

Despite BJP move, women's reservation still a long way off

The Bharatiya Janata Party's decision to reserve 33 percent seats for women cadre in its organisational structure is unlikely to have a ripple effect on other parties or even help in the passage of the long-pending Women's Reservation Bill in parliament.

The BJP passed a unanimous resolution at its two-day national council meeting here Thursday to give 33 percent reservation to its women cadre. The party has however not taken a decision on reservation for women in its parliamentary board.

Though the move has the other political parties worried, analysts doubt if it will prove effective.

'The male members in all political parties are opposed to the idea. And since they are strong in the party and most parties lack inner democracy, this reservation policy may not work,' said Professor Zoya Hasan of the Centre for Political Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Until constituencies are reserved for women in the same manner as is done for the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST), political parties are likely to give the party ticket to women - if forced to do so through legislation - in only those constituencies where the parties' chances of winning are poor, say experts.

'There are many small political parties having only one or two MPs. Moreover, the political parties are not as organised as in Scandinavian countries. As such, many changes are required before such a system of reservation can work,' Hasan added.

In giving reservation to women, the BJP has partially followed the Election Commission proposal that instead of legislation on women's reservation, the political parties could practise it while distributing the ticket to its candidates.

In response, the Congress stated that it is open to the idea. Spokesperson Abhishek Singhvi said: 'We are also not averse to what the Election Commission has proposed.'

However, it is unlikely that the Congress will go to the extent of reserving 33 percent organisational posts for women. 'We are not copycats of the BJP,' said a Congress minister, preferring anonymity. But the number of women cadre in the party is set to increase, say sources.

The Left parties have a different take on the issue. 'The BJP's reservation policy is a cosmetic statement from roof tops. If they really stand for women's rights why don't they condemn the Manu-smriti (ancient Indian text laying down laws for society)?' Communist Party of India-Marxist leader Nilotpal Basu said.

'No party can run on women's reservation alone. But in our organisation we are trying to improve participation of women,' said Basu.

However, amid all the brouhaha over the issue, the likely sufferer could be the Women's Reservation Bill. All the parties that were opposed to it continue to do so.

The most vocal opposition to the bill has come from Railway Minister Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya

Janata Dal (RJD), Sharad Yadav's Janata Dal-United and Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party. These parties bank on the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Muslim votes. Only a very small number of women among OBCs and Muslims participate in politics.

Congressmen blame coalition partners in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) for their failure to present the Women's Reservation Bill in parliament.

'The RJD and others will not allow the cabinet to approve introduction of the bill and so this government cannot present it in parliament,' said Sushma Swaraj, BJP general secretary, who formulated the reservation policy of the party.

The present 543-strong Lok Sabha has only 45 women members. This works out to only eight percent of the total membership.

Other than the BJP and the Congress, the Left parties are the only ones who support the bill.

'We have always supported the Women's Reservation Bill,' Basu said.

Interestingly, certain sections among political parties have reservations on the 33 percent quota for women in parliament. Some have even termed it 'politically suicidal'.

Even after amending in the party's constitution, the BJP may give insignificant posts to women just to adhere to the new rule. As for nomination of women for contesting elections, Swaraj said: 'There is no change in the parliamentary board and distribution of the party ticket as there is no unanimity.'

According to psephologist and political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan none of the political parties is very serious about women's reservation. 'Male leaders feel that they will lose their seats. Secondly, the seats will be rotated which means one seat reserved in one election will not be reserved in the next. Then there is the issue of reservation within reservation for SC/ST women.'

Rangarajan feels that unless these issues are resolved it is highly unlikely that the Women's Reservation Bill will be passed, even it is tabled in parliament.

The proposed legislation to reserve 33.3 percent seats in parliament and state legislatures for women was drafted first by the H. D. Deve Gowda-led United Front government. The bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Sep 12, 1996. Though it has been introduced in parliament several times since then, the bill could not be passed for want of a political consensus.

Till that happens, the number of women who reach the Lok Sabha will still be low, despite all the positive noises.

By Rakesh Mohan Chaturvedi (© IANS / India eNews)