

Quota Mandates and Governance Reality: Scheduled Caste Women in the 2017 Delhi Municipal Corporation Election within the Journey of Women's Laws in India

Ms. Ritu Rani¹ & Dr. Rahul Bavage²

Abstract

This study examines the political participation of Scheduled Caste (SC) women in the 2017 Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC) election. Utilizing Right to Information (RTI) data, the research investigates the role of party affiliation and reservation status in shaping the representation of SC women councillors. Findings reveal that while reservations significantly increased the descriptive representation of Scheduled Caste women, the vast majority succeeded through reserved seats. This reliance exposes systemic barriers limiting their viability outside quota mandates. The study concludes that patriarchal party politics and entrenched caste hierarchies hinder substantive empowerment of Scheduled Caste women within urban governance, necessitating policy reforms to move beyond symbolic representation toward genuine political inclusion.

Keywords: Scheduled Caste Women, Delhi Municipal Corporation, Gender Quotas, Substantive Representation, Symbolic Representation, Party Politics, Caste Hierarchies.

Introduction

Women's political representation in India embodies a complex interplay between constitutional promises of equality and the realities of deeply entrenched patriarchy and caste discrimination. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments marked milestones by mandating reservations for women, including SC women, in local governance bodies such as the Delhi Municipal Corporation. These legal guarantees set aside specific seats to empower marginalized women, intending to facilitate their grassroots political inclusion.

The 2017 DMC election occurred in this charged socio-political climate. A total of 144 women were elected councillors, with a prominent number being SC women winning primarily through reserved wards. This development prompts a critical inquiry: Does this numerical increase signal authentic empowerment, or is it largely symbolic, serving constitutional formalities while systemic inequities curtail actual influence?

¹ Research Scholar, VNGIASS Nagpur, Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University

² Research Guide, VNGIASS Nagpur, Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University



This study situates the 2017 election within India's broader trajectory of women's rights and caste justice to evaluate whether quota reservations translate into substantive political participation for SC women or whether disparities endure.

Literature Review

This research draws on the foundational typology of political representation established by Pitkin (1967), which distinguishes among descriptive, substantive, symbolic, and formalistic representation. Descriptive representation reflects the mere presence of a demographic in political office. Substantive representation requires active advocacy on behalf of that group's interests. Symbolic representation refers to the perception of significance attached to a group's presence, often disconnected from tangible policy outcomes. Formalistic representation refers to institutional mechanisms that facilitate political entry.

Building on these concepts, Phillips (1995) underscored that female political presence, while necessary to challenge male dominance, is insufficient for structural change without genuine empowerment. Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) further emphasized that gender quotas increase women's political participation but face contextual constraints related to institutional culture. Within India, Buch's (2000) findings on women in panchayats illustrate how legal empowerment often coexists with structural challenges such as patriarchal dominance and proxy representation.

Rai (2011) highlights the intersection of caste and gender as crucial to understanding the political inclusion of SC women. The dual burden of caste discrimination and gender marginalization compounds barriers to their substantive representation in urban governance contexts like the DMC. Despite constitutional guarantees provided through Articles 14, 15, 16, 21, 42, and 51A(e), persistent societal inequalities continue to shape the political realities of SC women. Thus, exploring the 2017 election offers insight into whether descriptive gains correspond with substantive authority or remain largely symbolic in practice.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

This study employs Pitkin's (1967) typology as an analytical framework to examine the qualities of political inclusion achieved by SC women in the 2017 DMC election. Key research questions include:

1. How have reservations affected the descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation of SC women?
2. What are the patterns of party affiliation and seat reservation among SC women councillors?



3. To what extent do SC women councillors exercise real political influence versus symbolic presence conditioned by legal and institutional constraints?

Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes that most SC women councillors succeeded via reserved seats, indicating that quota mandates secure descriptive representation but fail to overcome systemic barriers to substantive empowerment. The notion aligns with Pitkin's (1967) argument that mere presence without autonomy restricts the ability to effect policy change. Phillips's (1995) concept of the "politics of presence" further supports the notion that authentic empowerment requires capacity and independence, which are often absent in many reserved-seat winners.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, with the research primarily analysing RTI-obtained data detailing party affiliations and seat categories (reserved vs. unreserved) for elected SC women councillors in the 2017 DMC election. Complementary secondary literature enriches the theoretical analysis, situating empirical findings within broader debates on women's political representation and intersectionality. This rigorous data-driven assessment grounds the study in precise, official election outcomes while linking them to qualitative interpretations of empowerment and marginalization.

Findings and Analysis

The RTI data provided precise, measurable results about how political parties use the quota system and how electoral success relies on reserved seats.

Party Alignment and Strategic Quota Use

Table 1 summarises the representation of Scheduled Caste women across major parties and independent candidates in the 2017 MCD election. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led with 42.3%, followed by the Indian National Congress (INC) and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), each holding 26.9%, and others constituting minor shares. This distribution highlights how major parties strategically utilize quota mandates to engage caste-based constituencies.

Table 1: Party-Wise SC Women Councillors (2017 MCD Election)

Political Party	Number of SC Women Councillors	Percentage (%)
BJP	11	42.3
INC	7	26.9
AAP	7	26.9
Others/Ind.	1	3.9
Total	26	100.0

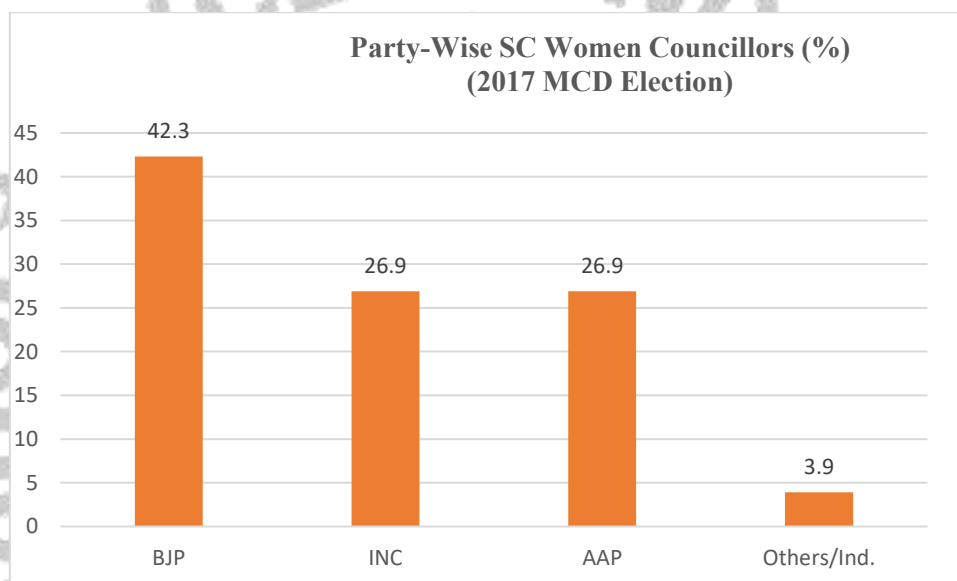
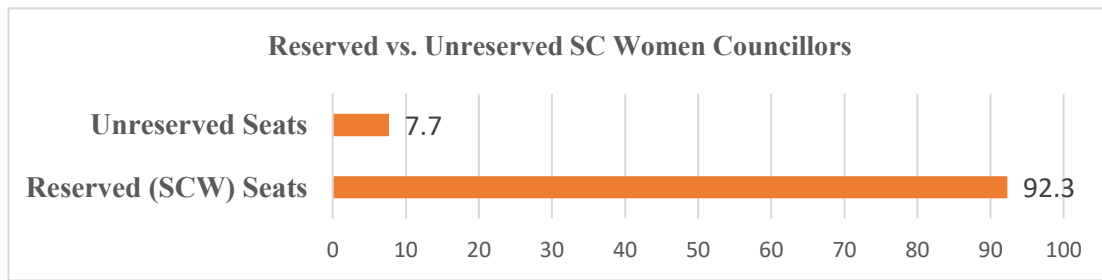


Chart 1: Party-Wise SC Women Councillors Percentage



Table 2 details SC women's reliance on reserved seats, indicating that 92.3% of these councillors gained office through constitutionally mandated reserved seats, with only 7.7% winning unreserved seats.

Table 2: Reserved vs. Unreserved SC Women Councillors (2017 MCD Election)



Seat Category	SC Women Councillors	Percentage (%)
Reserved (SCW) Seats	24	92.3
Unreserved Seats	2	7.7
Total	26	100.0

Chart 2: Reserved vs. Unreserved SC Women Councillors (2017 MCD Election)

The vast majority (92.3%) of Scheduled Caste women councillors gained their positions through reserved constituencies, highlighting the essential role of constitutional mandates in providing initial access to power. Without reservations, the descriptive representation of Scheduled Caste women would almost vanish. In contrast, only two Scheduled Caste women councillors (7.7%) won seats from unreserved seats. This limited success in open races suggests that the broader political context has not rendered their candidacy or leadership normal outside the framework of affirmative action.

Discussion

The findings clearly validate the successes of descriptive and formalistic representation, but expose significant dysfunctions in achieving substantive representation. While quotas increased SC women's visibility, party control and systemic caste-gender biases maintained their marginalization. The prevalence of proxy leadership where male party leaders or family members wield actual power undermines councillors' autonomy, restricting effective governance engagements.

Resource inequalities further entrench these disparities; limited campaign financing and minimal governance training consign SC women councillors to what Rai (2011) terms a "second-tier status."



Consequently, many fail to influence council agendas or critically address community issues. Even the minority who won unreserved seats report similar marginalization and exclusion within party hierarchies.

These structural constraints highlight the need to move beyond quotas towards fostering real political empowerment. Effective strategies must dismantle party gatekeeping, enhance equitable resource allocation, and counter entrenched caste and gender discrimination, as echoed by Franceschet and Piscopo (2008).

Conclusion

The 2017 DMC election illustrates the dual nature of quota mandates—while enhancing descriptive and symbolic representation, they fall short in fostering substantive empowerment for SC women. This calls for policy shifts emphasizing internal party democracy, leadership training, equitable resource allocation, and anti-discrimination measures to advance genuine political inclusion (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995).

Recommendations

Enforce transparent candidate selection to reduce proxy leadership and party gatekeeping.

- Develop targeted leadership and governance training for marginalized councillors.
- Ensure equal financial and logistical campaign support for reserved seat candidates.
- Strengthen anti-discrimination laws with accessible grievance mechanisms.
- Establish independent monitoring bodies to assess substantive outcomes of reservations.

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