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Why Women's Reservation Cannot Wait Any Longer

Context

- India is widely regarded as one of the world's most vibrant democracies, with high voter participation and an increasingly active electorate.
- A particularly notable development has been the **rise of women as a decisive voting force**.
- However, this progress reveals a striking paradox: while women actively participate in elections, they remain significantly underrepresented in legislative institutions.
- This gap between participation and representation highlights **the urgent need for the implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill**.

The Representation Gap

- **Disparity in Numbers**
 - Despite constituting nearly 50% of the population, women occupy only a small fraction of legislative seats in India.

- Their representation stands at approximately **9% in State Assemblies and around 14%-15% in Parliament.**
- These figures fall far short of reflecting the demographic reality and undermine the principle of inclusive democracy.
- **A Structural, Not Just Numerical Issue**
 - The underrepresentation of women is not merely a statistical anomaly but a reflection of **deeper structural inequalities.**
 - While women have become more politically aware and active over time, the system has failed to translate this participation into meaningful representation.

Rise of Women as Political Participants

- **From Passive Voters to Active Agents**
 - Over the past two decades, Indian women have transitioned from passive voters to active participants in the political process.
 - In several states, female voter turnout now equals or even surpasses that of men. This shift demonstrates increased awareness, agency, and engagement.
- **The Unfulfilled Transition to Leadership**
 - However, this rise in participation has not been matched by an increase in representation.
 - Women continue to remain **largely excluded from decision-making roles**, indicating a disconnect between democratic participation and political empowerment.

Structural Barriers to Women's Representation

- **Role of Political Parties**
 - Political parties act as gatekeepers to legislative power but consistently nominate fewer women candidates.
 - This limits women's entry into formal politics and perpetuates their underrepresentation.
- **Socio-Economic Constraints**
 - Electoral politics requires financial resources, networks, and social capital.
 - Women often face **systemic disadvantages** in accessing these resources due to existing socio-economic inequalities.
- **Cultural and Safety Concerns**
 - Deep-rooted cultural norms and concerns about safety further discourage women from entering politics. These factors **create a cycle of exclusion** that continues across elections.

The Case for the Women's Reservation Bill

- **Addressing Structural Inequality**
 - The Women's Reservation Bill proposes reserving a fixed proportion of seats for women in legislative bodies.
 - This measure directly tackles the structural barriers that prevent fair representation.
- **Debunking the Merit Argument**

- Critics argue that reservation undermines merit and promotes tokenism.
- However, the current **political system is not purely meritocratic**, as access to power is often shaped by privilege and networks rather than competence alone.

Broader Social Impact of Representation

- **Challenging Social Norms**

- The presence of women in leadership roles challenges entrenched gender norms and stereotypes, gradually transforming societal attitudes.

- **Creating a Leadership Pipeline**

- Representation also inspires future generations. Young girls begin to see leadership as attainable, helping to build a pipeline of women leaders for the future.

The Urgency of Reform

- **Changing Socio-Economic Landscape**

- India is undergoing rapid transformation, with more women entering education and the workforce. Their aspirations are evolving faster than political institutions.

- **Limitations of Voluntary Measures**

- While political parties have pledged to increase women's representation, progress has been minimal. Voluntary efforts have proven insufficient, reinforcing the need for legislative intervention.

Deepening Democracy and Development

- **From Participation to Power**

- True democratic empowerment goes beyond voting; it **requires representation in decision-making bodies**.
- Ensuring women's presence in legislatures is essential for deepening democracy.

- **Developmental Benefits**

- Research shows that gender-inclusive governance leads to better policy outcomes, improved social indicators, and more sustainable development. Excluding women from leadership is both unjust and inefficient.

Conclusion

- India's democratic journey has been remarkable, but it remains incomplete but the **gap between women's participation and representation is too significant to ignore**.
- Bridging this divide requires bold and immediate action. The Women's Reservation Bill is not merely a matter of fairness, it is **a necessary step toward building a more representative, inclusive, and resilient democracy**.
- The question is no longer whether India is ready for this reform, but whether it can afford to delay it any longer.

Why Women's Reservation Cannot Wait Any Longer FAQs

Q1. What contradiction exists in India's democracy regarding women?

Ans. Women actively participate in elections but remain underrepresented in legislative bodies.

Q2. What is the approximate representation of women in State Assemblies?

Ans. Women constitute about 9% of legislators in State Assemblies.

Q3. Why are women underrepresented in politics?

Ans. Women face structural barriers such as limited access to resources, party nominations, and social constraints.

Q4. How has reservation worked at the local level?

Ans. Reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions has enabled women to govern effectively and prioritise key social issues.

Q5. Why is the Women's Reservation Bill important?

Ans. It is important because it ensures fair representation and strengthens democracy by including women in decision-making.

Source: **The Hindu**

Labour Unrest in Noida - Wages, Subsistence and the Road to Industrial Peace

Context

- Thousands of industrial workers in Noida (UP) recently staged protests, which turned violent and led to several arrests.
- Similar unrest had earlier surfaced in Barauni, Surat, Manesar, and Panipat — pointing to a pattern of **labour discontent** that transcends geography and sector.

The Immediate Trigger of Protests

- The proximate cause was a minimum **wage** (MW) **hike** announced in Haryana, which exposed the deep disparity between existing wages and actual living costs.
- This was compounded by sharp **inflationary pressure** (especially due to the West Asia conflict) — particularly a steep rise in LPG cylinder prices in the black market — a commodity central to working-class households.

Structural Roots - A Decade of Wage Stagnation

- Behind the immediate trigger lies a more troubling structural reality. Minimum wages have two components –
 - **Basic Pay** — last revised in Haryana in 2015 and in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2014, despite a statutory requirement for revision every five years.

- **Dearness Allowance (DA)** — linked to the Consumer Price Index for Industrial Workers (**CPI-IW**) and revised twice yearly.
- While DA adjustments continued, the failure to revise the basic component for over a decade effectively meant that workers were denied their rightful share of gains in labour productivity.
- Calculations reveal falling real wages between 2021 and 2026 in Noida and Faridabad — the epicentres of the unrest.

The Flaw in Minimum Wage Computation:

- **Underestimation of housing costs:**
 - The MW formula accounts for house rent at only 10% of food and clothing expenditure — a figure grossly mismatching ground realities.
 - Rent consumes one-third to half of a worker's monthly income, especially near metro cities.
- **Issues with CPI:** The CPI, used to measure inflation, systematically **underrepresents** price rise in housing, healthcare, and education — sectors that weigh heavily on working-class budgets.
- **Absence of a scientific National Floor Wage (NFW)**
 - State governments are legally bound to set MWs above the NFW.
 - However, there exists no objective, needs-based methodology for determining the NFW — a critical institutional gap that allows states to anchor wages at inadequate levels.

Worker Demands and State Response

- Following the protests, state governments implicitly acknowledged the inadequacy of existing wages.
- **For example**, Haryana raised unskilled worker wages by 35%, while UP followed with a 21% hike, yet dissatisfaction persists.
- Unions in Haryana are still protesting and demanding MW revision to be Rs 23,196. Workers in UP remain aggrieved, partly because both states share the NCR region and face comparable costs of living — making the differential hike feel unjust.

A Pattern, Not an Isolated Incident

- The Noida protests must be read alongside a broader national trend. Before Noida, there was labour unrest in Barauni (Bihar), Surat (Gujarat), and Manesar, Panipat (Haryana).
- In all these places, workers were demanding **higher wages, improved overtime pay** and better working conditions.
- In Noida, even before the protest of factory workers subsided, **domestic workers** were on the road demanding wage revision.
- In 2025, gig workers across India went on strike for fair pay and the suspension of 10 minute delivery.
- This means, workers across sectors are surviving at the threshold of subsistence — a situation that, left unaddressed, will inevitably spill onto the streets.

Challenges

- Weak institutionalisation of tripartite dialogue (government-employers-workers).
- **Risk of criminalisation** of labour protest, echoing the Maruti Manesar incident where workers faced job loss and imprisonment.
- Regional wage disparities within shared economic zones like the NCR.

Way Forward

- **Revise:** The MW formula to accurately reflect housing, healthcare, and education costs — particularly in peri-urban and metro-adjacent industrial zones. Timely and periodic revision of the basic wage component, with statutory enforcement.
- **Establish:** A scientific NFW with clearly defined, needs-based criteria to serve as a credible floor for state-level wage-setting.
- **Institutionalise:** Tripartite dialogue as the primary mechanism for resolving industrial disputes before they escalate.
- **Recognise:** That stable industrial relations are a prerequisite for sustained investment and economic growth — not a constraint on it.

Conclusion

- The Noida labour unrest is not merely an episode of street protest — it is a symptom of a wage architecture that has failed to keep pace with the cost of living for over a decade.
- When workers risk arrest and livelihood to protest, it signals a **crisis of subsistence**, not agitation for luxury.
- As India builds world-class infrastructure — airports, industrial corridors, smart cities — the **social compact** with its labour force must be equally world-class.
- **Industrial peace** is not incidental to economic ambition; it is foundational to it.

Labour Unrest in Noida FAQs

Q1. What are the structural causes behind recent labour unrest in Noida?

Ans. Stagnant minimum wages, falling real incomes, rising living costs, and weak industrial dialogue mechanisms.

Q2. What are the limitations of the current minimum wage determination system in India?

Ans. It underestimates actual living costs, especially housing, healthcare, and education, and suffers from irregular revisions.

Q3. Why is the National Floor Wage important for ensuring wage justice in India?

Ans. It provides a minimum benchmark for states, reduces regional disparities, and promotes equitable labour standards.

Q4. How can tripartite dialogue help maintain industrial peace in India?

Ans. Regular consultation among government, employers, and workers can resolve grievances early and prevent conflicts.

Q5. How economic growth without fair wage distribution can lead to social unrest?

Ans. Growth that excludes workers from productivity gains increases inequality, insecurity, and labour protests.

Source: **IE**

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