). This vision against secularism in itself contradicts its essence; this can be due to reimagination and reinterpretation based on a framework of explaining patriarchal control within the realm of national revival, thereby reducing an individual's freedom with the idea of reviving cultural values of society (Chatterji et al. 2019; Banerjee 2003; Vijayan 2019; Hansen 1999). At the heart of this ideological framework is a highly contested reinterpretation of secularism, argued by critical scholars such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood as not doing away with religion in the public sphere but rather governing and defining it, putting the state as an arbiter of religious practice (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2016). This management in the postcolonial Indian context has assumed a form of hegemony that favours Hindu identity. Legitimacy drawn from colonial legacies has entrenched communal distinctions and fragmented India's pluralistic society. Thus, modern Indian secularism is a paradox: it seemingly maintains equality and religious neutrality while paradoxically supporting a socio-political framework that enforces majoritarian Hindu identity.

## **7. SARTORIAL CHOICES, SECULARISM, AND THE POLITICS OF BODILY AUTONOMY**

In modern society, sartorial choices have emerged to become one of the leading determinants of who is the kind of person who aligns with modernity and has a cultural disposition. Regarding this, the veil and secular garments are two extremes that help explain this phenomenon. Conventionally, the veil was a symbol of cultural traditionalism, being a mark often criticized as holding one back from progress and modernity. However, wearing a veil is a choice and should not be deemed the way to stop somebody from being modern or a modernist. The conflict between secularism and the veil has been a long-standing issue in most Western countries whose laws have been enacted prohibiting the garment of much concern. Secularism, which demands uniformity amongst its citizens, forgets the fact that personal conviction and religious customs play very crucial parts in individual identity which should not be affected. Principled secularism cannot usurp individual values and cultural customs in the name of homogeneity. Conversely, wearing overtly revealing clothes may also be very controversial. Here again, the prescription from society and culture imposes excessive burdens on women's bodies, which

continue to face scrutiny and regulation. Such a widespread problem calls into question how culture and religion control the bodily autonomy of women while raising important questions about the exercise of agency and self-expression within societal constructs. For instance, in 2022, the Indian state of Karnataka prohibited Muslim women from attending school on the pretext of "uniformity," thus violating their right to an education. Intercultural and interfaith empathy are necessary since this reflects a general paradigm of intolerance. This principle is then often brought under the authority of the state. It is not disparity per se that begets inequality but rather the failure of the public sector to recognize and include pluralism (Menon, 2023). In their quest for legal compliance and national integration, some women's organizations bear a disproportionate burden. Education is a right guaranteed by the Indian Constitution and should always be accessible, unimpeded by shallow dictates. What one wears should not deny educational opportunities nor be a yardstick for societal value. Yet inside the West, the veil is often seen as a statement of a putative "lesser" civilization. Traditionally, the West projects hegemonic ideals of enlightenment onto other cultures, especially in freeing women from traditional clothes stories often carried on through state-sanctioned coercion. These discourses echo around the world in particular in the veil and how it has become something that represents the battle over a site of ideological contestation. It also reflects a hyper-masculine stance that always supports a vigilante ethos that marginalizes divergent voices. In this arena, women's protests could have articulated an alternative vision—a vision rooted in principles of inclusivity, feminism, and a critical approach toward education in citizenship (Kadiwal, 2021). Among the most contentious issues when it comes to the regulation of women's dress and its complex cultural, religious, and political strands.

It epitomizes an ideal of women as better manageable through sartorial choice showing an embedded social attitude, that is often hostile, toward the idea of independence among women. In this light, the policy has facilitated the promotion of a narrative which is paternalistic, so to speak: namely that is, women are lesser agents of their will and more objects of control. Women have to walk through minefields created by conflicting expectations of being at once spiritually and legally compliant while publicly and privately accountable. Unfortunately, the government's priorities now, have shifted away from critical needs of society which include food security, equitable education, employment, and personal safety, and so the government gets more into affairs of telling a woman what to wear and what not to wear. It is high time that women are allowed to exercise their choice of dressing based on beliefs and conscience. The ban on hijab is a form of infringement on personal space and autonomy, further magnified by intersections of gender, religion, and caste. In India, the veil epitomizes how the state uses clothing as a tool of control advancing certain cultural and religious models and denigrating others. This forms a state of Muslim practice as conservative or oppressive toward the strengthening of Hindu upper-caste traditions, which then sustains maladaptive stereotypes that destroy Muslim women's autonomy (Nigam, 2022). It is not the story of Muslim women; what it includes is the story of India's female constituency, which is typing under the pressure to follow prescriptive dress norms. Simply put, it is a muddied knotty issue shrouded in the details of cultural, religious and political complexity. No institution or society must oppress women by determining their appearance. Rather than allowing clothes to be an arm in oppressing females, the state should lead the attention towards authentically needed rights of females towards such an atmosphere facilitating individualism and cultural diversity.

## **8. STATE, GENDER, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY IN INDIA**

Women face a myriad of adversities due to the societal constraints imposed on their physical selves, often circumscribing their autonomy and it is crucial to understand how women deal with these limitations and carve spaces of agency, asserting control over their corporeal and quotidian experiences. It is crucial to draw attention to the difficulties women encounter as well as the acts of defiance and empowerment they perform (Amirtham, 2011).

India's sociopolitical culture is profoundly enmeshed with governmental apparatuses, giving rise to a complex dynamic that permeates the societal fabric. Familial norms are meticulously delineated and codified by the administration, with the governmental framework frequently perceived as an extension

of the *familial unit*. The legitimacy of governance often finds its roots in traditional mores and religious ethics, underscoring the authority vested in patriarchal and gerontocratic figures. Masculine and feminine constructs, along with male and female forms, are invoked as potent symbols encapsulating the nation's identity. India is a fervent proponent of heteronormative unions that adheres closely to the Hindutva traditions. However, with the recent enactment of the Uniform Civil Code in Uttarakhand, the government has intensified its presence within domestic structures. Notably, this code mandates the formal registration of live-in partnerships by granting governmental entities the authority to validate the legitimacy of such unions and stipulating not only their acceptability but also their duration. This legislative action exposes a larger discussion about individual liberty, particularly about intimate partnerships and cohabitation. Such measures reveal the state's incursion into private domains, representing a conspicuous violation of personal sovereignty and confidentiality. As part of a larger set of cultural transformations underway in India, traditional paradigms clash with aspirations for the modern, the modern and the freedoms implicit in modernity. This is a sign of a very deep turmoil between a culture and a set of ideas deep in the ideological and cultural fibre of India, which will determine the contours of Indian society for the years to come.

The Act places upon cohabitants an obligation to report themselves to the local police and reveal their address. In the case of either party being under the age of 21 years, the notification by the parents or guardians is a requirement, and the authorities are entitled to inspect the genuineness of the cohabitation, particularly against such inhibiting factors as inter-caste or inter-religious relationships. This increased bureaucratic penetration into personal relationships calls for a re-examination of the effects of state intervention in private realms. Live-in relationships serve as an alternative pathway for those who want to escape the institution of marriage or are barred from entering it. The dichotomization of women into *virtuous* versus *transgressive* through such moralistic statutes engenders a punitive ethos, enforcing unattainable ideals that constrain all women. Live-in relationships alone can be regarded as enough to defy the archetypal Hindu family ideal and undermine the nation's sanctified image. Free and independent, women enter such relationships that are quite an aberration of the stereotypical purity and propriety ascribed to women under the Hindu family model. Societal condemnation that relates to the accepted sexual etiquette often follows such deviation. Such respect for a woman's choices of relationships is essential and the recognition of her right to autonomy in such decisions. The discourse by Thapan is ambiguous about the issue of embodiment regarding its formation in self-concept and mediation of transactions within their corporeal forms. It is profoundly insightful in analyzing how gender and socioeconomic stratifications shape women's experiences and identities. This also explains the unique kind of challenges and opportunities that urban environments pose before women within Indian metropolises, which amplifies the real women's narratives to negotiate the societal expectations and limitations of the body imposed on them. The text here discusses the strategy of the practice of resilience and reclaiming, used for making women feel in charge of their physical selves according to Thapan (2009).

## **9. GENDER, GOVERNANCE, AND THE QUEST FOR SOVEREIGNTY IN INDIAN POLITICS**

The Women's Reservation Bill, formally designated as the *Nari Shakti Vandan Abhiniyam*, was promulgated in the Lok Sabha in September 2023. This bill threw open the possibility of balancing the gender gap by granting an allocation of 33% in central and state legislatures for women and remoulding the gender equation of political representation. This enactment is the legislative response to this old issue of female underrepresentation in political echelons - an imbalance maintained despite 75 years of independence. The continued scarcity of female voices within political forums speaks to the prevalent disjuncture of power dynamics wherein men hold a monopoly over the regulatory prerogatives defining the limits of women's presence within governance structures and hence skew policy formulations that shape, at their very base, women's welfare. It becomes pertinent to acknowledge that women, being an intimate observer of their socio-cultural plight, require just representation. The implementation of this bill however throws up complex issues needing urgent, careful consideration. This bill would catalyze a transformative discourse on issues of gender by

magnifying the presence of women within political frameworks, thus buttressing those who have systematically been marginalized in such arenas as entitlements over lands, access to education, occupational opportunities, and general security—domains fraught with stubborn social ills like female foeticide, domestic subjugation, dowry extortions, 'honour' reprisals, and sexual predation. Despite decades of male hegemonic predominance in legislative institutions, these adversities still mark quotidian reality.

Although the bill has brought proportionate representation for women, glaringly ignored is the principle of intersectionality, thereby making the bill less equitable. The fact remains that women are split along lines of caste, creed, socio-economic status, and ethnicity and hence face systemic oppression at various levels and intensities and require differentiated mechanisms of representation. Therefore, the "quota within a quota" model becomes a necessity to ensure that women from marginalized backgrounds are adequately represented. Moreover, it needs to be understood that the quota alone cannot bring an effective transformation of women's position in society. It is necessary to implement policy structures to promote parity of access and outcomes, emphasizing equal opportunities and equal actualizations. Its very passage would jeopardize the guarantee of representation for OBCs, Dalits and Muslims, and mandate quotas within the quota for the women's reservation. This stratification appears to breed a vertical split in the otherwise heterogenous sections among the oppressed groups, thus threatening the very unity which gender-based campaigning was hitherto held to ensure. While reservations in the educational and vocational segments of life for OBCs were well-supported socio-historically, no such precedent or compelling demand existed for similar legislative quotas for the OBCs. Gender inequities demand a holistic paradigm to interrogate and deconstruct foundational architectures of gendered inequity that exist in education, labour markets, and healthcare systems. It is not merely the question of equal opportunity but the realization of egalitarian outcomes - a more nuanced objective that moves beyond easy metrics to challenge deeply embedded hierarchies in the sociopolitical. A recalibrated societal framework for women's representation, an imperative guided by the intersectional lens, holds out hope of a just and more inclusive ethos. Lastly, none of these political formations--whether at the Indian scale or worldwide--can presume immunity to residual patriarchal dogmas. What remains consequential, though, is the ideological inclination toward liberating and empowering women: on the surface, policy articulations of commitment and beneath, daily praxis, as expressed by (Bose, 2010).

## 10. CONCLUSION

Indian concepts of womanhood are very deeply embedded in interlocking forces of religion, culture, and state. Instead of separately exerting influences, such domains interact dynamically to configure and reproduce gender roles in the process of imposing limiting standards on a woman's behaviour, physicality, and social placement. Religion too has a lot of impact, giving specific doctrines of femininity and gender relationships that eventually seep into cultural norms defining expectations about modesty, obedience, and what value is placed on female education and careers. The state legal and policy frameworks either work to reinforce such stereotypes or work to dismantle them. It thus underlines potential as both a conservator and a challenger of traditional gender norms. Understanding this complex interplay is essential to understanding the complex experiences of Indian women, as their lives are defined by changing social norms and the ability of state policies to challenge or affirm these norms. Even with developments like legislative quotas for women in local governance, strong social and cultural barriers persist in the inclusion of women in the political arena in an equitable manner. A subtle understanding of effective empowerment needs to realize the diversified contexts in which women work within such norms, continually negotiating or transgressing boundaries. Hence, meaningful empowerment for Indian women shall be possible only through systemic efforts; not only in reforms but even in legal changes, as well as transformation in the cultural attitude and religious practice, which may eventually equip a society to become the ideal scenario towards equity and inclusivity.



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