

Women's Reservation and Democratisation: An Alternative Perspective

VASANTHI RAMAN

Indian society has been passing through a prolonged phase of social strife on account of ever new social communities and groups pressing their entitlements. Therefore, in a very substantial sense, the Women's Reservation Bill and the discussions around it mirror the current social turmoil in Indian society and the contestations for access to power and resources between the traditionally deprived and disadvantaged sections and those who have continued to be socially and economically dominant.

Women have for centuries been part of the traditionally deprived sections of society and attempts to open access to power and resources for them as part of a wider democratisation process are very much in order. However, having said this, it must be recognised that the task is difficult in view of age-old attitudes and structures which have been used to keep women in subjugation. Achieving any measure of success on this front calls for carefully negotiating the extremely complex, segmented and stratified hierarchical social order which has served as the source of denial to women of any kind of autonomy and power along with the other socially and economically deprived sections of Indian society.

At least two distinct and clearly articulated, though opposed, positions with regard to the Bill have emerged. The first position is that a blanket one-third reservation would assure representation to women in legislative bodies, particularly in the context of their progressively declining numbers in Parliament and state assemblies since Independence.

One assumption underlying this position is that women constitute a distinct social category and other discriminations which distinguish one group of women from another are hardly relevant for ensuring their empowerment so long as their overall representation is assured. As time passes, women belonging to deprived social communities and groups would see the social and political benefits of representation and would begin to make a bid for positions of power and authority. Whether this will indeed happen in view of the serious structural constraints within which the deprived and disadvantaged social communities, including the women within them, operate is something that this position does not address seriously.

The other position is one of opposition to the Bill in its present form on the ground that it is likely to exclude women from the OBCs [Other Backward Classes] and the minorities. Almost all the political parties except the CPI and the CPI(M) are deeply divided on this issue. The BJP leadership is in favour of the Bill in its present form, even though one of its women MPs had expressed reservations on the ground that OBC women were likely to get excluded. Needless to say, there is also a strong resistance on the part of a considerable number of political leaders to 'encroachments' into what has been a traditionally male preserve.

The protagonists of the Bill highlight the traditionally sanctioned exclusion of women from the public sphere as crucial. Emphasising the dimension of gender oppression at the expense of other oppressions (of caste, ethnicity, class, religion, etc.) glosses over the complex and intricate ways in which gender oppression is embedded in these categories. Historically, women's suppression has no doubt been very important in maintaining upper caste exclusivity and hegemony. Affirmative action for women would certainly play a role in undermining male and upper caste dominance. Even so, certain recent developments suggest the need for addressing gender oppression in more subtle and nuanced ways if access to power and resources to all categories of women is to be ensured.

One recent development relates to the increasing presence

and visibility of women, particularly in education and administration (and this in spite of the decreasing representation of women in Parliament). The stratum of women who have been the major beneficiaries of the development process have been women from the upper caste, middle classes. Even a cursory look at the educational institutions and government bureaucracy will confirm this.

This phenomenon has to be seen in the context of the overall performance and ensconcement of the upper caste, educated middle classes in the structures of government and administration. Conversely, women (and men) from the subaltern groups and classes have by and large been marginalised by the development process. That these groups are SCs, STs, OBCs and minority groups (particularly Muslim) needs to be emphasised. The liberalisation policies since the 1980s have only sharpened the polarising thrust of the development paradigm pursued so far with the cushion of the welfare state finally abandoned in the 1990s. The pursuit of the neo-liberal paradigm has heightened traditional social and economic differences of caste, class, religion and ethnicity, and women have only got more and not less embedded in their groups, leading to greater differentiation among them. This also accounts for the differential political articulation among women. The responses to the Mandal Commission recommendations and the Uniform Civil Code debate testify to this.

The Mandal issue in fact posed the question of democratisation of Indian society in a very sharp way. The response to Mandal, at one level hysterical opposition on the part of the upper castes (with women playing an active role) and at another level one of opportunistic support on the part of all political parties, is a significant pointer to the importance of the issue, particularly with regard to eroding upper caste hegemony over the administration. After all, it should not be overlooked that it is the OBCs and the Muslims (given their numerical strength and, more importantly, their social location) who can pose a real challenge to the hegemony of the upper castes and not the SCs and STs. That is why even the most

reactionary proponents of upper caste dominance can be patronising with regard to the SCs and STs but become hysterical in their opposition to the demands of the OBCs and the minorities, particularly the Muslims.

The fact that the emancipatory slogans of the women's movement of the 1970s and the early 1980s have been hijacked by the Hindu Right to consolidate their hold over upper caste educated middle classes (with the latter actively participating in the conflagration of the 1990s), is evidence enough of the consolidation of the forces of the status quo. That there is some realisation of this is clear from the unease and even the retreat from an unequivocal support to the Uniform Civil Code on the part of many national level women's organisations. In fact, both the issue of women's reservation and the question of the Uniform Civil Code are good examples of how gender justice can be made a casualty precisely because it has been posed in terms whereby the specific social and historical roots of gender inequality both within and between communities have been ignored.

What is happening to Indian society is a criss-crossing of movements of various oppressed sections. Often these movements pull in different and even opposite directions, thus defeating the democratisation process in the short run. It is a challenging task both for the leaders of these movements and social analysts to unravel the myriad oppressions that characterise Indian society and to draw out the major strand which will strengthen and contribute to the overall process of democratisation of society. The levers of change have to be sought in an overall democratisation of society. In a plural society like ours, the political system has to ensure a modicum of equality between all the groups and communities if history's longest oppression is to be seriously tackled. This would imply that the struggle for gender justice and equality will have to be woven into the struggle for emancipation of each of the oppressed groups and communities.

The 81st Amendment Bill is a good example of how the aspirations of one group are pitted against those of another. The Bill in its present form will willy-nilly strengthen and shore

up the interests of the dominant groups. On the other hand, women's representation from all sections will not only be more democratic, but will also contribute significantly to the democratisation process within communities.

Published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Commentary, 11-17 December 1999.