



Out of the Zenana Dabba

Strategies for Enhancing Women's Political Representation

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THE Prime Minister himself could not make it that day. At a conference organised by the National Commission for Women in the last week of July, a few of us had been asked by the Commission to pose questions to the Prime Minister on his views regarding 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies. At the last minute we were informed that the Prime Minister could not keep his commitment and had sent his Minister for Social Welfare, Mr Ramoowalia, as a substitute.

I asked Mr Ramoowalia: "The United Front (UF) government has been rather quick to announce that they will introduce 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and in the state assemblies, along with a 33 percent reservation in government

jobs, through an amendment of the constitution. Why is it that the politicians who committed themselves to these measures have done nothing to enhance the participation of women within their respective parties? How can 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies work if there aren't enough women active in parties, if the parties don't have enough viable candidates to field? What measures of internal reform were these parties contemplating in order to include women in party decision making and leadership roles?"

Mr Ramoowalia graced me with an answer, which I must present in brief or I will have no space for anything else. He started off by saying, "I agree wholeheartedly with my sister, Madhu Kishwar, that social reform is the most

important matter before us" then quickly launched into a sermon on what he thought were important issues for social reform. He advised the august gathering of women leaders and activists come from all over the country that women needed to be saved from three social evils — first and foremost from the dowry system. The second important evil women need to be saved from are "evil mothers-in-law." And then he went on to describe how during his trip to England he had read a moving novel about the viciousness of an evil-hearted mother-in-law who made her daughter-in-law's life miserable. Thereafter he launched into a vituperative but hilarious attack at a "new social evil" — the corrupt non-government organisations (NGOs). He warned women that in the

name of helping them and other vulnerable sections of society, these greedy NGO leaders were actually exploiting women just like evil mothers-in-law do and lectured us on how our women needed to be saved from the evil designs of NGO leaders whose funds and grants his ministry was beginning to cut down. It is obvious that his answer had as little to do with my question as chalk with cheese.

His skirting of my question shows how little thinking has been done by our political leaders about this vital measure to provide 33 percent reservation for women through a constitutional amendment.

If those in ministerial positions like Ramoowalia haven't given a minute's thought to this issue, one can imagine the paltry extent of discussion and debate that must have taken place among the top leaders as well as among ordinary party workers on the subject. Unfortunately, even women lobbyists and MPs who have campaigned in favour of reservations do not seem to have done the required homework before putting forward their demand. The proposed bill mindlessly follows the reservation scheme for women already in operation at the *zilla parishad* and *panchayat* level, which has by now demonstrated many inherent flaws and weaknesses. The new reservation bill fails to avoid those same mistakes.

The Magic Number

The provisions of the reservation bill as presented before the Parliament in the monsoon session can be summed up as follows:

■ One-third of seats will be reserved for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures through a constitutional amendment.

■ These reservations are meant for an indefinite period, unlike reservations for SCs and STs which

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lapse unless extended after every ten years.

■ The reserved constituencies are to be determined through a lottery system. For SCs and STs, constituencies are reserved on the basis of population proportion. Constituencies with a high SC/ST population are selected for a period of time and are supposed to be delimited after some years. But since the population of women is evenly spread throughout the country, this formula cannot be applied for them. The lottery system will mean that before every election a different set of constituencies will be declared as reserved for women.

■ There is also a provision for parallel reservations for SCs and STs, which is to say women belonging to SCs and STs will be getting one-third of seats reserved for people of that category — in other words there will be reservations within reservations.

There are several problems inherent in this particular scheme. To begin with, why a 33 percent quota? What is the significance of this number? Why not 13 or 43 or even 73 percent? The reservation quota for all other groups such as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes has been determined on the basis of their numerical strength in the overall population. Not so for

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women. In India the proportion of women as compared to men is a little less than 50 percent. So why not 49 percent reservation for women? Does the magical figure of 33 percent represent some projection into the near future of our declining sex ratio? Are our policy-makers anticipating the advent of all kinds of new technologies to bring down the already low sex ratio so that women will soon only be one-third of the population?

This is not at all to suggest that 33 percent reservation is a small amount. Even in Sweden, a country considered the most advanced democracy with the highest percentage of women in positions of political power anywhere in the world, women occupied 40 percent of elected parliamentary seats in 1994. This after nearly a century of effort and struggle. The figures for other "leading" democracies are pretty dismal. According to a survey done in 1994, women occupied nine percent of parliamentary seats in the UK; eleven percent in the USA's House of Representatives; seven percent in India (which has dropped to six percent in 1996); six percent in France; eight percent in Australia; four percent in Thailand; three percent in Japan; and two percent in Egypt and Turkey. Thus by reserving one-third of the seats in legislatures, India will be ensuring a quantum leap. The very presence of 181 women in the Lok Sabha will make them much more visible, a drastic difference from their minuscule presence today.

However, accepting the present scheme of 33 percent permanent reservation for women is like demanding that some seats be reserved in every bus for women or the equivalent of a *zenana dabba* (ladies compartment) in every train. Men then come to expect women to remain confined to the 'ladies section'