

Enact the Women's Reservation Bill without Further Delay

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Once again, the debate over Women's Reservation Bill has resurfaced, in the wake of the President's speech promising to enact 33% quota for women in assemblies and parliament as well as 50% quota in panchayats. After 13 years of delays and vacillations, the women's movement and progressive forces are naturally demanding that the Government and main ruling parties, who no longer have any excuse not to enact the Bill, walk their talk this time without any further delay.

The cacophony of misogynistic rhetoric voiced against the Bill since 1996, and revived this time around, has rightly invited outrage. However, let us set aside the anti-women baggage for a while, and re-examine the main case against the Bill, as articulated mainly by parties and leaders claiming to represent the dalits and OBCs. The crux of the debate is: will the Women's Bill in its present form militate against OBC representation in parliament and benefit only elite, privileged women, and must it therefore include a quota within quota for OBC women, as a precondition for passing the Bill?

Does the women's quota indeed represent a threat to political representation of oppressed and backward castes?

In the first place, we must note that provision has already been made, in the Bill, for 33% quota for women within the existing 22% SC/ST quota. So Mulayam Singh's warning to the (dalit woman) Speaker in his parliamentary diatribe against the Bill, that the Bill, if enacted, would prevent her own entry into Parliament, is obviously baseless.

The question of quota within quota for OBC women is more complicated – mainly because of the fact that there is no existing OBC quota at any level in representative institutions. The question of OBC quota in assemblies and parliament is being brought up only in response to the Women's Bill. Even in Bihar, where the state government headed by the JD(U) (the party of Sharad Yadav, the most vocal opponent of the Women's Bill) has instituted 50% quota for women in panchayats, there is a quota within quota for women from SC/ST and Most Backward Castes (MBCs), not for OBCs as such.

OBC representation in assemblies and parliament has, by all accounts, increased significantly since the 1980s. If 33% seats are reserved for women, will it result in a decline in OBC representation? Won't OBC women win seats which OBC men have been winning? No, say the opponents of the Bill – arguing that elite, educated, privileged women, usually upper caste women will steal a march over OBC women. The lion's share of the benefits of women's quota, they say, will accrue to the more privileged upper caste women.

This argument seems to be founded on a fallacy about the nature of electoral and political mechanisms. In reservation in general, it is true, where it is individuals who compete for limited seats – in jobs or education – it is the more privileged who are likely to corner the lion's share. For instance, in the case of OBC quota, intended to correct the underrepresentation of OBCs in jobs and higher education, working class poor and women from these castes are less likely to avail benefits as compared to those from the same castes who are relatively more privileged educationally and

economically. But the question arises: while OBCs continue to be underrepresented in jobs and higher education, necessitating the OBC quota, how come they are fairly well represented in parliament and many assemblies? Why has the upper caste domination in Indian politics been decisively broken, without any quota? The reason is that OBC political forces have ridden a wave of popular social mobilization that has asserted itself since the 1980s. Politics – including electoral politics – is all about contending social mobilizations, where the caliber and privileges of individual candidates is relatively secondary. This is the reason why a Phoolan Devi (the former bandit) won electoral battles even without any OBC quota. It is one matter that parties have been reluctant to field such women candidates, thus necessitating a women's quota, but the example of Phoolan Devi suggests that when given a chance, OBC women have not fared worse than their male counterparts in electoral battles. The same social forces which benefited male OBC leaders has played in their favour too, and their lack of educational privilege has not come in the way of electoral success. The point is that politics is not a personality contest, and there is simply no reason why OBC women should fare badly in comparison with upper caste women once the Women's Bill is brought into effect. Even the apprehension that OBC women might be denied tickets because they would be seen as less 'winnable' than more privileged women, doesn't hold water. Winnability, in our electoral process, is decided less by individual privilege alone – and more by the position of candidate and party in the social balance of forces. It is this which is the biggest factor in parties' decisions to field candidates. There is no reason why a party, in a constituency where their position in the social balance would favour an OBC candidate, would choose a non-OBC candidate in case the seat is reserved for women. Reservation for women would not alter the social balance of forces – it would only eliminate the aspect of gender discrimination from the social equation in that particular election.

Why is OBC quota proposed only in response to the Women's Bill, while it is not seen as necessary in general? Opponents of the Bill retort that it is precisely to counter the threat of growing OBC assertion in politics that the upper caste dominated parties have embraced the Women's Bill. Again, such an argument is based on a fallacious and superficial understanding of the basis of the increased OBC representation in politics. OBC political assertion reflects the growing assertion of an emergent kulak class in agrarian India. To reduce it to the assertion of the marginalised 'backward castes' alone would be to ignore that it also reflects the assertion of a powerful emergent landed class, which represents a more privileged layer within the backward castes, while, however, positioning itself as the voice of the genuine social aspirations of the backward castes as a whole. The ruling class including the dominant national ruling parties have, to a large extent, accommodated this kulak class and its political representatives, which have not proved in any way a hurdle to the economic and social policy thrust of other ruling class parties. The initial expectations from some quarters, that these parties would prove a hurdle to communal politics or to neoliberal economic policy have been badly belied. Tensions might remain between powerful 'regional' players and national formations, but the latter, while they might seek to replace the regional outfits, will do so by accommodating the OBC-kulak forces rather than by jettisoning them. Moreover, the Women's Bill is highly unlikely to overturn the power of the agrarian kulak class in the balance of social forces. Rather, the same political logic and process that has benefited OBC male leaders is likely to benefit OBC women as well.

It is not our case that 'OBC parties' and leaders like Sharad Yadav or Mulayam are more anti-women than those from the Congress or BJP. Rather, they are pitting the

OBC agenda against women, not simply because they are anti-women or even because they feel more threat from the Women's Bill, but because they perceive a political benefit in flaunting purported concern for OBCs. Sharad Yadav, for instance, is clearly seeking to use the Women's Bill issue as a timely tool in his bid to pose as OBC messiah and step into the shoes left vacant by the

decline of Laloo Yadav. Today, in any case, there is no unity even in the camp of OBC leaders and parties, on the 'quota within quota' position. Nitish Kumar of the JD(U) has strategically chosen not to endorse his party colleague Sharad Yadav's stand on the Women's Bill. In Parliament, Mulayam Singh too said not a word about 'quota within quota' for OBC women, choosing instead to suggest the even weaker mechanism of a party-wise quota of 20% tickets to women candidates.

In his speech in Parliament, Mulayam Singh said that with 22% reserved for SC/STs, and 33% for women, there would be no space left for upper castes and backward castes. He said that leaders like Advani, Joshi, and others had reached the Lok Sabha through hard struggles, and the Women's Bill would 'destroy this leadership.' He also employed the usual misogynistic spectre of women in parliament relegating men to domestic work, saying "those thumping tables today will tomorrow be left thumping mattresses at home," and lamented the 'state of affairs' where women like Sonia, Mamata, Jayalalitha and Mayawati were calling the shots everywhere. Interestingly, these arguments were clearly targeted not just at OBCs but specifically at upper caste leaders (even naming them), and even more interestingly, his implication that women elected through quotas would not be the product of 'hard struggles' and would destroy able leadership, actually echoes the meritocratic arguments posed by protestors against OBC quotas. Clearly, be it Sharad Yadav or Mulayam, the arguments against the Bill are not just emanating from 'concern for OBC representation', but rather these leaders have complex and distinct motivations that necessitated different articulations and emphases at different political junctures.

We do not oppose a 'quota within quota' on principle, nor do we reject it on the spurious argument that 'women' are an undifferentiated category uninflected by caste and class. In fact, it would be our greatest concern that women from oppressed castes and classes get their share of representation. What are objectionable are the attempts to use the OBC issue as a smokescreen to stall the Women's Bill. The need of the hour now is to pass the Women's Bill in its present form without a moment's further delay. If indeed experience reveals that women's reservation is resulting in any appreciable decline in OBC representation, OBC quota in assemblies and parliament, in general as well as within the women's quota, can be accommodated through amendment.

P.S.

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