

Toward Fairness

Reservation is the cheap coin of Indian politics. This is not real change of any kind, let alone of the kind that democrats and liberals can believe in. Yet it is a change because experts in vote calculus have reasons to derive comfort from ever expanding quota syndrome. March 8, International Women's Day, 2010 was a 'momentous' occasion for Indian parliamentarians, irrespective of their party colour, to congratulate themselves on Women's Reservation Bill. Finally the Bill that has been a cliff hanger for the last 15 years was passed in the Upper House, a day later, on March 9, with the support of the ruling Congress and most of its UPA allies, barring Trinamul, the main opposition BJP and its NDA partners, the CPM-led left and a motley crowd of other parties. Except some sceptics who opposed the Bill, not in principle but in its present format, hopefully to address their respective constituencies, all enjoyed the moment for the unique consensus they stood for. Also, it was a good diversion as food inflation, galloping economic inequality, mass unemployment, unrestrained corporate power no longer made hard news. All were busy to solve the quota puzzle. Incidentally it was the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. No doubt the idea of women's liberation has undergone a radical change ever since Clara Zetkin first raised the concept to provide a focus for women around the world in 1910 in Copenhagen.

The 108th Constitution Amendment Bill seeking reservation of one third seats for women in Parliament and state Assemblies has been lying dormant ever since the Geeta Mukherjee Committee reviewed the Bill in 1996 while making its recommendations in respect of its life span and other related issues for more than one reason.

The point at issue is whether the Bill can really empower women. What they were debating—or not debating—on the International Women's Day had little relevance to the rape victims of Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. The powerful feminists cutting across their party affiliation celebrated the Day with over-enthusiasm because they viewed the passage of the Bill as a 'historic' event in India's parliamentary culture for the sake of gender justice. But women in tribal belts have no reason to cheer about what they call new chapter in empowerment of women.

After all democracy without education is hypocrisy without limitation. How to empower the women of marginalised sections of all communities, lacking minimum basic rights, is not on the agenda of the rainbow club of the concerned ladies. Those who have no right to life and means to live a decent life, are worried about today, not tomorrow.

There are no more monstrous crimes committed anywhere in the world than those against women. There are more righteous reasons to resist than the horror women go through everyday in this land of Gandhi and elsewhere in the world. And if this were the only reason—and it is not—these crimes alone would pose the immediate need and demand for political articulation of women at the grassroots level. Empowerment through reservation won't enhance consciousness much for the economically and socially handicapped women who suffer at different levels.

All major political parties have their women's wing and they didn't fail to mark March 8 to reassert women's rights. But these advanced women did precious

little when security personnel brutalised women of Manipur against which a naked procession was organised by some elderly women of Manipur to mock at the biggest showpiece of democracy. Nor did they take it seriously when the tribals of junglemahal virtually revolted against state-sponsored rape and humiliation of women. In truth a women's fact-finding mission sent by the ruling Marxists to probe the Lalgah incident never demanded punishment of the guilty policemen.

Rehabilitation of rape victims in the Northeast as also in the Kashmir Valley is a major social and economic problem. Quota is no solution for them. Unless people in general refuse to accept women's place in society—whether under medieval veils or on display as modern commodities in everything from increasingly degrading and violent pornography to the obnoxious advertising in a million other ways, empowering women will remain a utopia.

Whenever any outrage or abuse is committed against any woman anywhere in the world, it is part of oppressing women as a whole. There lies a huge gap between the depth of repression women now face in family and in society and the current level of protest mostly organised by human rights groups. Filling vacancies in parliament and state legislatures by sending more political women there cannot really bridge the gap.

Despite reservation women will continue to be held downward unless they themselves get organised and speak out. "In Bangkok and Banga-lore and Moldova young women are stripped naked and sold across borders as sex slaves. In Indonesia and Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia women are shrouded in burkhas, kept as property of fathers and husbands, and even killed if they somehow 'dishonour' their family". The ground reality is 'between burkha and the democratic thong, there is no good choice'. □□□