

Essay on Women's Reservation A Forlorn Hope

"An International Labour Organisation study shows that "while women represent 50 percent of the world adult population and a third of the official labor force they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive a tenth of world income and own less than one percent of world property."

Therefore, reservation for women is not a bounty but only an honest recognition of their contribution to social development". Every political party for the last many years has been assuring its support to the Bill which disarms women activists. And then a farce rather than a tragedy is played out by so-called radical politicians, jumping into the well of the House, tearing copies of the Bill and making it impossible for proceedings to continue – the House gets adjourned, the Bill is thrown into the dustbin till it is revived in subsequent years with the same result. It is time this mockery stopped, considering that Congress, the BJP, and the Left parties proclaim that they are for the Bill in the present form and really want it to become a law.

The Women's Reservation Bill (WRB) providing 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures has been a non-starter through seven Lok Sabhas from 1996 onwards. Successive governments have placed it on the floor of the house, only to have it shelved. A hasty retreat is no solution. The bill is now firmly on the national political agenda and political parties know that sooner or later, something will have to be done. It is for this reason that proposals and counter-proposals are being suggested by our political leaders to show that at least publicly they are not hostile to the bill.

Congress Deputy Leader in the Lok Sabha Shivraj Patil has ignited the latest controversy on the WRB by insisting that the present bill can only be passed in the monsoon session if double-member constituencies are introduced in one-third of all parliamentary seats. Basically, this means that 182 seats in Parliament will be represented by two MPs, one of which has to be a woman, says Patil. This principle will work by rotation with one-third of seats being changed after each general election.

The logic? Double-member constituencies had already been tried out in the first session of Parliament held in 1952. Patil also believes that representation of one constituency by two MPs cannot be a source of conflict. "What is the harm if the number of MPs is increased substantially? Our present Parliament size of 545 was fixed in 1952 when our population was 30 crore. Today it is 103 crore and every MP is representing over 103 million people. In the UK, for example, one MP represents 60,000 people." Patil also insists that the presence of two MPs in one constituency will not result in a clash of interests. "MPs enjoy legislative and not executive powers which rest with members of the gram panchayat, Zila Parishad, and municipalities. How can two MPs create problems within a constituency if the task of implementing programs rests with the executive arm of the government?" asks Patil.

It is difficult for the existing bill to be passed since the majority of male MPs believe that introducing 33% of reservations will, along with reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, make 50% of seats unavailable to them. Which body of men will give up their seats to allow women to take over? As one MP from the Telugu Desam said, "Why should we agree to sign our own death warrant?" Patil's suggestion, made at a recent meet called by the Lok Sabha speaker Manohar Joshi to arrive at a consensus on this subject, has received the support of the BJP top brass. Vijay Kumar Malhotra, BJP MP, echoing the view of

his party, also believes, "The suggestion needs to be studied seriously since there is no harm in increasing the number of seats in Parliament".

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.

Women's activists are aghast at Patil's suggestion. Ranjana Kumari, Co-ordinator, Joint Action Front for Women, finds Patil's suggestion difficult to implement. "If there has to be a double-member reservation, then all parliament seats should be made double-member," she claims. "But this proposal has already been shot down on the grounds that it would cost the national exchequer too much," Kumari says.

Brinda Karat, General Secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association, is equally critical of the suggestion, "Double-member constituencies will create inequality between MPs. A privileged MP will be seen to have been elected from a single-member constituency and will represent it independently while those elected from double-member constituencies will have to share it with a male member. The message going out will be that women are incapable of managing seats on their own and will end up being treated as little more than add-ons."

"How can some seats have two members and the remaining only one? This means that in some constituencies voters will be asked to vote for two candidates while in the remaining, they will vote for only one. This kind of inequality will only serve to weaken not strengthen our democratic traditions," Karat argues. Women's activists see this suggestion as one more dilatory tactic to stymie the bill. They point out that all such suggestions must be made on the floor of the house

once the session has begun. Kumari says, "The WRB is presently the property of the house and it is against parliamentary propriety for MPs to be expressing an opinion outside the house. If a new process is started at this stage it will mean that the WRB gets delayed by yet another six years."

The Election Commission 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. This would mean that in a State where there are 40 Lok Sabha seats, the party would have to nominate at least 13 women candidates, and in the state assembly elections, it would have to nominate one-third of women candidates at the district level. The Election Commission's suggestion has the advantage that it does not bear the 'quota' tag. Nor will they be faced with the problem of rotation of constituencies. Politicians, however, are not very receptive to the Election Commission's suggestion either. The Shiv Sena is opposed to it and Mulayam Singh Yadav is not willing to concede more than 20% seats for women. He has argued time and again that reservations will only favor elite, English-speaking women and will not empower backward or low-caste women, especially since the majority are present in Parliament by virtue of family connections forged either by birth or by marriage.

Even I.K. Gujaral had moved a private member's bill in 1995, making it compulsory for parties to nominate women on the basis of their strength in Parliament. Some political parties such as the African National Congress have voluntarily decided to give a 30% quota to women. But their elections are based on a proportional representation system unlike India's. Switching to proportional representation would require a complete overhaul of our present electoral system. It is because of the confusion caused by these different suggestions that the CPI (M) has issued a statement saying that it will support the

women's bill in its present form and is not open to alternative suggestions. This is the stand that has been taken by the women's organizations that have spearheaded the whole movement to ensure greater representation of women in Parliament. As Mohini Giri, former chairperson of the National Commission for Women said, "We do not want any more discussions on the bill. The government, keeping in view the sensitivity of this issue, must pass it in its present form. Since all the political parties have given their blessings to the bill, the question of further delay no longer arises." There is agreement at the women's front. Now it is time for male MPs to step forward and convert the dream into reality.

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 the correct world-view that can go a long way to strengthen the movement for women's liberation. Hence, it is finally the struggle of the working class and the toiling women that must benefit from women's quota. For the women who have made history without portfolios and reserved seats, where women would be the contestants would expose better, the politics of 'by women, of women, for women'.

It is to be realized by the Indian politicians that they can no longer ignore the justified demand of reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislature. Till the Parliament is dominated by such MPs and lack of 'will' of determination with the ruling party and no support from the other parties the 33% reservation for the women will remain a 'Forlorn Hope'.