

## ***Women's Reservation: Does any male politician want it?***

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The Women's Reservation Bill is the most enigmatic object in Indian politics. Every party is in favour of reservations for women in the Legislature, but the Bill does not even get introduced in Parliament. Every party is also in favour of modifying it to provide quotas for the OBCs, but that modification never takes place.

The two largest parties in Parliament, the BJP and the Congress, declare that they are in favour of passing it as it stands, but they do nothing to pass it. It has the unique distinction of being a Bill that is defeated not by the majority voting against it on the floor, but a minority not allowing it to be introduced at all. Those who possess the majority and have declared the will to see it through would certainly not have tolerated such an unparliamentary way of obstructing the Bill if its subject had been any thing else.

It is really absurd that the amendment to include a quota for OBC women is found insuperable. A simple decision could have been taken in any of the umpteen all-Party meetings held by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, and the Union Law Ministry could have been asked to draft the amendment to the Bill. After the Mandal Commission, there is a well defined list of OBC castes relating to each State for purposes connected with the Union, which could also serve the purpose of reservation quota in Parliament seats. And each State in any case has a list of OBC castes for purposes related to the State, which would be the relevant list for the Legislative Assembly. And Constitutionality of such a quota is not in doubt, since the elected posts in the local bodies are already provided with both a women's quota and an OBC quota by the Constitution itself by virtue of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments. There is likely to be some problem, both political and Constitutional, in providing a quota for muslim women too, as demanded by Mulayam Singh Yadav, but the measure need not wait till that is resolved: the necessary amendment can be made at any time, once the political obstacle is resolved, and its Constitutionality can be tested in the Courts.

So what is the problem? Though the objection to the Bill was raised on the ground of non-provision of an OBC quota within the Women's quota, the real objection clearly lies elsewhere. It was left to Mulayam Singh Yadav to make clear what is evidently the objection of all – or most, at any rate – male politicians. It is now said that (i) there should be no reservation of constituencies, but instead the Election regulations could be amended to make it mandatory for all parties to allot a specified number of seats to women; and (ii) that the number should not be 33% but only 10%.

Mulayam Singh Yadav is a politician respected in secular and democratic circles for the role he – along with Kanshi Ram & Mayavathi – played in discovering the right political medium to stem the tide of the Sangh Parivar in Uttar Pradesh. Where the liberal version of secularism as defined by the Congress and the class organization of the Left failed, the identification of the Sangh Parivar as a Manuvaadi force inimical to the dalits and bahujans set up the necessary polarity to halt the saffron advance. But that is all the more reason to ask him some plain questions.

How would he react if some non-dalit, non-OBC person declared without rhyme or reason that the OBCs do not need 27 percent reservation in jobs, and 10 or 12 percent would do? Have not dalit and OBC organizations, on the contrary, argued with good reason that reservation should be on the basis of population proportion, less the percentage of positions which the community is able to achieve in the usual course in open competition? And what is the proportion of women in the population minus the proportion of seats they currently occupy in the legislatures? It is definitely more than 33%?

Secondly, how would he react to a suggestion that seats for SCs and STs should not be fixed constituency-wise, but there should instead be an electoral regulation that parties will give certain designated proportion of seats to SC and ST candidates? He would object, and quite rightly, that the upper caste politicians who dominate all parties would not allot a single winning seat to the SCs and STs. Will not the same be the fate of women candidates?

The plain fact is that men have always been loath to share power and property with women, and a seat in the legislature is today an instrument of power and also a sure source of considerable property. Male politicians do not want to give up even one-third of the opportunity. Since upper caste women are more vocal and assertive in claiming their political rights, parties such as BJP and the Congress dominated by the upper caste men are forced to say that they are for the reservation. But they are happy to have OBC politicians bold enough to obstruct their proclaimed readiness, for the OBC castes do not as yet have a substantial number of politically assertive women who can demand an answer from the Mulayam Singhs.

Mulayam Singh says the Bill is a conspiracy against the rising OBC leadership, but if it were so, the BJP and the Congress would not have bowed to his unlawful tactics of obstruction against the very introduction of the Bill. The BJP would not have been indulging in the farce of introducing the Bill on the penultimate day of each session of the Lok Sabha and throwing up its hands in helplessness when it knows perfectly well that if it had been any other Bill, the marshalls of the Lok Sabha would have taken care of the obstructers. Mulayam Singh, whether he knows it or not, is part of the BJP's conspiracy against its own Bill.

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