

IT'S A LONG ROAD TO WOMEN'S EQUALITY

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Bihar BJP Mahila Morcha supporters light lamps a day after Parliament passed the women's reservation Bill, in Patna. | Photo Credit: ANI

After almost a decade of silence, the Modi government's sudden announcement took everyone by surprise: a Bill in favour of women's reservation, now renamed Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinyam (roughly, Statute Revering Women's Power), was to be presented in Parliament. It has since been passed in both Houses without much ado, with just two votes against it in the Lok Sabha.

While voting in its favour, Opposition groups have rightly pointed out that the Bill has been presented late in the day, and that too with various conditionalities attached, which make actual implementation vague. There is no question of its playing a direct role in the 2024 general elections. Some even wonder whether arrangements for implementation will be in place by 2029. Thus, the future of women's reservations remains uncertain even though it is now the law. How do we take stock of this turn of events? One way is to revisit the history of the issue, which spans a century of campaigns over women's rights.

The possibility of women entering political life took shape in the early 20th century when the colonial state responded to Indian nationalism in the form of political devolution, by offering Indians a greater role in governance through various means of nomination, reservation, and election. It was in this context that the first women's organisations were born. They sought to take forward agendas of social reform by expanding women's voting rights as well as by standing for elections. Women leaders, though, took different positions. While some did not want any form of reservation, others believed that structural disadvantages such as lack of economic autonomy, dependency, and the constraints of marriage laws meant that women required reservations to ensure that the 'women's point of view' was represented in legislatures. These were also the years when the rights of the depressed classes, the Dravidian movement, and the fears of Muslims of turning into a minority were occupying public space, all of which had significant implications for women's groups. Women's organisations not only opposed the idea of separate electorates for different groups in the name of women's unity, but came to be persuaded after 1930 (and especially after the Poona Pact) to drop their demand for any special treatment in the form of nominations or reservations. 'Equality and no privileges' and 'a fair field and no favour' were common slogans. Differing views were sought to be suppressed, even at the cost of loss of membership, especially for Muslim women.

Not enough is known about a subsequent critical time in this history, namely the years of

preparation for the Constitution. No voices were raised in favour of reservations for women. No change in attitude was visible until the 1970s and the shocking findings of the 1974 'Towards Equality' report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, which declared that women were turning into a minority. However, even this committee opposed by a majority vote the idea that political reservations for women were needed to counter the appallingly low presence of women in electoral politics. The rebirth of the women's movement in the late 1970s and '80s, which for the first time saw political campaigns on issues such as custodial rape and dowry deaths, also did not express concern over the absence of women in State Assemblies or Parliament.

It is only in the 1990s that a change in orientation was visible, though opinions differed then too. While there was general agreement for the need to revive moribund village panchayats with one-third reservations for women, few groups came out openly in favour of the 1996 women's reservation Bill proposing a similar quota at the State and national levels. Equally noteworthy was the form of opposition. The Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal demanded a sub-quota for women from Other Backward Classes (OBC), stating that a blanket reservation for women would disproportionately favour upper caste women. The call for sub-quotas for OBC women and Muslim women did not find many backers. Even in 2010, when the Bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha, there was little appreciation of the complex forms that patriarchal exclusion takes. While there was growing support for women's reservations as an idea, questions such as the electoral disadvantages of OBC women pitted against upper caste women did not find resonance.

Today, we are in the strange situation where everyone is in favour of women's reservations, as though patriarchy has disappeared. The ruling party seems to believe that it has successfully domesticated women's issues. It sees this Bill "revering woman power" as just another welfare scheme rather than a historic law allowing women to participate in the shaping of state policy. We must be vigilant against this mood of self-congratulation. It is imperative that the reservations policy for women recognises the multiple and unequal forms that patriarchy takes in excluding women from public life. It is equally important to guard against the idea that the mere presence of women in electoral politics will translate into women's equality and freedom. Given the current ideological climate, the new law is not an achievement but a challenge. The long waiting period before it takes effect should be a time for re-examining our ideas and beliefs about how the electoral presence of women might translate into a more egalitarian and less hate-filled ethos.

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