



Women MPs sitting on *dharna* for reservation at Parliament House

The Logic of Quotas

Women's Movement Splits on the Reservation Bill

○ Madhu Kishwar

After much fireworks, the bill to provide 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures has been put on the back-burner, which is exactly where it belongs. The pro-reservation lobby is determined to keep the issue alive. Just as well. It is good to keep it alive as an idea, as an issue to be resolved. However, it would have been disastrous if that foolishly conceived scheme of reservations had actually become part of our electoral law.

For a long time any legislation which claimed to be pro-women, no matter how stupid and harmful in substance, sailed through Parliament because any legislative initiative claiming to help women enjoyed a moral aura. This moral vantage ground has unfortunately been severely eroded thanks to the shortsighted, thoughtless politics of many of our leaders both women and men.

My focus here will be on the women politicians. Since the early 1980s a small coterie of politically prominent women, acting in concert with some high profile NGOs, have taken it upon themselves to push for ever new laws, as well as far reaching amendments to existing laws, all in the name of strengthening women's rights. Most of these laws are stupidly drafted with little thought given to their actual implementation, without any thought as to whether they are enforceable, or even if they will actually help women.

The amended anti-dowry laws, the legislation to ban sex determination tests, the anti-sati law, the new provisions to deal with cases of domestic violence, are some examples of their shoddy legislation producing many harmful results. Yet, they have made no attempt to review why these laws failed to accomplish their objectives but rather added to women's problems by igniting new

problems. When the women leaders who pushed for these laws are confronted with their abuse and the lack of results from their passage, they just demand yet more stringent and more thoughtless provisions.

The Women's Reservation Bill is the latest, the most serious and the most ambitious of their legislative interventions. If enacted, this measure will send our already tottering political system into an even more devastating tailspin.

I have pointed in two earlier essays (MANUSHI No. 96 & 97) that the Women's Reservation Bill, in its present form, has serious, indeed fatal, defects. The one-third of the total parliamentary seats to be reserved for women are to be selected through a lottery system. This implies that at random at least 180 male legislators will be uprooted from their constituencies at every election. In their place, 180 women

will be assigned those constituencies before every election. Then, at the time of the next election, when the new list of 180 reserved constituencies is declared in the same manner, these 180 women will not be able to contest from the seats they are holding at that point of time because the same constituency cannot be reserved twice in succession under the bill's rotation system.

Thus two-thirds of our legislators will be uprooted at every election while the remaining one-third will be left hanging until the last moment, not knowing if their constituency will form part of the one-third randomly chosen women's reservation lottery and thus require them to scramble at short notice to find another seat to contest.

Moreover, it takes away any incentive or motivation that women representatives might have to nurture and be accountable to their constituencies since after each election they will be expected to move to a different constituency as no constituency can be reserved in succession.

The bill, as presently drafted, jeopardises the possibility of sensible planning to contest a political constituency for both men and women. It is amazing that our women leaders do not seem to have fully grasped the implications of such a vast change proposed for our electoral process as it will create special difficulties for women. Since very few women politicians have a strong electoral base, this uncertainty about where they will be fielded from will make them even more dependent on male bosses of their party to win elections. In such a situation, it becomes necessary that the influential male leaders be convinced of the advantages to the party leaders of these changes or else they will either sabotage women contenders as a revenge against their getting pushed



Congress (I) women's demonstration favouring reservation

out or they will spend all their political capital helping their women relatives to come to the reserved seats. A likely strategy for them to adopt would be to bring in their wives and daughters as proxies to keep the seat "safe" for them until the next election when they would be likely to be able to reclaim their seats.

Furthering Male Agendas

Being a politician's wife or daughter ought not be a disqualification in itself. Nor would one object to their having a natural advantage, just as the children of lawyers and doctors often inherit their father's practice. However, we know that most female relatives are brought in as proxies whose only task is to safeguard the political interests of the men of their families. Like Laloo Yadav's wife Rabri Devi they will be brought in as rubber stamps and sent home after their use is over.

I, for one, am convinced that we cannot afford to pack our Parliament and state legislatures with a larger contingent of Rabri Devis. Apart from other disabilities, they act as very negative role models for women because they enlarge the compass of the ideology of female slavery, which

is most prominent in the domestic realm, into the public and political domain as well. The one and only agenda these women have is to do all that they can to save their husbands' seat or protect them from being put on trial for looting the public exchequer. They don't even bother to pretend otherwise. How does such a woman serve the cause of women or empower other women?

The Biwi-Beti brigade, in fact, acts as a definite block against the emergence of independent-minded women who wish to make a space for themselves on their own strength in the public domain. For example, it is a common phenomenon in India that the women's fronts of various political parties are headed by wives, other female relatives, or mistresses of prominent male party leaders. These posts are given to these women like a jagir for as long as their men retain their clout in the party. Such women do not easily make space for other women with merit. Any woman who enters the party, no matter how talented, has to play a subservient role to these dependent women. The political initiative of most women thus gets curbed rather than encouraged in the party mahila (women) fronts.

Because of the familial connection between the main party and the women's fronts, the politics of the women's front remains subservient to the party. They are left to tackle the colourful variety of women's issues as a side show rather than being involved in defining over-all party policies or even strategies and tactical alliances of the party.

All too often the main purpose of the women's fronts turns out to be narrowly partisan on women's issues. For example, if a rape is committed by people associated with the Congress Party.. the women in Opposition parties are used to let loose a tirade against the Congress.

But the same women seem helpless to bring redressal for victimised women when their own party colleagues indulge in crimes against women. Even more sad is the spectacle of these party women attacking each other to protect the male leaders of their respective parties.

For example, during the last parliamentary elections, Mamta Banerjee of Trinamul Congress raised a big hue and cry about the violence unleashed by the Communist Party Marxist (CPM) cadres on women, including cases of rape, in order to obstruct the conduct of free and fair elections in West Bengal. The CPM women responded in characteristic style and hurled the choicest of political abuses at Mamta instead of offering to conduct a joint enquiry, at least into the cases of atrocities on women, to verify the authenticity of those charges.

If the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) men are accused of gang-rapes, as happened recently in Rajasthan, women of that party are not known to make common cause with the non-BJP women protesting against those cases of sexual abuse. No wonder our country has not yet witnessed the emergence of women-centric politics on women's issues.

Intolerance of Dissent

However, the pro-reservation feminine mullahs have consistently refused to address themselves to this shortcoming, among others and, refused to allow a genuine debate on the merits and demerits of their reservation scheme. Instead, anyone who points out these and related flaws and suggests improvements has only met with hostility and is accused of furthering patriarchal agendas.

Even those who have had a long history of working on women's issues have been denied a hearing. When the Parliament appointed a Select Committee headed by Geeta Mukherjee to review the bill, the proreservationists ensured that most of those who wanted to see improvements in the bill were not even invited to present their opinion and to engage in dialogue. A few dissenters were invited, who failed to make any dent. The bill was represented to Parliament without any modifications whatsoever. Mostly, those who were willing to rubberstamp the bill were given a hearing.

When some of the newspapers and magazines gave space to those few who dared to criticise the bill's shortcomings, a slander campaign was let loose. Just to give one personal example among several: one of the key persons in the proreservationist lobby, Brinda Karat of CPM, went as far as telephoning concerned journalists and editors asking them not to carry my critique of the bill because, according to her, I had joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)! This accusation, in fact, has been a major theme of a concerted campaign against me ever since I took an open stand insisting on improvements in the existing reservation scheme. This typically Stalinist way of handling disagreements is nothing new among feminists in India.

My point in mentioning this

absurd allegation is because such tactics raise more fundamental questions regarding the legitimacy of democratic dissent: do RSS women not have a right to be heard on these issues? Even if I were an RSS member, can my arguments against the Bill be dismissed with contempt simply because I do not profess the current politically fashionable version of Marxism common to many Indian feminists? In India, the left party women in particular and socialist feminists in general, behave as though they alone have a monopoly over defining the agenda of social and political reforms. Because they use typically male weapons like slander to put down all dissent, feminism in India often becomes *bhed chaal* akin to herd mentality. Very few women activists dare dissent openly or refuse to toe their line.

The same kind of intolerance was witnessed in Parliament. The proreservationists would not have invited such anger and wrath against themselves had they not insisted that this important bill involving a constitutional amendment be passed without a debate. This is indeed unacceptable, undemocratic behaviour. What is the purpose of having a Parliament if a proposed legislation cannot be debated and discussed? Their ostensible justification for denying a discussion was that three of the major parties—the Congress, the BJP and the United Front—had committed themselves to enacting this law in their respective party manifestos. However, none of the regional parties, who are important constituents of the present coalition government at the Centre, had made any such commitment. Should they all be denied their democratic right to deliberate upon the bill? If so, why not just wind up the whole *tamasha* called Parliament?

Moreover, as is well-known, none of our party bosses take their

manifestos seriously. Even leading MPs and party office-bearers are not consulted before drafting these manifestos. Voters hardly ever get to see, leave alone read manifestos before casting their ballot. In such a situation, do we want to compound the farce by not allowing even a formal debate on the subject, especially since an overwhelming majority of MPs are against the bill for a whole variety of legitimate and not-so-legitimate reasons? Can such a momentous decision be taken without winning over a section of the legislators on to the women's side—especially considering how very few women are in any position to win elections without support from their male colleagues?

Confrontation sans Strength

The pro-reservation lobby has invited the first serious male backlash on a women's rights issue in the history of Independent India largely because of their ham-handed approach and undemocratic behaviour in dealing with even well-meaning dissent. So far we have had a strong tradition—thanks in part due to the legacy of the 19th century reform movements and the Gandhi-led freedom struggle—of significant numbers of men not only joining but even leading women's rights struggles in India. We were fortunate enough rarely to witness polarisation on gender lines on women's rights issues. Despite this history, the feminist reservationists have needlessly created an atmosphere of gender warfare, alienating even those among our male politicians who could be valuable allies in the struggle for getting women their due share of political power.

The confrontationist attitude of the pro-reservation lobby is especially absurd since they do not have much of a mass-based support among women for this measure.

An Alternative Proposal

I have already discussed an alternative bill in (MANUSHI No. 96) in which I suggested multi-seat constituencies for those who are enamoured with 33 per cent reservation whereby one out of every three candidates elected from a combined constituency would be a woman. However, even at that time I indicated that my own preference is for a 50 per cent reservation for women involving dual seat constituencies. This is how it would work.

Every constituency would be represented by two people—one of whom must be a female. She would be elected on the basis of securing the highest number of votes among women candidates. However, if no male candidate got as many votes as the two top ranking women candidates, both seats could go to women. In order to ensure that the reserved women's seat went to a credible candidate, it could be stipulated that the winning female candidate (as also the male) has to secure a certain percentage of overall votes failing which there be a second round of election. This system will allow a larger choice range to voters.

Some people have expressed doubts about this scheme by pointing out that it will make our legislatures too big and increase the costs of the whole enterprise. A useful proposal in this regard has come from Mani Shankar Aiyar of the Congress Party who suggests that we could instead abolish the Rajya Sabha for it serves no real function except provide a forum for accommodating all those who fail to get elected to Lok Sabha. In any case, there is serious talk of delimiting constituencies because there has been a manifold increase in the size of our population since the first general election when the present strength of parliament was fixed at 544. With our population having reached the one billion mark, many of our constituencies have become truly unwieldy. Therefore, increasing the numerical strength of our legislatures in keeping with the growth in population has become necessary. The proposed system of dual member constituencies thus solves two problems in one go.

However, this bill will only take care of the quantitative aspects of women's representation. It is not enough to send a certain number of sari wearing persons to the Parliament. It is far more important that people who reach there—whether men or women—act with responsibility, and do not use their office merely as a licence to loot. For that to happen we need to work on a comprehensive agenda of political reforms aimed at decriminalising politics, reducing the role of illicit money and making our legislators genuinely sensitive to popular aspirations and have the necessary competence to undertake the complex task of legislating for one billion people. We ought to play an active leading role in this process rather than leave the entire exercise of defining the rules of the game to men while we only stay confined to demanding a small playing ground for women. This amounts to ghettoising women's politics. However, genuine women-centred politics can begin to emerge only when women as a group acquire sufficient economic power to take part in politics in their own right. Their political marginalisation cannot be effectively combated without combating their economic marginalisation both within the family and society.

When the bill was unceremoniously torn to shreds in Parliament, there were no spontaneous protests by women even in Delhi, let alone in other parts of the country. The most successful of the pro-reservation demonstrations have never witnessed participation by more than a few hundred women.

Most of their protests and dharnas (protest sit-in) are attended by no more than a few dozen women. Most important of all, they have not yet made the smallest dent in organising women as a cohesive vote-bank. Most of those leading the pro-reservation lobby could not win a municipal election on their own strength, leave alone a parliamentary one. The enthusiasm of many of our feminist NGOs for reservations is particularly puzzling since most of them have virtually no roots in their own neighbourhoods or communitytwo essential prerequisites in the electoral arena. Their dependence on international aid money has seriously estranged them from social sentiment and much of their work consists of attending national and international conferences of likeminded NGOs, unlikely venues for garnering votes.

It is noteworthy that the few among women politicians who have an independent political base are not very enthusiastic about reservations for women. No wonder the male parliamentarians have called the bluff of the women supporters of the bill; they have realised that apart from projecting them as diehard chauvinists in the international media and a section of the Indian press, -the collective might of the feminist lobby cannot make the slightest dent in even one quarter of a constituency in India, let alone succeed in making this an important electoral issue all over the country. That is the main reason their claims are not taken seriously within their parties.



BJP women supporters demonstrate in favour of the Reservation Bill

Photo: India Today

It is naive for the pro-reservation women politicians to think that without winning over a significant number of their male colleagues in their respective parties, they can muster a majority vote in Parliament in favour of their bill. Nor has the track record of many of our women parliamentarians been such as to give this move much moral legitimacy.

Feminist Myths

The whole debate on reservations centres on the following myths:

➔ that a greater presence of women will be a step towards empowerment of Indian women.

➔ that women's larger presence as a result of this bill will change the very nature of politics, make it less corrupt, more sensitive to women's needs and generally more democratic and compassionate.

Reserving one-third of the seats in our legislatures would undoubtedly bestow special powers and privileges on the approximately 180 women who would make it to Parliament and many more to state legislatures on the strength of the quota system. It would also create new aspirations

among women at large. But I fail to understand how it will "empower" ordinary women citizens.

Has the presence of 500 plus male legislators in Parliament empowered the men of India? Do most men in India not have to grovel, cringe and bribe for every little thing from a water connection to buying a railway ticket? Have these MPs facilitated the growth of men's freedom from abuse and harassment? Freedom from hunger and malnutrition? Do men feel secure and safe in today's India? Far from it. Even the mighty male business magnates have to act like hapless supplicants in our country in order to carry out routine aspects of their business. Most citizens, male or female, feel powerless and vulnerable when dealing with the government machinery.

If most men in this country have not benefitted from the preponderant presence of male parliamentarians, why should we naively believe that 180 women in Parliament will change the fate of women in India? Given the current political structures, it seems far more likely that those who reach the legislatures will join the loot-brigade like Mayawati, Sheila Kaul and Jayalalitha, or emulate an authoritarian power maniac like Indira Gandhi.

So far in India, we have not witnessed women politicians bringing a superior vision into politics. In the last 50 years, there is no evidence that women politicians have taken a stand any different from that of their party bosses on any issue of importance or introduced any new, worthwhile issues on the political agenda apart from making noises to get a bunch of ineffective or harmful laws passed ostensibly for the protection of women. For instance, no woman politician from the Congress Party opposed the imposition of the Emergency. No woman politician stood against the extra-constitutional power-centre that Sanjay Gandhi and his thug brigade came to represent. No Congress woman politician (worth her name) condemned, either within or outside the party, the massacre of Sikhs carried out at the behest of Party High Command in 1984 or the various anti-Muslim riots instigated by the party as part of its electoral strategy.

Similarly, no BJP woman leader stood up to condemn the bloodshed that accompanied Advani's rathayatra. None of the BJP's female stalwarts has taken a stand any different from the most jingoistic of the male BJP politicians on the nuclear weapons issue. Nor has any of them raised the banner of revolt against the growing corruption and criminalisation of the party.

The record of women from the Janata Dal and the various communist parties is no better, perhaps worse. In what way then, is a larger presence of women in Parliament going to bring about greater accountability in our political system? The supporters of reservation respond to such concerns with typical disdain. Their position can be summed up as follows:

☞ "Why are people raising the issue of political corruption and institutional breakdown at the same time when we are raising the issue of women's representation? This is

proof of bad faith, establishing an alibi to scuttle 'women's empowerment'. " "So what if the political system is corrupt and dysfunctional? We want our due share of power even if it means plunging in the sea of corruption." To quote one of their leading proponents: 'Is sadi gali vyavastha mein bhi hamein hamar a hissa chahiye'. An Indian variant of "Women must hold up half the sky."

☞ "Women's entry will uplift politics and improve the functioning of our legislatures. It will bring more probity into public life.

I, for one, find these two arguments very inadequate.

Politics of the Ghetto

Political corruption and the crying need for electoral reforms have been the key issues on the national agenda for nearly a decade now. The countrywide lionisation of T.N.Seshan, who as the chief election commissioner tried to curb electoral malpractices, demonstrates how much urgency even the ordinary citizens attach to this subject. It is one of the most hotly debated issues in our public life. It speaks of the serious marginalisation of women lobbyists for the women's reservation bill that none of them is actively involved with struggle over this issue. No meaningful suggestions for changes have come from them in the ongoing public debate on electoral reforms.

Their campaign for nothing more than cornering a quota for women at a time when our polity is facing grave threats from criminalisation of politics and misgovernance is proof of tragic short-sightedness. It is like a daughter clamouring for her name to be included as an equal inheritor with her brothers in the parental home and property, at a time when the whole house is on fire or seized by dacoits. A daughter who can lead the firefighting operation or successfully combat dacoits is more

likely to be a more serious candidate for her share. Even if she is short-changed, she will have more legitimacy and strength to fight it out with her brothers out to disinherit her. Can one ever imagine an Aung San Suu Kyi needing to fight from a reserved seat for women? The subcontinent needs many Aung San Suu Kyi variety of women who would dare to be leaders of men as well, rather than stay confined to the women's ghetto.

The *zenana dabba* mentality cannot take women too far. The ghettoising of women's concerns to narrowly defined issues will keep them forever marginalised and fighting among each other in the typical *saas-bahu* style. Most important of all, why should the task of thinking through meaningful, overall electoral reforms be left to men while women confine their attention only to securing a share of the pie without examining whether the pie is worth eating at all? Are we then not accepting that the rules of the game will inevitably be set by men? Women would only appear as bit players that too in the "reserved" category. Those who argue that a large presence of women will cleanse politics need to be made aware that women, unfortunately, have not been bestowed with any divine powers or magic wands whereby their very presence would improve things. In our subcontinent, at least, we have seen women outdoing men in corruption, crime and authoritarian politics as the career graphs of Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi and the many Jayalalitha clones show. Even in the police, bureaucracy and professions, women have taken to corruption with ease and gusto.

Before women made a substantial entry into public life, many people naively believed that women's entry into public life would help cleanse it because it was believed women were intrinsically more honest and

compassionate than men. Unfortunately, we have been disabused of such naive and romantic notions by looking at their actual conduct in positions of power.

Women appear more moral only when they are under special familial and social constraints which deny them wider opportunity for corruption. But when they are acting in unison and are partners in corruption with men of their family, they are not affected by social opprobrium of the kind that women indulging in immoral practices on their own initiative get to experience.

Most important of all, if winning an election to Parliament or state legislatures involves spending a few crore rupees, it is inevitable that such persons will try to get returns on their investment through dubious means since as legislators they are denied legitimate ways of making money. Women have succeeded in playing a creative role in politics only in those societies where political parties already function more or less according to established norms and traditions, where there is a substantial measure of accountability in public life. But where the overall politics is criminalised, women tend to join the men in corruption and crime with ease rather than attempt to establish new norms, as the examples of Benazir Bhutto, Imelda Marcos and our own breed of women politicians like Jayalalitha.

Quotas within Quotas

The whole reservation debate has acquired many absurd and comic results. The groups that are resisting it most—male leaders of certain backward castes—are the ones most likely to benefit from women's reservations in comparison to most other groups and parties. They began by first trashing the very idea of women's reservation on the ground that it would strengthen



Another demonstration at Parliament

upper caste hold over politics alleging that only the upper caste, upper class women would benefit from the quota because of the social and educational advantages they have acquired. Since their opposition was expressed in rather crude and derogatory terms (yeh par kati mahilaon ko hum dekh lenge sort of rhetoric), it led to widespread condemnation of the Other Backward Castes (OBC) leaders for what was rightly seen as their uncouth behaviour and nasty male chauvinism. They retreated for a while but regrouped with a fresh offensive demanding a quota within a quota for OBC women as their strategy. They were soon joined by a section of Muslim male leaders demanding a similar quota for Muslim women as well. Even the Scheduled Caste leaders are demanding their share of quota for their SC women members, unmindful of the fact that the provision for the latter already exists in the proposed bill. Or perhaps it is a strategy to corner extra seats for SCs from the women's quota rather than yield seats for women of their communities from the existing SC quota.

In characteristic style, the proreservation lobby has reacted

with pious outrage declaring: "Please do not try dividing us. Women are all one; their interests are common." By polarising the issue on gender lines, the proreservationists have actually exposed the weakness in their own ranks. They claim to speak on behalf of all of India's women. Yet OBC and Muslim women prefer to go along with their men's politics, no matter how chauvinist, no matter how dishonest, than with the feminist lobby. When the bill suffered a humiliating defeat in Parliament amidst very ugly scenes by OBC and Muslim MPs, none of the OBC or Muslim women leaders stood up to defend the bill or claim solidarity with the prowomen's reservation lobby.

In fact, the male OBC and Muslim leaders were successful in getting a few known women of their respective parties and communities to endorse their stand. For a while it looked like only the supposed "puppet" women politicians had come out with that divisive stand at the behest of their male colleagues. However, within a very short period, even within the so-called autonomous women's movement, strong voices have

arisen from among Muslim and OBC women echoing the stance of OBC male leaders that there be a caste and community-based quota within the women's quota.

Otherwise they will oppose the bill. Still more interesting, certain important voices within the Muslim community are arguing that the Muslim women's quota be further reserved for the lower castes among Muslims.

They have a fairly legitimate argument as far as the logic of reservations go. They claim that caste is as deep-rooted and entrenched among the subcontinent's Muslims as among the Hindus. They allege that so far Muslim politics has been dominated by upper castes among Muslims who tend to jeopardise the safety of the poorer sections by taking very obscurantist positions on various issues thus pitching the scales of confrontation with the rightwing Hindu community leaders. The lower caste among Muslims accuse their upper caste leaders of promoting fundamentalist politics which has kept the Muslim community trapped in backwardness and illiteracy. Therefore, they are demanding that the benefit of Muslim women's quota should go to the lower caste Muslim women so that the most oppressed among them get to be heard and represented.

This demand for reservations within reservations demonstrates how the very logic of reservations can be stretched endlessly, especially given a situation of high fragmentation within our society, existence of gross inequalities within every group and the general dysfunctionality of democratic institutions so that virtually every group feels aggrieved.

But most important of all, the manner in which this issue has divided



Muslim women demanding their own quota

Muslim women demanding their own quota women's organisations and whatever goes by the name of a women's movement in India shows that on most issues women's loyalty to their caste and community is far stronger than their commitment to genderbased solidarity. Even without being physically present in women's organisations, men easily dominate women's thinking and perceptions on most issues. How else does one explain the fact that the demand for a quota within the women's quota has gone only as far as the limits so far set by men?

If the logic is that the oppressed groups among women should have special provisions, why just talk of the OBC women? Why not the women of those listed as Most Backward Castes (MBCs)? Why not extend the reservations to still more marginalised and oppressed women of those

communities whom the British viciously branded as criminal tribes simply because they had a long history of resistance to British rule? Even today they are treated worse than a subhuman species and face the most brutal forms of violence and exploitation. Why not a quota for physically handicapped women, as well as for women who are afflicted by leprosy for they are treated worse than pariahs? For women beggars? For prostitutes? The list of marginalised groups is indeed endless.

Yet, why are women's organisations debating only the representation of OBC and Muslim women? The answer is simple. Men of these communities have put the issue on the agenda. So far women's organisations in India echoed the politics of left parties in its broad contours because they claimed to be the progressive

voices of society. Now with caste and minority politics of a certain hue having become another fashionable issue, women's organisations are split vertically along those lines.

Even if we were to leave aside the new complex issues emerging out of the reservation debate, is the demand for a quota for the OBC and Muslim women justified? The two actually cannot be clubbed together for they represent altogether different realities. Let us consider them one by one.

➤ It is noteworthy that those who are raising the issue of a quota for the OBC women are altogether silent on a quota for the OBC men. The reason is simple: Because of their numerical strength, OBCs have today come to dominate most state legislatures as also our Parliament. For example, from Tamil Nadu only two upper caste MPs could get elected. All others are from OBC or Scheduled Castes/Tribes. It

is a similar case in the Tamil Nadu state legislature. If there was to be a population-based quota, the OBC would not qualify for a quota at all because the heterogeneous castes that get clubbed under the OBC nomenclature constitute 52 per cent of our population. Thus they cannot claim to be a political minority even while, as a socially and educationally deprived group, they do qualify for a job quota in the government. No wonder they don't raise the issue of OBC quota for men!

Granted that OBC women are among the most deprived women in India. However, they are being kept behind by the men of their communities rather than due to caste prejudice. The OBC women's primary battle lies within their own families and communities. In fact, they would have a definite advantage over upper caste women in an electoral battle because of the numerical strength of their community. It is altogether unlikely that upper caste women would be able to win from OBC-dominated constituencies. Therefore, there really is no merit to their demand for a separate quota for the OBC women.

➤ The Muslim quota case is the very opposite. The proportion of Muslims in our Parliament and state legislatures does not match their numerical strength in the population. But then the whole idea of communal electorates was rejected by the Indian leadership because that demand had culminated in the Partition of the subcontinent. In any case, can we consider a quota for Muslim women without conceding a quota for Muslim men? It is obvious that Muslim male leaders are bringing in the issue of religion-based quotas through the backdoor using their women as a sword rather than fighting their battle on their own strength.

The idea of a women's quota is based on a secular principle that



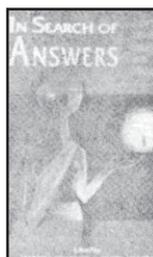
Istri Shiromani Akali Dal demanding quota for Sikh women

Pana India

historically women have had specific disabilities imposed on them as a group, no matter which caste or community they belong to. To inject the idea of caste and communal quotas into a women's quota is essentially to delegitimise the idea that women as a group have common interests. Thus, the very demand for a women's quota becomes infructuous.

As discussed earlier, the quota

system will inevitably unleash unending demands for further reservations within the quota. After all there are at present only 544 seats in Parliament in a country of one billion people~ situated in thousands of communities. The faults of our representative institutions cannot really be corrected through the quota mechanism. Other, more radical, remedies are required involving farreaching electoral reforms. □



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