

Power vs. Representation: Feminist Dilemmas, Ambivalent State and the Debate on Reservation for Women in India

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The women's quota (81st Constitutional Amendment) Bill providing for one-third reservation of women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies was hanging fire for some time, and has now been put in cold storage. The current debate on the Bill (prior to the dissolution of the Lok Sabha) has raised a host of questions - relating to liberal democracy, egalitarianism and the under representation of women; interest-group politics and the political inclusion and exclusion of certain identifiable group interests; the notion of 'participatory democracy' and the relationship between women's political representation and processes of further democratisation; the normative basis of demands for equality and social justice; the meaning of equal opportunity and the need for more vigorous advocacy and positive intervention on behalf of women. Feminist perspectives on the state, democracy and notions of political equality and participation have emphasised that without formal mechanisms for ensuring women's representation in political structures it will not be possible for women to cross formidable barriers to their entry into active electoral politics.

Democratisation and representative institutions while setting the terms for citizen's participation, also provide the framework for political activity. Inequalities that characterise our social structure and qualify the notion of 'political equality' are an important part of any agenda for democratisation. The agenda of the women's movement spans the entire range of issues from the redistribution of resources, time and responsibilities at home, to changes in the electoral process, parliamentary democracy, representation and women's political engagement with democratic institutions. The social agenda hidden in the demand for political representation of women and the larger struggle for equalising opportunities continues to pose a challenge to institutions of democracy. The process of democratisation has been resisted by the changing dynamics of class, caste and gender relations pursuing their different and at times conflicting interests.

The greatest appeal of liberal democracy was the promise of equality of status and opportunity. However, the biggest challenge to these goals has come from the social and political elites and other hegemonic forces in a multicultural and stratified society. The persistent paradox of liberal democracy has been the tension between the notion of political equality and pre-existing social and economic inequalities. The universal ideals of democracy (equality, social justice) have come to be increasingly challenged by a culturally and ethnically diverse population. People's movements have constituted a critical arena for the process of democratisation and representative democracy itself. Democracy in broad terms is based on principles of 'one person, one vote and one value'. Within democracies disagreements over priorities and development goals and whose interests are being served, necessitate mobilisation around group-interests. The populist rhetoric of the political discourse on democracy, egalitarianism and popular participation disguises these conflicts. The need to address the structures of exclusion and inclusion through vigorous advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged groups has been acknowledged.

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The question of who could best speak for the oppressed or disadvantaged groups becomes a central concern within these movements (women's movements, civil rights movements, ethnic movements) and in each case, an earlier unity that was promised on 'shared ideas' gave way to alternative unities forged around 'shared experience'. She further explains that "the emphasis on political exclusion and what counts as political inclusion, significantly alters the framework for debates on political equality. The main achievement of nineteenth and twentieth century democracy was to make citizenship more universal, pulling down, one after another all these barriers that excluded women, people with wrong religion, the wrong skin colour or just people with too little property. Subsequent debates have focussed on what else might be necessary - in the shape of more substantial equalities in our social and economic life - to realize the promise of democratic equality. The demand for equal or fairer representation of women with men or demand for political inclusion of groups that see themselves as marginalised, is a major reframing of the problem of democratic equality.... The 'politics of ideas' (what is represented) is being challenged by an alternative 'politics of presence'. Further elaborating her ideas she says that "The politics of presence is not about locking people into pre-given essentialised identities, nor is it, just a new way of defining interest- groups that should jostle for attention. The point, rather, is to enable those now excluded from politics to engage more directly in political debate and political action". (Phillips, 1994).

In India the political response to cumulative gender inequalities historically embedded in a stratified pluralistic society, was a policy of correction by breaking down formal barrier to women's access to legal, political, educational and economic institutions assuming that this would bring about significant changes in women's participatory roles. Gandhi viewed political and legal equality only as a starting point:

"Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation". The second part of the anticipated change never started. As I have discussed elsewhere, the vision faded out of the Indian scene once theoretical equality was incorporated in the Constitution. (Sharma, 1984).

The promise of equality in Article 14 and 15 of the Constitution prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion race, caste and language had to be followed by the First Constitution Amendment giving powers to the state to make special provisions for the advancement of 'socially and educationally backward classes'. It was the judicial, verdict in Champakam Dorairajan's case in 1951, characterising any preferential treatment to 'socially and economically weaker sections' as discriminatory, that led to an amendment to Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution. Justice P.S. Poti in his Forward to 'Dynamics of Reservation Policy' wrote that "this amendment made reservation a non- issue". Article 15 (4) brought in by the Constitution (first Amendment) Act 1951 enables the state to make 'special provisions for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes' of citizens or for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Similar provision was made in Article 16(4) for reservation of posts in favour of any 'backward class of citizens' which in the opinion of the state 'is not adequately represented in the services under the state'. Both these clauses refer to 'classes of citizens' , and not to individuals. Marc Gallanter sees the role of reservation as a compensatory discrimination policy.

"It is not to be judged only for its instrumental qualities. These policies show a sense of connection and shared destiny.... Compensatory discrimination embodied the brave new hopes of India reborn that animated the freedom movement and that crystallised in the Constitution". (Gallanter, 1984).

While introducing the First Constitutional Amendment, Nehru said:

"we come up against the difficulty that on the one hand, in our Directive Principles of State Policy, we talk of removing inequalities, of raising the people in every way socially, educationally and economically, of reducing the distances which separate the groups or classes of individuals from one another, on the other hand we find ourselves handicapped by certain provisions of the Constitution... We Cannot have equality because we cannot have non-discrimination, for if you are thinking of raising those who are down, you are somehow affecting the status quo, undoubtedly. You are thus said to be discriminating because you are affecting the status quo. If this argument is correct then we cannot make any major changes in the status quo whether in the economic or any other sphere. Clearly whatever law you may make you have to make some change somewhere" (cited in: Mehta and Patel, 1985).

A strong sentiment was also expressed by Ambedkar in his address to the Constituent Assembly debates, "on the social plane, we have in India a society based on privilege of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who are living in abject poverty. On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter a public life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man (sic), one vote and one value. In our social and economic life we shall, by reason of social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? ... We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which the Constituent Assembly so laboriously built up" (cited in Keer, 1962)..

The inverted pyramid which became the basis of India's planning and development administration resulted in not only uneven growth but reinforced the class, caste and gender hierarchies of an unequal society. The criteria for deciding 'backwardness' have dogged reservation policies in India. Even during the Constituent Assembly debates the policies of preferential treatment to the SCs and STs were criticised on the grounds that 'it puts a premium on backwardness and inefficiency'. The Kalelkar Commission appointed in 1953 submitted its report in 1955 and recommended that the social position of a community in the caste hierarchy should be used as the criterion to determine backwardness. No action was taken on the Report as the then Home Minister GB Pant observed that the criterion of caste 'displays dangers of separatism'. The second Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1979 under the chairmanship of BP Mandal to examine the condition of 'socially and educationally backward classes'. The Commission identified 11 indicators and 3743 castes as backward which at that time constituted 52 per cent of India's population. The violent agitation against the VP Singh , government's attempt to implement the recommendations, mainly from the educated middle class, and a series of writ petitions in the Supreme Court challenging caste as a criterion for determining backwardness, demonstrate the opposition from entrenched class interests. The belief that certain sections have suffered historic injustices and need special safeguards and affirmative action to realise their constitutional rights , which has formed the basis for affirmative action, is thus being strongly opposed from certain quarters.

The state is not only seen as an agent of promoting equality but also constitutes a terrain of conflicting demands being made by different interest-groups. The idea of compensatory justice through state action, has given rise to movements for people's rights and the demand for proportionate representation in decision-making structures. The range of issues brought into the

debate on political processes, participation and democracy and the perspectives of different movements engaged in transforming institutions and systems of governance are questioning the principles of liberal democratic framework'.

Increasingly the concern with the under-representation of women in political institutions is seen as a byproduct of gendered spaces and opportunity structures. Their participation is seen not only as central to the functioning of democracy but also for women's ability to struggle for their rights and challenge the ideologies and hierarchies which keep them subordinated. (Perspectives from the Women's Movement, 1995).

Affirmative action for women in India has legal and Constitutional support, despite some dissenting voices. The Bombay High Court in 1953 upheld the validity of certain provisions of the Bombay Boroughs Act 1925 which had provided for the reservation of seats for women in the election of Jalagaon Municipality. Patna High Court also took a position in a case where Bihar Panchayat Samities and Zila Parishad Act 1961 conferring a right to coopt two women as members was challenged. The Court said that as long as clause 15(3) of the Constitution stood in its present form any special right conferred upon women in the special circumstances could not be struck down as going against clause 15(1).

The Arguments for and against political reservation for women have to be seen in its historical context as the debate is more than seventy years old.

The Debate on Political Reservation for Women in the Indian Context

The early phase of the women's movement began with the emergence of the three women's organisations (All India Women's Conference, 1927, Women's India Association, 1917, and National Council of Women in India, 1925). Several local and provincial women's associations were started after 1910 which later merged to form the national organisations.

The battle for the vote began in 1917 when Sarojini Naidu led an All India women's deputation to Montague, the Secretary of State for India, who came to discuss India's demands for political representation. The memorandum said that 'when franchise was extended to the people of India, women be recognised as 'people'. When Montague's scheme of reforms for India was published, however, women were completely left out. The 1919 Government of India Act enfranchised a mere three per cent of Indian Adults for the provincial assemblies based on educational and property qualifications. It excluded women from the vote, but allowed provincial assemblies to drop the exclusion clause (property and educational qualification) if they wished.

In his Presidential Address delivered at the thirty-fourth Annual Session of the Indian National Congress on the 27th December 1919, Motilal Nehru pointed out that

"A feature of the 1919 Act which has disappointed me much, is the failure to do justice to the political rights of Indian women. I had hoped that Parliament would profit by the lesson of the women suffrage agitation in England but they have repeated the mistake of the Franchise Committee (the Southborough Franchise Committee toured India in 1918 and concluded that women's suffrage would be out of harmony with the conservative feeling of the country). I trust that Indian men will come to the rescue of their sisters and hasten the day of their enfranchisement" (cited in Panikkar, 1961).

In 1924 a Reforms Enquiry committee started recording evidence and views on whether Indian women really desired membership of the Legislatures. With the removal of the ban in 1927, the Madras State Provincial legislature threw open its membership to women just a few weeks before elections.

Jana Everett has argued that the campaign of the Indian women's movement for political representation had two phases : in the first phase (1917-1928) the issue was female enfranchisement and eligibility for the legislature; in the second phase (1928-1937) it was liberalisation of the terms of enfranchisement and increasing female representation in the legislatures. In both phases the extent to which the interests of the women's movement and those of political authorities coincided was the main factor determining the outcome of the women's movement demands. (Everett, 1981).

When the Simon Commission came to India in 1928, many women leaders, the Congress and other nationalist parties boycotted the Commission. However, another faction of the women's movement appeared before the Commission and argued for an 'extension of female suffrage and reservation of four seats for women in the legislatures in order to encourage women to take part in political affairs and to better represent women's interest in education and social welfare'. The Simon Commission did not recommend reservation of seats in the legislatures but left it to the provincial governments to nominate women if none were elected. The Commission also rejected the system of separate electorates but recommended reservation of seats for the depressed classes.¹ Everett has called this group the 'women's uplift faction' which was also represented at the First Round Table Conference (November 1930-January 1931) boycotted by the Congress. Their approach to increasing female franchise was in line with the government position as they supported the idea of wifehood qualifications and reservation of seats for women in legislatures. (Everett, 1981).

At the First Round Table Conference boycotted by the Congress, the British government appointed two women (Radabhai Subbarayan and Begum Shah Nawaz) who supported the idea of wifehood qualifications and seats reserved for women in legislatures though not on communal basis. The memorandum they presented was on the lines of the British women's memorandum. The memorandum presented on behalf of the three All India Women's organisations, on the other hand, demanded the principle of equality. Everett argues that 'a split developed within the women's movement between those who aligned themselves with the Congress and those women who were not involved in nationalist activities. In 1931 when a new Constitution for India was being discussed in British Parliament, the three organisations i.e. Women's India Association (WIA), All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and National Council for Women in India (NCWI) met and drafted a joint memorandum supporting adult suffrage but rejecting special measures to ensure women's representation in legislatures. AIWC along with NCWI organised a meeting of representative women in Bombay and the meeting elected a Drafting Committee of eight women to prepare a Memorandum to be submitted to the Franchise Committee of the Second Round Table Conference. The main demands were universal adult suffrage, mixed general electorates and no reservation, nomination or co-option of women.²

The integral links between the nationalism movement and women's movement have always been reaffirmed by political activists and analysts. Sarojini Naidu during her Congress Presidential address in 1925, had pleaded for a women's section of the Congress. During the Karachi session of the Congress held in April 1931, the Party expressed its gratitude to women for participation in the Civil Disobedience movement and adopted a 'Declaration of Fundamental Rights' which included in its guarantees, gender equality before the law and universal adult Franchise.

Reservation was, however, rejected by women leaders as a retrograde step after acceptance of political equality in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931. In her presidential address to the All India Women's Conference, Sarojini Naidu stated:

"We are not weak, timid, meek women. We hold the courageous Savitri as our ideals, we know how Sita defied those who entertained suspicion of her ability to keep her chastity. We possess the spirit of creative energy to legislate for the moral of the world. I think this conference is writing the history of women of the world. I will, however, confess to you one thing. I will whisper it into this loud-speaker. I am not a feminist. To be a feminist is to acknowledge that one's life has been repressed. The demand for granting preferential treatment to women is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been by the side of men in council and in the fields of battle.... We must have no mutual conflict in our homes or abroad. We must transcend differences. We have risen above nationalism, above religion, above sex". (Fourth Session of AIWC, Bombay, 1930).

In the same Session, Lady Tata lamented the 'absence of women members in the Legislative Assembly as a great drawback by the supporters of the Sarda Bill as women could have voiced the feelings of their sisters with greater directness and force than men'. In their letter to the Premier and Chairman of the Minorities Committee, the three organizations (AIWC, WIA and the Central Committee of the NCWI) jointly issued a memorandum on the status of Indian women in the proposed new Constitution (Government of India Act, 1935) and demanded immediate and complete recognition of women's equal political status in theory and practice. They further stated that "We are further enjoined to resist any plea that may be advanced by small individual groups of people for any kind of temporary concessions or adventitious methods of securing the adequate representation of women in the legislatures in the shape of reservation of seats, nomination or co-option whether by status, convention or at the discretion of the provincial and central governments. To seek any form of preferential treatment would be to violate the integrity of the universal demand of Indian women for absolute equality of political status". (16th Nov., 1931).

In 1932, the AIWC and WIA met to draft a declaration and send representatives before the Lothian Committee. Nine members gave evidence before the Indian Franchise Committee presided over by Lord Lothian. They opposed the reservation of seats for women as it 'might create a spirit of communalism against women'. The Lothian Committee's Report (1932) stated that women should be treated as one of the main sections of the community and be represented in a manner similar to the Muslims, Sikhs and depressed classes.³ It recommended that 2 to 5% of the seats in provincial legislatures be reserved for women for the first ten years, but did not elaborate on any particular method of selection. The India Franchise Committee stated that "unless special provision is made for women, it seems improbable that more than a few, if any, women will secure election to the first legislatures even with a larger women's electorate than we are able to propose, considering the prejudice which still exists in India against women taking part in public life".

Recognizing the fact that the AIWC was opposed to the granting of any special facilities as they wished 'to be returned by the open door of competition', the Committee pointed out that a very large number of witnesses, both men and women, who gave evidence individually or as representatives of associations, felt strongly that some minimum representation should be secured for the first ten years.⁴ The report further stated that under a system of responsible government, nomination is ruled out. The Communal Award (1932) specifically mentioned that

in the provincial legislatures, all seats including those reserved for women, would be allocated to members of specific communities and the electorate for each seat would consist of members of a single community'. The Congress and women's organization continued to oppose communal electorates first established in the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909.

In the seventh Session of the AIWC at Lucknow (Dec. 28, 1932 to Jan. 1st, 1933) a resolution was moved and unanimously adopted to reiterate the demand of, 'universal franchise in all its bearings'. One of the members pointed out that 'women do not want favours, we wish to resist reservation of seats or anything that will tend to perpetuate our inferiority'. It was Rajkumari Amrit Kaur who, while supporting the resolution, stated that

"I want you to fully understand the importance of these words 'franchise in all its bearings'- for there have been one or two persons who have put forward the view- point that though the Conference can give its opinion on Franchise, as far as women are concerned, it cannot discuss the issues of either 'joint electorates' or 'the Communal Award' - for these bring us into politics. Our Conference is pledged not to take part in 'party politics' and I am quite certain that we have never broken this pledge.... But if we are to eschew politics altogether we might as well as give up all our work in connection with vital questions for us - for we want our status to be fully recognised on an equal basis with men from the very beginning in the new Constitution. But the mere obtaining of the power of the vote is not enough. We must consider the basis of franchise, secondly the methods employed for the exercise of the vote and thirdly the manner in which women are to be represented, in the future councils of the country".

Anrma Asaf Ali while seconding the resolution thought 'reservation of seats for women is meaningless and absurd if the demand for equality is genuine'.

In the pre-independence period, several women's organisations made a distinction between 'political participation' and 'political action'. 'Politics' was a taboo word; education and legislative measures were considered necessary for the improvement of women's status. The dilemma of women's Organisation as to what constitutes 'politics' and 'political participation' continued even in the post-independence period.

In 1933 when a new constitution was under consideration by the Joint Select Committee, the premier women's organisations sent three of its representatives to place the women' case before it:

"The memorandum presented to the Joint Select Committee created quite a stir and showed the enormous strides which political consciousness had made in the minds of Indian women. They demanded a democratic constitution conferring full self-governing rights on India, including a clause in the Fundamental Rights granting equal rights to women; declared themselves strongly against communal electorates, against reservation of seats for women and special women's constituencies and against wife-hood and literacy qualification for franchise" (Chathopadhyay and others, 1939).

The Report of the Joint Select Committee on Indian Constitutional Reform (1934) made proposals for women's representation and the Government of India Act 1935 incorporated them with minor changes. Wifehood qualifications were the main instrument, for women's enfranchisement and 41 seats allocated among the communities were reserved for women. Under the 1935 Act as finally adopted, six million women and 29 million men became eligible to vote. Seats were reserved for women on a communal basis though women could contest any of the general seats. The three organizations issue a joint statement on January 22, 1935 expressing

their disapproval of the Wifehood qualifications, the indirect election the absence of a declaration of fundamental rights and communal electorates.

The women's movement could not remain unaffected by the growing tensions between the Congress and the Muslim League in the political arena and separate all India organizations of Muslim women were formed in the late thirties. Everett has pointed out that

"AIWC leaders appeared to hold a naive view of electoral politics and the influence of their Organisation on mass politics before the 1937 elections When the parties selected their candidates, women leaders discovered that very few women were nominated from general seats and once entered the legislatures, party affiliation to be more important than sex in voting on legislation" (Everett, 1981, p.135).

She also comments on the inadequate role of women's organisations in the electoral mobilisation of women. The attitudes of politicians, policy makers and women leaders in the pre independence period have thus shown an ambivalence and a failure to understand the varied nature of women's constraints within the complex system of structural inequalities which reinforces patterns of marginality for the underprivileged groups who do not have equal access to power, authority and decision making processes. This kind of understanding did not go away with independence.

The ideology of national liberation incorporated a vision of society with a liberal political agenda. Within the nationalist discourse and during the initial phase of nation-building women got support from men for equal political rights, but the policies and programmes of independent India hardly reflected the recognition of women's contribution and potentialities. The integral links between the nationalist movement and women's movement have always been reiterated by women activists. However, the ambivalence and at times contradictory approaches to the women's question has also been noted by commentators. Joanna Liddle and Joshi have noted that "the two issues central to the women's question in Independent India were women's suffrage and the reform of Hindu Personal Law. Votes for women united the nationalist movement with the women's movement but the nationalists were bitterly divided over personal law reform which included issues like marriage and inheritance which were of special concern to women". (Liddle and Joshi, 1986:35).

The Male chauvinism came to the fore on the issue of family laws. Whenever patriarchal controls in the family were questioned during the debate over the Hindu Code Bill the demands met with opposition. While a kind of liberal ideology of equal rights in education, right to vote, women's welfare etc. was promoted, it is not surprising that patriotic and cultural nationalistic arguments were used to reject or oppose such proposals for changing family laws and equal property rights for women, as being the influence of western education.⁵

The perceived threat to indigenous tradition and values from a colonial regime influenced the debate on women's role during the pre-independence period. India's colonial experience and the manner in which men played an important role in the social reform movement and later in the nationalist movement in focussing on the women's question influenced the logic and strategies of the women's movement to a considerable extent. The right to representation symbolised to many at that time an 'entry point' into the all male-world of decision making. Omvedt suggests that

"Gandhi recognised the power of the women and the lower castes and contained it for the cause of Independence, uniting the nation behind the freedom struggle at the expense of injustices

within, caste class and gender relations. He effectively mediated these discontents so that they remain targetted exclusively at Imperialism" (Omvedt quoted in Liddle and Joshi, 1986). It was women's large scale participation in the civil disobedience movement rather than any radical notion of gender equality which tilted the balance in favour of political equality in the Constituent Assembly debates.

In the first Lok Sabha (1952-57) of free India, only 43 women contested and 14 were elected (out of a total number of 489). In a letter to the Chief Ministers (8th May, 1952) Nehru said:

"I have noticed with great regret how few women have been selected. I think we are very much to be blamed.... Our laws are man-made, our society dominated by men and so most of us take a very lop-sided view of this matter. We cannot be objective because we have grown up in certain grooves of thought and action. But the future of India will probably depend ultimately more upon the women than the men".

Of the 216 women contestants for about 3000 assembly seats only 82 got elected. During the 50s and 60s, several legislations were passed promising a better deal to women. Perhaps as an indication of how little is known about this period, some scholars have called it the 'silent years' of the women's movement.

The question of political reservation in favour of women died out or at least became dormant till the early seventies, when the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI, 1974) again debated the issue. (The All India Panchayat Parishad at its Sixth National Conference held at New Delhi in 1973 also passed a resolution recommending a fuller representation of women and a reserved percentage of not less than one-third to start with. (Panchayat Sandesh, Nov. 1995, AIPP). This resolution was not followed up in any of its subsequent meetings till 1990. At the Panchayati Raj Sammelans of the Northern and Western states in January 1989, delegates expressed different views about the reservation of seats for women. The Report of the CSWI pointed out that 'the rights guaranteed by the Constitution have helped to build an illusion of equality and power which is frequently used as an argument to resist protective and accelerating measures to enable women to achieve their just and equal position in society'. The demand for a system of reservation came from several groups of women during the Committee's tour to different parts of the country. While the Committee rejected by a majority the proposal for statutory reservation of seats for women in legislative bodies, it recommended statutory women's panchayats at the village level because of the neglect of women in rural development programmes. It also called upon political parties to "adopt a definite policy regarding the percentage of women candidates for contesting elections". The dissenting minority of two members who advocated reservation, criticised :

"the policy of 'tokenism' by having few women in the legislative and executive wings of government whose minority and dependent status offered serious obstacles to their acting as spokespersons for women's rights and opportunities. Their greater representation may also increase the women legislators' concern for problems affecting women, ensuring a body of spokespersons of the women's cause in representative bodies. This will also help political mobilisation of women".

They also argued that

"if this proceeds continued over a long period more and more women, losing faith in the political process to change their conditions in life, may opt out of the political system and become either passive partners or rebels. In the present context in India the greater majority would

undoubtedly follow the first path because most of them have not shaken off the feelings of subjugation and inferiority generated by centuries of subordination....."

"a political system cannot be based on ideology alone but must keep in touch with the actualities of the social situation The continuing under representation of women prevents their proper participation in the decision making process in the country..... When one applies the principles of democracy to a society characterised by tremendous inequalities such special protections are only spear heads to pierce through the barriers of inequality. An unattainable goal is as meaningless as a right that cannot be exercised". (CSWI, 1994).

In these arguments women's representation is seen as an instrument for change and women are seen as an interest group who will take up the cause of other disadvantaged women. It is also anticipated that once they became part of the decision-making process, they would demand participation in development decisions and a reorientation of public policies. Several of these arguments have since been thrown back and forth in the current debate on the reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies.

Support for reservation also came from a group of scholars who examined women's role in the political process as part of the CSWI exercise, and came to the conclusion that the process of Indian women coming into their own politically has been slow and halting because Indian culture is a political, and the force of tradition has been particularly against participation of women in politics. Improving the political status of women is an integral aspect of the overall problem of socioeconomic change and broadening the political elite structure. They noted that the failure of Indian society to "look upon women's participation with sympathy and understanding is an exceedingly retarding factor in political socialization of men and women". It was argued that

"30% reservation of seats in the legislative bodies for women cannot lead to their becoming "isolated pockets in the nation" because women are not marginal to society as a minority group might be. Such a transitional measure to break through the existing structure of inequalities will not be retrogression "from the doctrine of equality and the principle of democratic representation" (CSWI, 1974).

Significantly, opposition at the time came from political parties and most women legislators, the very sections who are today advocating political quotas for women. Rejecting the suggestion as a retrograde step, the CSWI put forward the following views:

The women's cause in India has always been championed by all progressive elements, men and women; separate constituencies for women will narrow their outlook; women's interests cannot be isolated from the economic, social and political interests of groups, strata and classes in society.

- it may precipitate similar demands from various other interest groups.
- the privilege once granted will be difficult to withdraw.
- women are not a community and a category and hence there is no rational basis for reservation.

Some of these arguments were still couched in the language and discourses adopted during the nationalist struggle. The emergence of autonomous women's groups (or non-party women's organisations) in the 70s, raised radical questions about the relationship between the feminist movement, formal political institutions and power structures, and the need to organise as women. Disillusioned with party politics, many of them preferred to mobilise outside formal political

structures. These new women's groups achieved a fair degree of success in getting amendments to laws pertaining to rape and dowry; in questioning development concepts, policies and their gender-neutrality, and in pressing for a reorientation of the state. However, the agitation around the Muslim Women's Bill had disappointing results as caste, loyalties and religious identities split the movement's support base.

The derailment of Constitutional democracy with the declaration of the National Emergency in 1975, activated a variety of people's organisations as the issues of safeguarding civil liberties and democratic rights, and ensuring the greater participation of women and other deprived groups in the political process took centre stage. Several of these grassroots initiatives and people's movements which resisted state power, are part of the dynamics of democracy in India and have their origins in unequal social and economic relationships. The struggles originated from the economic and social bases of various groups threatened as a direct consequence of public policies which protected the interests of those sustaining the power elites. Class, caste and gender identities provided the socio-political context for popular struggles. By partially addressing the popular demands through public policies, the state tried to co-opt dissent. Today much of the terminology of the women's movement has been co-opted by the government and other agencies.

The experiences of leadership and collective action by women's groups on a variety of issues (land, credit, anti-arrack campaign, literacy etc.) made a significant contribution in enlarging the definition of 'politics'. And yet, women remain excluded and underrepresented in formal politics. Feminists challenging the liberal models of politics argue that the present conception of politics is a male one and women's concerns cannot be accommodated within such a framework.

In 1983, a meeting of experts on the 'participation of women in political life and the means to increase the participation', felt the need to redefine women's participation in politics and what constitutes the sphere of politics. The report pointed out that 'the sphere of politics includes the social relations which create and institutionalise power relations and use them to foster, control or manipulate people's behaviour, attitudes and beliefs in order to supervise and regulate the distribution of resources'. According to this Report

"political participation is involvement (Commitment) in respect of a deliberate and organised activity which seeks to influence (modify) the character (functioning, structure, policies, statement, behaviour) of one or more of these institutions or the mechanisms of power within one of these spheres. Attempts to overcome the obstacles and to produce new (alternative) channels of power in places where access to established channels is blocked inadequate or ineffective should be regarded as a form of political participation. Most people's movements fall in this category". (Lisbon, 13-16th December 1983).

Political participation is an exercise in power. Women's movement has to grapple with the issues of representation and governance and the nature of politics and political institutions in a multi-party democratic system. Issues of women's representation is a classic example of how contested politics around different identities can push it on or off the political agenda.

Since the 1980s, most mainstream political parties have begun viewing women as a constituency and introduced women's issues in their party manifestos. Political parties' heightened awareness of the importance of women's votes, the participation of women in popular movements, the pressures of the women's movement, the dynamics of grassroots organisations, judicial interventions and executive action taken together, forced them to address some women's issues. The women's movement revived the demand for reservation. The draft National Perspective Plan

(NPP) recommended reservation of 30 per cent seats at Panchayat and Zilla Parishad level and local municipal bodies through nomination and co-option (NPP, 1988). National women's organisations rejected this as 'subversive of the Constitution' and emphasised the need for elections at all levels to ensure the emergence of grassroots leadership. (A perspective from the women's movement, 1989). The NPP did not take the debate on political representation raised in the CSWI any further, though the final version did recommend 30 per cent reservation of seats at the district and lower levels to be filled by election. The issue of reservations in Parliament and State Assemblies was not raised at all. It is interesting that the demand for reservation of seats for women on the Municipalities, District and local Boards was endorsed even in the pre-Independence period.

In the post-CSWI period, women have definitely emerged as a distinct category in development planning (WID initiatives), But women's experiences of collective action and mobilisation did not result in the greater representation of women in elected bodies. The critique of NPP from the women's movement argued that the under representation of women in elected bodies is a manifestation of their subordinate position in the family, community and the society and as such undermines the democratic process. They reiterated the demand for one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and municipal bodies. A National Conference on Panchayati Raj and Women (1989) was addressed by the late Rajiv Gandhi who announced that 30 per cent seats in PRIs would be reserved for women. He claimed that this was only the beginning and that his government would extend it to fifty per cent in two years time.

Those arguing for reservation support it on the grounds of both the historic injustice and inequalities suffered by women as well as women's moral superiority in providing 'clean politics'. Echoes of these arguments were also heard during the Parliamentary debates on the 64th and 65th (1989) and 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Bills (1991). Those against quotas called it 'inherently undemocratic and against the principle of equality', while those supporting it argued that the continued under representation of women is a failure of liberal democracy and the promise of equality of status and opportunity.

During the debate on the 64th and 65th Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 1989 it was hailed as a 'historic measure', 'a revolutionary approach' and an old dream of Mahatma Gandhi. It was opposed on the grounds that it was an attempt to usurp the powers of the state. Doubts were also raised whether Parliament had the power to amend the Constitution which changes the nature of the federal polity. Others said that it was an 'election gimmick'.

The patronising attitude of the male MPs during the debate on the 64th and 65th Amendments was quite obvious. A veteran MP opined that 'now we are going to provide representation to our women, our mother, our sisters and our daughters..... Is it not a fact that we considered it as a matter of respectability that our women should remain there in the harem and behind the door just in a whispering fashion, never to come into the force and add their voices of assent or dissent? ...

"Now we want to break away all these shackles and liberate our women. ... They should be brought in the fore under the banyan tree in an important manner into our villages, into our panchayats and councils and enthrone them wherever it is possible Earlier also we have done it by preventing them from committing suicides, and sati" (magnanimous indeed).

Another male parliamentarian praised the Bill as mother presides over the society. She is head of the family. She is a demi-god. Therefore the only provision that could have a world-wide

acclaim is this provision ... It is a 'befitting gesture'. Another MP welcomed 'it is a nice thing as in a male-dominated and feudal society (not in the economic but cultural sense) women will not get the place they deserve and are entitled to'. Syed Shahabuddin called the Bills 'children of political compulsion' as he saw the 'reservation for women is nothing more than a tactical manoeuvre by the higher castes, by the upper elites and by the vested interests to regain on the roundabout what they shall lose on the swings'. He argued for reservation for women within the quotas for each class.

The Bills could not be carried through in the Rajya Sabha (the upper house) for want of a requisite majority. Panchayati Raj became an election issue and when Congress took over the government, the Constitution (72nd Amendment) Bill 1991 was again introduced in The Lok Sabha with some modifications suggesting the insertion of new part IX (definition, constitution of Panchayat etc) and Eleventh Schedule (Article 243 G regarding functions of Panchayats) in the Constitution. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Bill Providing for one-third reservation for women in PRIs were finally passed in December 1992 and were ratified by all the states by April 1993.

These two historic Amendments could mark a shift from the politics of protest to proactive politics and an opportunity for women to shape the agenda at the local level. The overwhelming response by women to these measures and the entry of nearly one million women in PRIs encouraged the women's movement to make a similar demand for reservation of one-third seats in the Parliament and state assemblies before the general election in 1996. The experiences and effectiveness of the first generation elected women representatives in PRIs have generated so much debate on the issue of political quotas. However, all major political parties supported the demand and incorporated it in their election manifestos. It was also included in the Common Minimum Programme of the Ruling Coalition government at the national level. In the first session of the now dissolved Parliament, the United Front government introduced the Constitution (81st) Amendment Bill, 1996. The debate in the parliament over the Bill reflected stiff opposition from several quarters. The political threat to the position, power and privileges of a male dominated Parliament brought to the fore serious divisions within political parties and various interest-groups. Despite putting on a brave public posture not wish to be identified is reported to have said that 'there has been no internal discussion on how the government plans to handle this emotive issue'. The ruling party's Prime Minister within the Parliament. Not many were convinced that it would achieve 'social justice' for women as argued by the women's movement. Even the beleaguered Prime Minister relented, saying that 'legislation of such social importance cannot be enacted without a consensus' as it 'requires persuasion and accommodation'. The Bill was referred to the Joint Select Committee of the Parliament, composed of members from both the Houses, under the chairpersonship of Geeta Mukherjee.

The original Bill did not mention Rajya Sabha or Legislative councils and Union Territories. The Joint Select Committee submitted their Report in December (which was placed before the two Houses on 9th December 1996) and suggested several amendments including reservation in those states where there are less than three seats. It did not make any recommendations as to how reserved constituencies would be determined and left it to the Government and the Election Commission. It did not accept the amendment regarding the provision of reservation for women belonging to the other backward castes. It suggested that the Government should find some modus operandi so that reservation of seats for women in Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils can also be introduced and urged the Parliament to pass the Bill without delay.

The Bill was twice stalled in the Lok Sabha and the current political scenario and the compulsion of coalition politics may seal the fate of the Bill. It is interesting that there was near unanimity on

the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which were hailed by all political parties as a 'historic step' and as an instrument of democratic decentralisation. In contrast, the reactions of intellectual elites, politicians and the media to the 81st Constitutional Amendment are sharply divided. The women's movement has managed to keep a united front, howsoever fragile, despite some dissonant voices. Is there a gender divide on the reservation issue? No, says a country wide survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. Seventy five per cent men and seventy nine per cent women favoured reservations in legislative bodies (The maturing of a Democracy - India Today, August 31, 1996). The fate of the 81st Amendment tells a different story as the predominantly male Parliament developed cold feet. It is a virtual catch-22 position where the fear of opposing a move towards 'women's political empowerment' is regarded as politically incorrect, while supporting the Bill is seen as suicidal. Consensus continues to elude the Bill. Behind the door lobbying to reduce the quota from one-third to a lower percentage acceptable to all parties has not yielded any results. The women's movement has taken a firm stand that they will not accept any dilution even if the Bill is defeated in the Parliament. Clearly in the era of coalition politics and a continuous battle for political survival, political agendas are determined by other considerations.

Paying lip service to women's causes on public platforms never gets translated into concrete strategies. The number of women Parliamentarians has never exceeded more than seven per cent. The protagonists of reservation for women argue that the male dominated political system refuses to provide space for women, and reservation of seats will help in creating political space for women and will also lead to the social mobilisation of women. Women are arguing for parity and not charity and see reservation as a vehicle for social justice'. The antagonists are apprehensive about the whole rationale of reservation at the Parliament and Assembly level. They not only consider it a retrograde step and a violation of the principle of equality but are also opposed to the idea of reservation per se. "It is a horrible method of dismembering India... The Amendment would be judged by history as one of the most important factors in destroying social cohesion in India (Buch in Hindustan Times, November 30, 1994). Such a viewpoint ignores the challenges posed by other forces (caste, ethnicity and identity politics). Some believe that such a step promises to resurrect the Mandal ghost though it is not perceived to be divisive enough to subvert society. Some add a note of caution that the proponents of women's reservation ought to be more worried about the speedy acceptance and endorsement of their demand than a fear of possible backlash, as it conceals the hypocrisy of neo-converts to reservation (Ajaz Ashraf in The Pioneer, July 28, 1996). The later developments on the Bill proves the point. The bitter hostility to the women's quota Bill introduced by the Government after the Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee, demonstrates entrenched vested interests and also warns against easy optimism.

The attempt at redressing the gender balance in Parliament and State Assemblies has evoked an animated discussion on the quantity and quality of women's participation and whether reservation empowers women and reduces disparities. The debate has been proceeding at different levels. Some question the basic premise that a change in the gender composition will bring something distinctive to these bodies, inspire more women to enter politics, to represent and articulate women's interests, and do not agree that securing greater representation is a matter of social justice. Others argue that it will introduce tensions in the social system. On what criteria will constituencies be designated as reserved? A suggestion has also been made to introduce multi-member constituencies so that each constituency will have the choice to elect both men and women. The Shetkari Mahila Aghadi, the women's, front of the Shetkari Sangathan (a peasant women's Organisation in Maharashtra) suggested a "system of three seat constituencies" combined to form a single constituency.

The print media's responses were equally interesting, sometimes dramatic. The Indian Express called it 'the mandalisation of gender, yet another manifestation of social engineering perfected to the divisive best' (India Genderised, July 20, 1996). The same paper called it a 'wrong headed affirmative action which is ruthlessly self-aggrandising' (14.9.1996). Hindustan Times called it "competitive populism at its basest with no commitment or concern for the status and welfare of women in society" (Hypocrisy Unlimited, Hindustan Times, 14.9.1996). One of the papers stated

"strangely enough, on the issue of women's right to equality with men and their representation in legislature, there appears to be a close similarity of prejudice between the orthodox Hindu Pandit and the anti-Hindu non-conformist. Gender justice is virtually unknown to either". (The Hindu, Reservation and Gender Justice; 31.12.1996).

Group interests are central to the democratic process. Current attacks on reservation are emerging from class interests. The oft repeated cliché that women have less interest in politics is another expression of the male resistance to women in politics and public life. It is the form of politics which women find unattractive. Women and men may have different concerns, perspectives and motives for political activity. In the context of the U.S., Katzenstein says that the "politics of mobilisation and politics of electoral representation are not one and the same since the defeat of Equal Rights Amendment (1982), feminists have turned from the strategy of mobilisation to the politics of representation". She describes three paradigms that seek to capture the meaning of electoral politics - elections as an instrument of social control and co-optation, as a means for the representation of group-interest and as an agent of mobilisation. It is significant that while elected women representatives often act collectively on controversial issues, party affiliation affects their responses.

The opposition from male politicians has also been commented upon as "there is a realisation that this measure could change power equations forever (Times of India; Gender Mender; 21.11.1996). Jayanthi Natarajan, a Rajya Sabha Member, counters the argument that the framers of the Constitution never intended reservations for women. "It was women members of the Constituent Assembly who did not want a crutch of reservation. Alas, how wrong these brave women were! Fifty years down the road and the percentage of women members in Parliament has not even crossed the double digit'. An eighty-four old ex-member of the Constituent Assembly in a recent interview admitted that her 'initial perception was wrong and she now believed in reservation'. The reactions have thus varied from excitement and high expectations (representation of women in PRIS) to guarded optimism and even cynicism about reservations and its impact on the formal political process, institutions and sharing of power and responsibilities. The biggest hurdle to transformative politics is the party system and the electoral politics and the polarisation between ideological positions and reality of women's oppression. The ardent advocates of political reservation usually downplay the nature of electoral politics and group interests and solidarities.

Electoral Politics, Political Parties, Democratisation and Political Representation of Women

A world-wide comparative survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) suggests a corollary between the degrees of democratisation and the extent of women's participation in political life. The study examines three main sectors i.e. women in political parties, women's participation in the electoral process and women in national parliaments. The study based on replies from 115 countries confirms a major discrepancy between two sexes. With the relative exception of Nordic countries, all countries conduct politics in a way that excludes nearly half of people. It suggests establishing a new social contract to secure the common good. The report

clearly states that 'part of the answer to the limited parliamentary representation of women should be sought within political parties, especially in their hierarchy and political practices. Women are often numerous among the grassroots and are increasingly becoming aware of their electoral clout. They are now beginning to react against the very narrow space in which they remain confined when it, comes to power structures' (IPU, 1997).

Political parties in Nordic countries introduced gender quotas for the selection of parliamentary candidates from mid-70s. The Report of the CSWI also suggested a quota within all political parties in 1974. The African National Congress in the first election, in South Africa introduced a quota system for women. The British Labour Party adopted a target of 50 per cent women to be elected in the next three general elections. The proportion of women in legislative assemblies has reached 38 per cent in Denmark, 21.3 per cent in Netherlands and 15 per cent in Germany.

In the IPU survey report, the response from Denmark is worth quoting- 'The interplay between 'from above' and 'from below' is often highlighted as a fundamental characteristic of the integration of women in politics in the Nordic countries. This interplay between the integration of women's issue in the state and the spread of Women's movement activities provides one of the explanations of the comprehensive mobilisation and notable progress made in the Nordic countries...

"It is a combination of pressure from below, especially from the social movements and the system's comparatively high degree of responsiveness towards new groups and demands (the political opportunity structure) that are among the decisive factors with respect to the integration of women into politics'. It is also important to point out an understanding of the political significance of gender focus both on changes in political culture and on changes in relation to gender" (IPU, p. 12).

The prevailing political crisis in India and the compulsions and contradictions of multi-party democracy and coalition politics raises the question whether parties are effective 'instruments for channelling and reflecting the concerns and aspirations of women. Has the relatively large number of women in Nordic parliaments altered the political agenda and content of politics which was one of the expectations of women's organisations'?

Activists within the women's movement however, believe that women's participation in the political process is crucial to their struggle. Political parties today are more aware of women's votes however, this has not been matched numerically in their participation in decision-making process or in parties nominating more women candidates in the elections.

The absence of women in the internal party hierarchy, lack of necessary arrangements to facilitate women's participation in party activities, a great deal of reluctance about accepting the idea of parity and partnership between men and women in politics, are reflected in women's small numbers in parliament and state assemblies. Women's units within the parties established in the 70s are regarded as subsidiary or peripheral to the party structures and their activities are largely confined to social events, campaign work and mobilising women to support and defend the agenda of the party in power. Without logistic, financial and strategic support from the parties women cannot succeed as candidates in the multi-party democratic system.

A Regional Consultation on the 'Women's movement in India' noted that:

"today a large number of activists see the women's movement as a political movement however, its link with wider political processes has emerged as a major problem area. At one level, the social perception of the movement is of an apolitical struggle by various women's organisations,

to improve women's status within the family. Even when sympathetic to women's resistance against familial oppression, this view questions the validity and rationale of the movement's effort to intervene in the political process. The autonomous women's groups, which had distanced themselves from political 'policies' do not view themselves as apolitical. Many organizations and independent groups however, see the struggle for gender equality as part of the process of wider participation of women in the political process. In the process over the years there has been an attempt to redefine population nations of 'politics' and 'political participation from gender perspective", (CWDS, 1995).

Participants in an International seminar, however, cautioned against "the risk of returning to a division of spheres of influence based on sex (opting out of formal political institutions) and of seeing women once again barred from politics". In their view

"the historical emergence of feminism was manifestation of women's interest in politics however, the idea of remaining on the outside, maintaining radical positions under new conditions and refusing to take part in institutional politics might well be a form of sectarianism or abdication. It might in fact be tantamount to choosing a position of powerlessness which would only reinforce the exclusion of women from the sphere of political activity" (Lisbon, 1983).

Added to this perspective is the movement's concern with issues of caste, class ethnic and religious identity and the interaction between differing ideologies and positions with undercurrents of unstated tensions.

Neelam Gore, a political activists associated with the Republican Party, sees:

"a diminishing responses to programmatic politics and morchas (demonstration) for democratic demands'. Lata, an activists with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) feels that 'the focus of women's issues has added another dimension to debates. However, we have stopped transcending the gap between welfarism and feminism". (CWDS, 1995: 20).

The passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments has reopened the debate on political structures and processes and their role in encouraging women's leadership at the grassroots level. The two Amendments envisage significant structural changes. Does the women's movement see it as an attempt to co-opt women's growing militancy? Undoubtedly the women's movement is faced with a dilemma regarding the need to engage in politics and at the same time not allow political parties to use it as an instrument of co-option.

The failure of the women's movement to forge links with mass based organizations and the initiatives taken by casteist and communal forces to mobilize women has thrown another challenge to women's movement. Electoral politics today cannot ignore casteist and communal rhetoric. Increasing criminalisation of politics and escalating violence against women has also engaged women's movement.

The report of the workshop on the women's movement points out that caste mobilization could not be ignored and needs to be understood from the women's viewpoint to expose the patriarchal overtones of casteist rhetoric. The communal divisions and the violence stemming from identity politics is another services challenge to the women's movement where gender identities are enmeshed in the caste and communal identities placing women in a peculiar position (CWDS, 1995).

A document prepared by seven Women's Organisations also states that

"the political milieu as it is constructed today pushes women out of politics as electoral politics is increasingly relying on violence and intimidation...Criminal intimidation is likely to increase as people's protest against their deprivation and dispossession grows. Criminalization of politics has an added dimension for women that is the use of political power of sexually exploit them". (A Perspective from Women's Movement, 1995).

"The politics of identity and casteism and communalism which have gripped the society have intensified the problem of women's political participation. Participation in the public domain can help to empower women, but in a social milieu wherein caste, class and gender ideologies intersect in complex, interrelated and yet antagonistic relationships, problems are likely to persist", (Mazumdar and Agnihotri, 1995).

Democratic politics has increasingly focused attention on the composition and behaviour of existing elites and the limits of representative or participatory democracy. The nature of party politics in a multi-party democratic system and the nature of political institutions have fostered new political divides not always on conventional ideological grounds. Coalition politics has further demonstrated its own contradictions which cannot always accommodate legitimate concerns in their political agenda because of their own survival concerns. In a multi-party democracy where the "number game" ensures the formation of governments, the logic of selecting 'winning candidates' often works against women despite lip service paid to women in party manifestos. Issues of women's representation being debated in the 90s clearly demonstrates how social and economic inequalities combined with cultural values makes it harder for women to challenge dominant ideologies and structures.

It is obvious that, as a 'socially and economically disadvantaged section', women have begun to understand the ways in which power is shared and why greater representation is needed to influence the redistribution of power and resources. Can policies of reservation redress the imbalance? Women activists believe the political representation will equip women with power to change and redefine the political agenda and articulate women's interests. It is also pointed out that for transforming the standards of politics and governance which remain male-dominated, a process of progressive political representation of women is needed. The politics of representation around castes, ethnicity and religion itself raises questions of contested politics around excluded identities. Identity-based politics is seen by many as a potential threat to society where competing and exclusionary groups promote factionalism and cultivate power bases.

Today not only the women's movement but elected women representatives from different political parties are demanding reservations. In a recent National Convention of elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions, organized by several women's organizations in Delhi, a Resolution was adopted which reiterated 'the need for a closer co-ordination between women's organizations and the elected women representatives to strengthen the struggle of women for equality and justice in the economic, social and political sphere'. Women activists believe that without organized pressure it would be difficult to get women's issues and perspectives on the political agendas. It is not possible to achieve any of our goals without transforming political power relations, structures and processes (Agnihotri and Mazumdar, 1995). Rajni Kothari has argued that:

"unless and three issues - the demand for representation, the demand for a role in governance and the movement for basic transformation are taken together, the larger game being played by the highly entrenched power structures will co-opt these new social movements. We are living in a

period when the best of terminology of the grassroots movement is co-opted by the canopies including GOI and World Bank", (CWDS Symposium, 1997).

In the current phase of globalization is political equality compatible with market economy? Cohen points out that:

"the new trade agreements and international regimes will adversely affect equality, seeking group's democratic options. Just as women and other disadvantaged groups have begun to understand the ways in which they might be influential in redistributing power, the locus of power has changed and once again, these people are excluded. So, as women, aboriginals and people from ethnic minorities, are appointed to various courts and are more visible in public forums, these bodies become less and less responsible for the decisions which shape the boundaries for economic and social existence. Just as these groups begin to understand how to manoeuvre and the effective within a nation, the nation itself loses its effectiveness and the target for political action is nebulous". (Cohen in Doyer and Drache, 1996).

Several political theories and women activists have taken issues with liberal democracy including the concepts of equality of opportunities, merit and social justice. Phillips, for instance, has examined the issues of citizenship, making arguments for a more active participatory democracy and the questions associated with representing social heterogeneity and group differences. She claims that "liberal democracy has not served women well'. She notes three areas of feminist dissatisfaction with existing liberal democracy i.e. the basis on which women have been included in the political community; the weight feminism attaches to women being able to transform their identity through active involvement in collective discussion and action and the critique of dependency as a crucial part of sexual inequality which puts them firmly in the camp of democracy and political participation (Philips, 1992: 68-82).

Many of these dilemmas apparent in the reservation debate have profound implication for political theory and practice and for the attempts by the women's movement to give a new meaning and dimension to the slogan 'political empowerment of women'. The contradictions seem to be inherent in the process. On the one hand, decline in the accountability and credibility of democratic institutions and institutions of governance lead to cynicism; on the other, a strong feeling that a larger participation of women in the political process can reverse the process of deterioration in public life, spurs women to demand political representation. The expectations of gains from representational politics definitely marks a shift in the strategy of the women's movement.

Notes:

1. Ms. Eleanor Rathbone, MP in Britain invited the wrath of nationalist Indian women by criticizing the plight of Indian women particularly girl children. She argued that Britain had to assume the responsibility for 'backwardness' of Indians. She was closely associated with the offensive of Katherine Mayo who published her book called "Mother India" and the copies of the book were presented to every Member of Parliament when the Simon Commission Report came for discussion. Ms. Eleanor Rathbone called a Conference in London and Rama Rau alongwith two other Members of AIWC gave their names to participate in the Conference. The publicity pamphlets showed that all the speakers were British women, mostly missionaries and the subjects for discussion were the Indian Caste System, child marriage, tuberculosis in women, the purdah system, education of women etc... It amazed me to discover the ignorance of British men and women about the most elementary matters concerning India, Indian life, customs and

social problems. How extraordinary that they remained unconcerned while vital political reforms were being advocated in India". *An Inheritance: The Memories of Dhanvanthi*; Rama Rau; Allied Publishers, 1978.

2. A Joint Memorandum was issued by the three premier organizations (AIWC, WIF and the Central Committee of the NCWI) on the 'Status of Indian Women in the Proposed New Constitution'. In the letter addressed to the Prime Minister, chairman of the Minority Committee. Downing Street, dated 16th November 1931, by MRs. Naidu and Begum Shah Nawaz, it was stated that 'we have been entrusted with the task of presenting to the Round Table Conference our demand for a complete and immediate recognition of equal political status in theory and practice. The draft Memorandum was circulated to various constituencies inviting their views on the 'reservation issue'. Out of the replies received, there was a t that time only one constituency which favoured reservation of seats in the Legislature. Sixth Session of the All India Women's Conference, Madras, 1931.

3. A state by the AIWC was issued in 1932 on the Report of the India Franchise Committee which pointed out that 'the women of India were deeply and painfully conscious of the incalculable harm that the demon of separatism has effected in the body politic and were determined not to allow such a pernicious spirit to enter into the sphere of women's activities.... We feel strongly that the result of reservation of seats and special representation with which it is proposed to saddle us contrary to our expressed wishes - will be a to introduced the poison of communalism in our sphere - a contingency that will meet with the most determined and united opposition of womanhood of India.... Inequalities and discrimination between the sexes, the dependency of wife upon the husband - an admittance of her inferiority - will be perpetuated as a result of the recommendations of the Committee.

4. During the discussion on the amendments to the District, Municipalities and Local Boards Act, I put in a plea for reservation of seats for women.... Till we get economic independence and get equal share in the property, we would not be in a position to face the elections along with men candidates. In regard to the importance of women serving on these municipalities, I contend that the functions of a municipality are in a large measure the functions of a house... When the women, are recognized as mistress of the house, why not our city Fathers consider them as such in the administration of municipalities. The Bill should be suitable amended to reserve two seats for women in every municipality. She opposed separate electorates for women as this will creates for women as this will create a sex barrier. She further argued that we want women to represent the women's point of view and hence reservation for women is necessary. There should be division of labour... (in *My Experience as a Legislator*, 1930). Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy (The first woman legislator elected in 1926, as Deputy President of the Legislative Council, Madras).

5. The granting of the vote to women generated a debate which also carried a demand for the representation of women in the Legislative Council. While some sections of the educated public brushed aside the importance of political rights to women, some others welcomed it and emphasized that women would be contributing only on issues related to women and children. The WIA, the most vocal representative of educated women in the 20s and 30s also expressed similar views. The readings of the women's journal at that time reflect the intense need for women to justify their aspirations with socially acceptable arguments when these aspirations crossed the boundaries of the home and the family. *Stri Dharma*, April 1928.

6. Ramanohar Lohia arguing in favour of preferential rights for women said; 'Some women many not themselves have liked such a please because of its assumption that women are inferior to men in certain spheres... But this problem of women must not be treated on the level of temporary annoyances, it must be tackled at its roots. Woman is undoubtedly among the most exploited sections of humanity, together with the poorest and lowliest of men. She many try to forget her condition with love or trinkets and her charitable generosity. If socialism and democracy are a battle for equality, they are cut out specially as creeds of women.

Rights more than duties belong to the sphere of politics and political actions belongs to the sphere or organization. In the sphere of organization, men is the superior of woman. An attempt must be made to reduce this superiority in such a measure as is possible through a scheme of preferential rights for women.

The demand for preferential rights for women should be deeply studied in order that women's inequality should be reduced to the minimum and she may help banish the methods of violence from human pursuits.' *Preferential Rights for women* (1956). Writings published in *Mankind* a monthly journal during August 1956-March 1962. Rammanohar Lohia, *Samta Vidyalaya Nyas Prakash Vibhag; Notes and Comments; Vol.1* Hyderabad, 1972.

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