

Political Emancipation of Women

Or

Reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies

The representation of women in politics is very low. Women have been marginalised everywhere. They are nowhere in the decision making process. They have been considered misfit for politics. Their status has been very low in society. The gender equality is a distant reality although women constitute 50% of Indian Population. Various social biases have been acting as obstacles in empowerment of women. So a constitution amendment bill providing for 33 percent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies is a step in the right direction for emancipation of women.

The initiative to provide reservation to women in legislatures is reasonable because in politics there are only few strong women personalities. Such empowerment could not come through natural evolution of society through education and family welfare measures. So one cannot wait for time to take care of the imbalance. There is lot of discrimination against women. Women are not there in reasonable number at national decision making levels. Their representation in legislatures is very low. The eighth Lok Sabha had the highest percentage of women representatives of 8.1 percent since 1947. It touched the lowest percentage of 2.4 in fifth Lok Sabha.

In the last 50 years of independence the life of women has not improved considerably. In the Human Development Report 1996, India's ranking in the gender related development Index is 103. India ranks 93 in gender empowerment measures. 2.3 per cent women are administrators and managers. Women's earned income share is only 24.8 percent. New economic policy might force them out of their jobs and make the situation worse. Also they lack independent identity. They are always referred to as somebody's wife, sister, or mother. They are considered as weak candidates and given tickets just because they happen to be related to powerful politicians.

In order to rectify these anomalies, women's reservation in legislatures is a must for their emancipation and empowerment. In this context, the 81st Constitution Amendment Bill provides for 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. Also the Bill reserves one-third of that quota for SC/ST. The 181 Lok Sabha seats would be rotated by a draw of lots. Even the United Front government had a 33 per cent reservation for women in legislatures in its

common minimum programme (CMP). But subsequently it was being opposed by most of the parties especially Janata Dal. It argued for special quota for women of OBCS within the 33 percent reservation. Its arguments were that most of the seats reserved for women would be favouring higher castes women as they are more educated and forward. It was also argued whether the quota be reduced from 33 per cent to 20 or 25 per cent. It was unanimously accepted that the quota should remain at 33 percent and be passed immediately.

The case for women's quota was supported even by UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1990. Only through decision-making for a women can raise their voices and also they will be able to do something to uplift the other women. Women have shown their intelligence and excellence in various fields. If they are allowed to enter politics they will definitely bring feminine virtues like caring, altruism, self-denial, etc. which is really needed in today's politics. Today's politics has become corrupt, criminalised and immoral. To a greater extent violence can be curtailed when the women are at the higher levels of decision making. Of course, few exceptions cannot be ruled out. Also the experiment at panchayat and municipal bodies of giving one-third reservation has been encouraging. At some places women representatives have shown their genuine concern at solving various local problems.

But everything is not rosy with the provision of reservation of seats for them. The greatest problem is with the rotation of women's seats. Constant rotation may create confusion. A lot of opposition to the bill has come from males as they see the potential to change power equations radically, reservation system is also seen as another divisive measure to divide society as the society is already divided and polarised on caste and communal lines. Male and female will be another pole for division.

To begin with reservation of women in legislation is a welcome measure for empowerment of women but it should be for a definite and specified period. Various progressive laws are there to empower women but implementation has been very poor. At the same time the social attitudes have to change towards them. Reservation per se is not enough. It has to be supplemented by various other measures like compulsory education and good health services and providing employment opportunities. All efforts should be made to raise the status of women so that gender equality is achieved and enough individual and social space is provided to them which will help in fulfilling the roles and functions assigned to them through political empowerment.