

The Frozen Constituency

Delayed Delimitation and Denied Representation of SCs and STs

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The Indian Constitution's promise of proportional political representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has been systematically undermined by the delimitation freeze imposed in 1976. Our analysis, drawing on census data, population projections, and counterfactual modelling, quantifies a staggering representation deficit. A mere unfreezing of the process is insufficient. A legitimate redressal requires a two-pronged approach: implementing a one-time corrective to bridge the historical sc/st representation gap and reformulating Parliament to address federal concerns.

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The constitutional promise of proportional political representation for Scheduled Castes (scs) and Scheduled Tribes (sts) is being fundamentally undermined by a frozen map of India's parliamentary constituencies. While scholars have identified an "emerging crisis of representation" (Vaishnav and Hinton 2019), its most acute manifestation is the systematic under-representation of scs and sts, a direct consequence of the delimitation freeze imposed in 1976. This article argues that this freeze, far from a neutral procedural pause, constitutes a continuous constitutional subversion. It has transformed a dynamic system designed to reflect demographic change into a rigid architecture that denies scs and sts their rightful political voice, creating what we term a "compounding democratic deficit."

The Indian Constitution, through an interlocking system of Articles 82, 330, and 332, envisioned a Parliament where the number of seats reserved for scs and sts would evolve with every census. This was a hard-won compact, reflecting B R Ambedkar's insistence that representation for marginalised communities must be both guaranteed and effective—in numbers sufficient to "constitute a force" for change (Ambedkar 1947). However, the 42nd Amendment Act of 1976, which froze the allocation of Lok Sabha seats to each state based on the 1971 Census, shattered this design. Ostensibly to promote family planning (Basu 1997), this decision, as McMillan (2000) noted, fundamentally altered India's democratic compact. The subsequent extension of the freeze until 2026 has entrenched a situation where parliamentary representation

for scs and sts remains locked in a 1971 straitjacket, even as their populations have grown and shifted over five decades.

The consequences are both quantifiable and deep. Our analysis, synthesising census data, Election Commission records, and population projections, reveals a deficit of 76 parliamentary seats—52 for scs and 24 for sts—that should exist to maintain constitutional proportionality. This represents a denial of representation to approximately 95 million citizens. Beyond the numbers, this deficit also has tangible implications: it dilutes the voice of marginalised communities in legislative bodies, weakens their influence in parliamentary committees, and skews policymaking on issues critical to their welfare, from manual scavenging to forest rights.

While the existing literature has ably documented the federal implications of the delimitation freeze, particularly the north-south divide (Sivaramakrishnan 2000), and decried it as "constitutional fraud" (McMillan 2001), its specific and devastating impact on sc/st representation has received insufficient attention. This article fills that gap. We move beyond the interstate frame to highlight an intra-state, caste-based democratic crisis. Using counterfactual analysis, we demonstrate how the freeze has systematically prevented the proportional increase of reserved seats, thereby maintaining a status quo that disproportionately benefits upper-caste political dominance.

This article proceeds by first examining the historical and constitutional subversion of the delimitation process. It then presents a quantitative analysis of the representation deficit, projecting the number of sc/st seats that would exist today had the constitutional mandate been honoured. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of this democratic deficit and argue that addressing this historical injustice must be a central concern as India approaches the 2026 delimitation deadline. The integrity of Indian democracy hinges on restoring the broken

link between demographic reality and political representation for its most marginalised citizens.

Constitutional Promise and Political Paralysis

The architects of the Constitution crafted a sophisticated framework to ensure that the political representation of SCs and STs would be both protected and dynamic. This system rested on a tripod of constitutional provisions: Articles 330 and 332, which mandated the reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies in proportion to their population; and Article 82, which required the readjustment of these constituencies after every census. This was not an act of charity but a necessary corrective, a constitutional compact born from a clear-eyed recognition of historical injustice and social exclusion.

Ambedkar, the principal architect of these provisions, argued vehemently

that representation for marginalised communities must be meaningful—it required a presence in sufficient numbers to “constitute a force sufficient to claim redress” (Rodrigues 2017). The linkage between census, delimitation, and reservation was therefore deliberate and crucial. It ensured that as SC/ST populations grew or migrated, their political voice would be amplified accordingly, preventing their encapsulation in a static, historical quota. This vision was operationalised through the first three delimitation exercises in 1952, 1962, and 1972, which saw a gradual increase in reserved seats, as shown in Table 1.

This dynamic constitutional design was shattered by the 42nd Amendment Act of 1976. Citing the need to promote family planning, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s government froze the allocation of Lok Sabha seats to states until after the 2001 Census. The stated logic was that states successfully controlling population growth should not be penalised with

of seats per state. This created an absurd paradox: boundaries could shift to reflect population movement, but the overall number of seats reserved for SCs and STs could not increase to reflect their growing numbers. The 2008 delimitation exercise, the first in over three decades (Kumar 2009), was thus a hollow exercise in reshuffling a static deck, unable to address the fundamental deficit.

The consequence of this 50-year paralysis is a Lok Sabha whose composition is based on the demography of 1971, creating a growing chasm between constitutional principle and political reality. As Table 2 illustrates, the number of reserved seats remained virtually frozen for decades, even as the SC/ST population share grew significantly.

This subversion operates through several mechanisms. It creates a temporal distortion, applying 1971 population ratios to the 21st century. It causes spatial misalignment, preventing the reallocation of seats from states with proportionally shrinking SC/ST populations to states where these communities are growing (Verma 2002). Most perniciously, it intersects with broader patterns of caste-based exclusion, functioning as what Rana (2022) terms “institutional casteism”—using a neutral-sounding procedure to maintain upper-caste dominance over Parliament. The constitutional promise of a voice for the marginalised has been silenced by a political paralysis that serves the interests of the powerful.

Quantifying the Democratic Deficit

The historical subversion of delimitation, detailed in the previous section, is not a matter of abstract constitutional principle alone. Its consequences are starkly quantifiable. This section presents the findings of our empirical analysis, which models the number of SC/ST seats in the Lok Sabha had the constitutional mandate of decennial readjustment been honoured. The results reveal a representation deficit of crisis proportions.

To estimate this deficit, we constructed a counterfactual scenario for the projected Lok Sabha in 2026. We synthesised data from the Census of India (2001, 2011), population projections from the Technical

Table 1: The Evolving Constitutional Compact, 1951–71

Census Year	Total Population (Millions)	SC Population (Millions)	SC % of Total Population	ST Population (Millions)	ST % of Total Population	Seats Reserved for SCs	Seats Reserved for STs	Total Seats
1951	361.1	35.2	15.10	19.1	8.10	72	26	489
1961	439.2	44.7	14.70	23.3	7.60	76	31	494
1971	548.2	60.9	14.90	30.2	7.40	76	36	518
1981	683.3	80.5	15.50	37.5	7.20	79	41	543
1991	846.4	103.9	16.50	49.6	7.90	79	41	543
2001	1,028.70	138.2	16.20	67.8	8.20	79	41	543
2011	1,210.90	166.6	16.60	84.3	8.60	84	47	543

The number of SC/ST seats generally tracked population changes in this period.

Source: Census of India; Election Commission reports.

Table 2: The Great Freeze—Stagnant Seats amid Growing Populations

Year of Election	Seats Reserved for SCs	Seats Reserved for STs	Total Seats
1951	72	26	489
1957	76	31	494
1962	76	31	494
1967	77	37	520
1971	76	36	518
1977	79	41	543
1980	79	41	543
1984–85	79	41	543
1989	79	41	543
1991–92	79	41	543
1996	79	41	543
1998	79	41	543
1999	79	41	543
2004	79	41	543
2009	84	47	543
2014	84	47	543

The modest increase in 2009 was a result of boundary changes, not a constitutional readjustment, and failed to match population growth.

Source: Compiled from Election Commission data and census figures.

reduced parliamentary representation. While this addressed interstate equity concerns, it displayed a disregard for intra-state equity and the constitutional rights of SC/ST communities. As Alistair McMillan (2000) presciently observed, this act “fundamentally altered India’s democratic compact,” transforming a system of proportional representation into one that entrenched historical disparities.

The freeze, intended to be temporary, became permanent through political entrenchment. The 84th Amendment Act of 2001 extended the paralysis until 2026. The 87th Amendment Act of 2003 permitted a limited redrawing of constituency boundaries within states based on the 2001 Census, but it crucially maintained the freeze on the total number

Group on Population Projections (2020), and the delimitation framework established by Patel and Sekher (2024). We employed two projection methods: a conservative constant-share method, which holds sc/st population shares at recent levels, and a trend-based method, which extrapolates their historical growth rates. (A detailed methodology is provided in the Appendix, pp 45–46). The outcome, under both models, confirms a severe and systematic under-representation.

The scale of the deficit is staggering. The trend-based projection, which more accurately captures the sustained growth of sc populations, reveals that they are denied 52 seats—a 38% under-representation. For sts, both projection methods converge on a deficit of 24 seats, meaning their current representation is only two-thirds of what it should be. In total, 76 parliamentary seats are effectively “missing” for the communities the Constitution sought to protect. This represents a denial of political voice to approximately 95 million citizens, a population larger than that of most European nations.

The geographical distribution of this deficit, presented in Table 4, reveals that the injury is not evenly spread but concentrates in states with large and often economically marginalised sc/st populations.

This spatial concentration has serious implications. States accounting for over 70% of the sc deficit have below-average per capita incomes. Similarly, states with 80% of the st deficit have

above-average poverty rates. This creates a vicious cycle: regions with the greatest need for assertive advocacy on social justice and welfare issues are precisely those whose political voice has been most systematically weakened by the delimitation freeze.

The implications extend beyond mere seat counts to the core functioning of Parliament. With proportional representation, sc/st MPs would constitute roughly 26% of the Lok Sabha, ensuring a critical mass in every parliamentary standing committee. Current under-representation reduces their presence, weakening scrutiny of legislation and policy implementation on issues from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 to education and healthcare budgets. The deficit is not just numerical; it is a deficit of influence, oversight, and political power.

The evidence is unequivocal. The delimitation freeze has created a massive and growing representation gap, disproportionately affecting the most marginalised communities. The following section will argue that this is not merely a technical failure of electoral administration but a fundamental crisis for Indian democracy.

2026 Reckoning and Path Forward

The evidence presented in this article leads to an inescapable conclusion: the delimitation freeze represents one of the most significant, yet under-examined, democratic regressions in post-independence

India. By locking the Lok Sabha’s composition to the 1971 Census, the Indian state has systematically broken the constitutional compact of proportional representation for scs and sts. The result is not a technical anomaly but a serious democratic deficit—76 missing parliamentary seats that have silenced the political voice of approximately 95 million citizens over five decades. This has skewed policy-making, weakened legislative oversight on social justice, and perpetuated a form of institutional casteism that maintains upper-caste dominance at the expense of marginalised communities.

As India approaches the 2026 delimitation deadline, the nation faces a constitutional reckoning. Simply lifting the freeze and conducting a standard delimitation exercise would be an inadequate response. A routine readjustment would primarily address the interstate imbalances, but it would fail to remedy the specific, historical injustice inflicted upon sc/st communities. The accumulated deficit of 76 seats is a unique injury that demands a targeted remedy.

Therefore, we propose a path forward that is both constitutionally faithful and politically viable:

Implement a one-time corrective for SC/ST representation: The delimitation exercise must incorporate a mechanism to bridge the five-decade-long representation gap. This could involve a one-time, compensatory increase in the number of reserved seats, ensuring that the final allocation for scs and sts in the new Lok Sabha reflects not just their current population share, but also compensates for the historical deficit. This would be a decisive step towards restoring the original intent of Articles 330 and 332.

Moreover, there is also a strong case for rethinking bicameralism to better reflect federal principles, particularly by reformulating the Rajya Sabha to ensure just representation for all states. Models such as the United States Senate, and proportional representation as employed by the German Bundestag or Parliament of Sri Lanka are also possible pathways

Table 3: The Representation Deficit in 2026 (Projected)

Group	Current Seats (2008 Delimitation)	Projected Seats (Constant-Share)	Projected Seats (Trend-based)	Representation Deficit (Trend-based)
Scheduled Castes	84	83	136	-52
Scheduled Tribes	47	71	71	-24
Total	131	154	207	-76

The constant-share method for SCs uses 2021 age-cohort data; for STs, it relies on 2011 Census shares due to data constraints. The trend-based method extrapolates growth observed between 2001 and 2011.

Source: Authors’ calculations based on Census data, Technical Group on Population Projections (2020), and Patel and Sekher (2024) delimitation framework.

Table 4: State-wise Concentration of the SC/ST Representation Deficit (Trend Projection)

State	SC Deficit	ST Deficit	Key Observations
Uttar Pradesh	-10	-	Highest absolute SC deficit; fast-growing Dalit population
Maharashtra	-5	-3	Major deficit in both categories, reflecting demographic shifts
Rajasthan	-5	-3	Significant under-representation for both SCs and STs
Madhya Pradesh	-4	-5	Epicentre of ST under-representation
Bihar	-6	-	High SC deficit despite being a populous state
West Bengal	-4	-1	Substantial SC deficit unaddressed by boundary changes
All-India total	-52	-24	A cross-state democratic crisis

Source: Authors’ calculations. A full state-wise table is available in the Appendix.

for enabling better representation of states (EPW 2025).

Critics may argue that such measures are complex or politically challenging. Yet, the alternative—continuing the freeze or implementing a delimitation that ignores this historical debt—is morally and constitutionally indefensible. It would signal that the procedural convenience of the powerful outweighs the fundamental rights of the marginalised. The political challenge of a restructured Parliament is a small price to pay for upholding the foundational principle of representative democracy.

The impending delimitation is more than a bureaucratic exercise; it is a test of India's commitment to substantive democracy. Will we continue to be governed by a parliamentary map frozen in time, reflecting the social hierarchies of half a century ago? Or will we seize this constitutional moment to create a legislature that truly represents the Indian people of the 21st century?

The path of least resistance—further delay or a minimalist approach—is a path towards greater democratic decay. The courageous path, and the only one worthy of India's constitutional vision, is to embrace a delimitation that is both federally just and socially equitable. The 76 missing seats are not just a number; they are a ghost in the machine of Indian democracy, a reminder of a promise unfulfilled. As the 2026 deadline approaches, the nation must choose between perpetuating a historical wrong and finally honouring its constitutional compact with the most marginalised. The integrity of Indian democracy hinges on this choice.

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Appendix: Data Sources and Projection Methodology

This appendix provides the technical details underpinning the empirical analysis in Section 2, "Quantifying the Democratic Deficit."

A1 Data Sources and Description

Our analysis synthesises data from the following official sources to ensure reliability and reproducibility:

- **Population shares:** Census of India data for 2001 and 2011, providing state-wise percentages of Scheduled Caste (sc) and Scheduled Tribe (st) populations.
- **Population projections:** Data from the Technical Group on Population Projections (2020), constituted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. This includes:
 - Total population projections for all states and union territories for 2016-36.
 - Age-specific cohort projections for the sc population for 2021.
- **Delimitation Framework:** The seat allocation framework for a projected 2026 Lok Sabha from Patel and Sekher (2024), which applies the Webster equal proportions method with a fixed divisor of 18,10,350 inhabitants per seat. This results in a total of 793 seats allocated across the 22 largest states; the 19 smaller

states and union territories retain their constitutionally guaranteed current number of seats.

- **Current seat allocation:** The delimitation of parliamentary and assembly constituencies Order, 2008, from the Election Commission of India (2008), which provides the baseline for current sc and st reserved seats.

A2 Detailed Methodology for Seat Projections

We employed two distinct projection methods to account for demographic uncertainty, applied to the Patel and Sekher (2024) seat totals for 2026.

(i) Constant Share Projection

This conservative method holds the sc/st population shares constant at the most recently observed level.

- **For SCs:** The 2021 sc population share was derived by aggregating age-specific cohort data and dividing by the state's total projected population for 2021. This share was then applied to the 2026 total population projection to estimate the sc headcount.

- **For STs:** Due to a lack of recent age-cohort data, the constant share method relies on the 2011 Census st population proportion, applied to the 2026 total population projection.

(2) Trend-based Projection

This method accounts for ongoing demographic change by extrapolating historical growth trends.

- **For SCs and STs:** The annual rate of change in a state's sc/st population share was calculated using the formula: $(\text{Share}_{2011} - \text{Share}_{2001})/10$. This annual change was extrapolated to 2026 to project the future population share, which was then used to calculate the headcount.

Seat Calculation

For both methods, the number of reserved seats for each state was calculated using the standard constitutional formula:

Projected Seats = round (State's Total Seats × (Projected sc/st Population/State's Total Projected Population))

Seats for the 19 smallest states and UTs were held constant at their current levels as per constitutional guarantees.

A3 Full State-wise Projection Table

Table A1 provides the complete state-wise breakdown of our trend-based projections, which form the primary basis for the deficit calculation in the main text.

Table A1: Complete State-wise Projection of sc/st Seats for 2026 (Trend Method)

Table A1: Projected vs Actual SC/ST Seats for 2026

State Union Territories	Total Seats-2026	Current Reserved Seats (2008 Delimitation)		Projected Reserved Seats (2026)				Representation Deficit	
		SC	ST	(Conservative)		(Trend)		SC Deficit (Trend-based)	ST Deficit (Conservative)
				SC	ST	SC	ST		
Uttar Pradesh	134	17	0	15	1	27	1	-10	-1
Bihar	73	6	1	7	1	12	1	-6	0
Maharashtra	71	5	4	4	7	10	7	-5	-3
West Bengal	56	10	2	14	3	14	3	-4	-1
Rajasthan	46	4	3	4	6	9	6	-5	-3
Madhya Pradesh	50	4	6	4	11	8	11	-4	-5
Tamil Nadu	43	7	0	4	0	9	0	-2	0
Gujarat	41	2	4	1	3	3	6	-1	1
Karnataka	38	5	2	3	3	7	3	-2	-1
Andhra Pradesh	30	7	3	2	2	5	2	2	1
Telangana	21	3	2	1	2	3	2	0	0
Keralam	20	2	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
Jharkhand	23	1	5	2	6	3	6	-2	-1
Odisha	26	5	5	2	6	5	6	0	-1
Chhattisgarh	17	1	4	1	5	2	5	-1	-1
Punjab	17	4	0	2	0	6	0	-2	0
Haryana	17	2	0	2	0	4	0	-2	0
Assam	20	1	2	1	2	2	2	-1	0
Other states/ Union territories	60	11	10	11	10	11	10	0	0
Total	793	84	47	83	71	136	71	-52	-24

Source: Authors' calculations, as detailed in sections A1 and A2 above.

Table A2: State-wise SC/ST Representation Pre- and Post-2008 Delimitation

	Seats in the House as Constituted in 2004 on the Basis of the Delimitation of Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies Order, 1976			Seats in the House as Subsequently Constituted as per the Delimitation of Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies Order, 2008		
	Total	Reserved for the SC	Reserved for the ST	Total	Reserved for the SC	Reserved for the ST
I States						
Andhra Pradesh	42	6	2	42	7	3
Arunachal Pradesh*	2	—	—	2	—	—
Assam*	14	1	2	14	1	2
Bihar	40	7	—	40	6	—
Chhattisgarh	11	2	4	11	1	4
Goa	2	—	—	2	—	—
Gujarat	26	2	4	26	2	4
Haryana	10	2	—	10	2	—
Himachal Pradesh	4	1	—	4	1	—
Jammu and Kashmir*	6	—	—	6	—	—
Jharkhand@	14	1	5	14	1	5
Karnataka	28	4	—	28	5	2
Keralam	20	2	—	20	2	—
Madhya Pradesh	29	4	5	29	4	6
Maharashtra	48	3	4	48	5	4
Manipur*	2	—	1	2	—	1
Meghalaya	2	—	—	2	—	2
Mizoram	1	—	1	1	—	1
Nagaland*	1	—	—	1	—	—
Odisha	21	3	5	21	3	5
Punjab	13	3	—	13	4	—
Rajasthan	25	4	3	25	4	3
Sikkim	1	—	—	1	—	—
Tamil Nadu	39	7	—	39	7	—
Tripura	2	—	1	2	—	1
Uttarakhand	5	—	—	5	1	—
Uttar Pradesh	80	18	—	80	17	—
West Bengal	42	8	2	42	10	2
II Union territories						
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1	—	—	1	—	—
Chandigarh	1	—	—	1	—	—
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	1	—	1	1	—	1
Delhi	7	1	—	7	1	—
Daman and Diu	1	—	—	1	—	—
Lakshadweep	1	—	1	1	—	1
Puducherry	1	—	—	1	—	—
Total seats	543	79	41	543	84	47

* States excluded from the delimitation exercise.

@ Order issued by the Delimitation Commission was nullified by Section 10B of the Delimitation Amendment Act, 2008.

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