Women's Reservation Bill

Why in news?

Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) leader began a day-long hunger strike in New Delhi, demanding passage of the Women's Reservation Bill (WRB).

What is the Women's Reservation Bill (WRB)?

- The *Constitution 108th Amendment Bill, 2008* seeks to reserve *one-third (33%)* of all seats for women in the *Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies*.
- Reserved seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the state or union territory.
- Reservation of seats for women shall cease to exist 15 years after the commencement of this Amendment Act.

What is the timeline of the bill?

- **1996 –** The WRB was 1st introduced in 1996, and was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee, however, the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha and had to be reintroduced.
- **1998 –** The Bill was reintroduced and yet again, it failed to get support and lapsed.
- **1999 –** The Bill was reintroduced by the NDA government in the 13th Lok Sabha and was subsequently introduced twice in the year 2003.
- **2004 –** The UPA government included it in its Common Minimum Programme and finally tabled it, this time in Rajya Sabha to prevent it from lapsing again, in 2008.
- Few recommendations made by the *1996 Geeta Mukherjee Committee* were included in this version of the Bill.
- **2010 –** The Bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha and lapsed in the Lok Sabha, since then the demand for reservation for women in legislative bodies is not new.

WRB is seen as a logical extension of the 72nd and 73rd constitutional amendments (1992, 1993), which reserved one third of all seats and chairperson posts for women in rural and urban local governments.

Why did the parliament fail to pass the WRB?

- **Heated debates & sexist taunts –** The WRB has seen some of the heated debates and a fair share of sexism.
- **Quota within quota –** The 1996 committee recommended reservation for *OBC women* within the 1/3rd reservation for women of the Bill, however, this demand has never been incorporated.

- This has led to opponents saying that the WRB will not benefit their women.
- **Lack of political ability –** Only Odisha's Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and West Bengal's Trinamool Congress (TMC) have reserved seats for women for election candidatures.
- **Diverts attention –** Opponents contend WRB diverts attention from the larger issues of electoral reform such as criminalisation of politics and inner party democracy.

What is the status of Women Reservation in India?

- **Gujarat –** It elected just 8% of women legislators in its 182-member assembly.
- **Himachal Pradesh –** Where every second voter is a female, has elected 67 men and only 1 woman.
- **National average –** The national average of women in all state assemblies remains around 8%.
- **Rankings –** India ranks 144 out of 193 countries in the representation of women in parliament according to *Inter-Parliamentary Union's report*.
- Among our immediate neighbours, India falls behind Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal.

Why is WRB important?

- Women have historically suffered due to systemic inequality and barriers.
- **Caste groups –** Any scheme of women's reservation must be within the constitutional tenets and must also account for its representation across caste groups.
- **Gender quota –** Without a gender quota, women's representation will continue to remain marginal causing a massive deficit in our democracy.
- **Panchayats –** Some recent studies on panchayats have shown the positive effect of reservation on empowerment of women and on allocation of resources.
- **Vote share –** Though women's vote share has increased the number of women in positions of power has not increased.

What is the way forward?

- With its massive women population, India has a huge reservoir of potential which, if unleashed, will take the country much ahead.
- Women's reservation will jump-start the democratic process, allowing significant majority to have a say in how their lives must be governed.

References

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