

Women's Reservation: Need of the Hour

With Indian politics constantly trying to deal with the ginormous 'revolution of rising expectations', every day, it is called upon to look into new demands from the various constituents of the body politic. And, it seems that finally it is the women who want their share in the national cake as evident by the vitality of the Women's Reservation Bill (WRB) that keeps popping out of the oblivion to which a section of our leadership wants it to be consigned.

No doubt, the Bill has become a major issue of debate nation-wide. But, once again it has become a butt of political manoeuvring. But, then it is quite natural in a democracy for an issue with implications for future shape of politics to become politicised the way it has. The demand for the draft Bill to be modified in a way so as to make it more representative has been raised. Though it allows women's reservation in state and central legislatures in principle, it simultaneously underlines the many hitches and glitches that remain before the weaker gender is finally given a say in making decisions that affect them.

An International Labour Organisation study shows that "while women represent 50 percent of the world adult population and a third of the official labour force, they perform nearly two-third of all working hours, receive a tenth of world income and own less than one percent of world property." The WRB or the Constitution 108th Amendment Bill aiming at providing 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislatures has been a non-starter through all Lok Sabhas from 1996 onwards. Successive governments have placed it on the floor of the house, only to have it shelved with proposals and counter proposals doing the rounds.

The seats to be reserved in rotation are to be determined by draw of lots in such a way that a seat shall be reserved only once in three consecutive general elections. This Bill has been passed by the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the Parliament in March 2010. However, it needs to be passed by the Lok Sabha and at least fifty per cent of all State Legislative Assemblies, before it is put before the President of India for his approval.

It is difficult for the existing bill to be passed since the majority of male MPs believe that introducing 33% reservations will, along with reservations for Scheduled Castes and

Tribes, make 50% of seats unavailable to them. Many believe it will lead to more sectoral representation and will ignore the larger issues. It has been argued time and again that reservations will only favour elite, English-speaking women and will not empower backward women. It will again be a pseudo-representation of women actually overshadowed by their husbands or kin who would actually wield the *de facto* powers. Also, the parties themselves have very less women representation in their inner party structures which shows their lack of faith in encouraging more representation from amongst women.

Today, women hold only 20% of parliamentary seats worldwide. However, in India it has taken 50 years for the percentage of women in the Lok Sabha to increase from 4.4 to 8.8, a figure that continues to be lower than the 15% average for countries with elected legislatures. The supporters of the Bill believe that passage of the same shall have several positive spin-off effects in various spheres. It would only pave the way for better understanding and cohesion among different sections of Indian society without compromising the overarching goals of justice and equity. With women sharing the high pedestal in the decision making system, many urgent social issues like population, poverty, health-care system, gender disparity and literacy are likely to receive enhanced attention.

It would also lead to gender equality in Parliament, resulting in the empowerment of women as a whole. Increased political participation of women will help them fight the abuse, discrimination, and inequality they suffer from. Reservation goes beyond increasing women's participation; it means bringing the experience, knowledge, and interests of women on the development agenda. Reservation for women is not a favour but only an honest recognition of their contribution to the holistic social development.

In 1995, the final conclusion of Beijing Platform for Action at the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women was, "Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives in all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved." Until women are represented suitably in local, national and international decision-making bodies, their priorities will not receive needed attention and corresponding resources. Assuring women's greater participation in governance is a step to building stronger societies.

At the panchayat level, one-third seats were reserved for women by making an amendment (73rd) in the Indian Constitution. The experience of women's reservation at the panchayat level has been very encouraging. A million women are being elected to the panchayats in the country every five year. This is the largest participation of women in public life in the world. The Election Commission of India had also put up a proposal making it mandatory for political parties to nominate 33% women candidates with a state as a unit for the Lok Sabha and the district as a unit for the state assemblies.

While the struggle for women's empowerment goes on, one must, however, not forget that though numbers and percentages are important, it is ultimately numbers coupled with an open mindset that can go a long way to strengthen the movement for women's liberation. Hence, it must be ensured in due recognition of the struggle of the working class and the toiling women that it is they who should mainly benefit from the women's quota, rather than

being pocketed and cornered by the women from the aristocratic, rich families. More than tokenism, the women's reservation should result in the real empowerment of our women.

It is to be realised by the Indian political class that they can no longer ignore the justified demand of reservation for the women in Parliament and State Legislatures. Till the Parliament is dominated by such MPs and there is a lack of consensus among the political parties, the 33% reservation for the women will remain a pipedream. But in the largest democracy of the world dominated by a patriarchal society, the debate on affirmative discrimination for women is still alive, giving hope for a positive outcomes sooner than later. As and when it comes, women's reservation shall undoubtedly be in the larger interest of our country and its citizens.

Some sections have been demanding sub-reservation for women from the other backward classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Now, the question that arises: Is it really some red herring that these sections are chasing so as to somehow scuttle the Bill or is there really some genuine concern for the interests of women from these sections? While, there should be no scruple now that every political party is reconciled to the fact of an impending WRB, but before it really comes about, every party seems very keen to consolidate its vote bank in ways it deems fit.

In fact, some of their fears are not as misplaced as they seem to be. If the Bill is enacted in its present form, there is every possibility that the alleged 'Bibi-Beti' brigade from the privileged upper and dominant castes may come to dominate the scene as women from these sections are relatively more liberated and assertive than their counterparts from OBCs, SCs and STs. And, many feel that there would be no problem about exploring the idea i.e. reservation for women from OBCs, SCs and STs as it is already there in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Schooled in rural areas, where standards leave much to be desired, they are bound to see any such attempt to encroach on about 33 per cent seats in legislatures as a rear-guard action by the privileged in our society. To them, a 33 per cent loss of legislative seats would go directly to the upper and dominant castes and, thus, neutralise all the advantages of numbers that they have secured in recent years.

On its face, such fears appear misplaced as these parties could well ensure that their women are elected to those seats, if at all they agree among themselves to give the same percentage of seats to women of their community during ticket-distribution. But, then it could be argued that why we need reservation for women at all as the same could be done by all parties, while distributing tickets during elections. But, despite all those talk and promises for women's reservation, nothing concrete could come about so far. So, the bottom-line is that if there has to be reservation for women, the sub-reservation cannot be ignored and can be ignored only at a great political and social cost.

What is surprising is that once again the same arguments are doing rounds which surfaced during the anti-reservation agitation on the 1990s that such sub-reservation would further compromise the quality and merit of our legislators, that it would divide Indian society more than ever before and many more. When states were being reorganised on linguistic basis during the sixties, similar arguments arose about such measure threatening the integrity of

the nascent Indian nation, but nothing of the sort happened and the nation only emerged stronger therefrom.

So, instead of letting such an important issue fester longer, making room for further politicking, it would be better to accept such demands in a way suiting the genius of our political system. It is really amazing that despite the constitutional goal of socialism, Indian society continues to deny half of its population an effective say in the 'decision-making mechanism' of the country, thus, leaving the social structure as inegalitarian as we inherited it in 1947. One hopes that this single move by our political class would prove revolutionary for our society.

Salient Points

- Proposal mooted for giving 33% representation in legislative bodies.
- Political manoeuvrings and conflict of interests being experienced.
- Many argue that it will lead to more sectoral representation and will ignore larger issues.
- That reservation will only favour elite, English-speaking women and will not empower backward women.
- In India, it has taken 50 years for the percentage of women in the Lok Sabha to increase from 4.4 to 8.8, a figure lower than 15% average for countries with elected legislatures.
- Higher women representation in legislatures would mean more attention to urgent social issues like population, poverty, health-care, gender disparity and literacy.
- Till there is a lack of consensus among political parties, 33% reservation for the women will remain a pipedream.

Glossary

Ginormous: really very big

Manoeuvring: skilful and crafty movement

Pseudo: non-genuine

Overarching: comprehensive or all-embracing

Scruple: doubt

Bottom-line: essential point in an argument

Inegalitarian: inequality between people