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# Women in Politics and the Subject of Reservations

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**I**n 1996 significant sections of the women's movement came out in support of one-third reservations of seats in the state and national assemblies, which took the form of tabling a Women's Reservation Bill. In spite of all the lip service paid at the time and in successive years, including the declared support of major parties, the Bill has yet to be passed. It is quite in keeping with these globalised times to locate this new interest as part of a world-wide concern with questions of governance, and the lack of gender equality in the sphere of political representation.

Most discussions of reservations for women in India have contextualised the issue in relation to the prior move to introduce reservations at the local level (panchayats and municipalities), a rather quiet or at least publicly uncontested process which took place during 1993 and 94 in the form of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments. This paper, however, demonstrates that the effective history of thinking about political representation in the form of reservations for women is as old as the women's movement itself. Feminist engagements with the political domain became caught up within dynamics that grew out of the specific dilemmas and contradictions of political representation, and shifted across time from the colonial, to post independence and the more contemporary period after the 1990s, that I have elsewhere designated as "postnational" (John 2014). It is surely rather paradoxical to witness a stronger feminist desire to inhabit the legislative apparatus of the state in its colonial and present day 'neo-liberal' forms

than in the heyday of national development. On the face of it, one would have surely imagined the opposite to be the case. At the same time, certain continuities are also in evidence from the colonial era to the contemporary interest in women's political representation, which coalesced around the repeated problem of a conflict between conceptions of women's political rights and rights based on minority status and caste.

### **Social Reform, the 'New Woman' and the Subject of Politics**

As is well known, women emerged as subjects of social reform by the end of the nineteenth century in the late colonial period. This 'new woman' occupied a space of tension between notions of the 'social' and 'political', which was heightened under the growing forces of cultural and political nationalism. Compared to the earlier period of social reform, the turn of the century not only witnessed new demands and opposition to British rule, but also the colonial state's response to Indian nationalism in the form of political devolution, by offering Indians a greater role in governance itself. Begun at the level of local bodies in 1892, and taken forward through a series of political and constitutional reforms over the next decades, Indians were sought to be included by various means of nomination, reservation and election. This was the context within which women came together to form the first organisations in their own name following from their prior experiences as members of social reform organisations that were 'male-inspired and male-guided'. (Forbes 1996: 68). Between 1917 and 1927, the major women's organisations to emerge were the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). Members came from different regions, from Hindu, Muslim, Parsee and Christian families, products of the educational experiments that gave them interests beyond the household. The major issue before them was precisely how to take forward agendas of social reform (still predominantly defined through the ideas of the long century behind them, with education leading the way) in relation to the largely undefined question as to whether or how they could be political.

In some accounts, there should not have been a problem at all. According to Partha Chatterjee's formulation nationalism was able to successfully

resolve the major conflicts produced in the wake of social reform by “refusing to make the women’s question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state”. Moreover, nationalists granted women the vote without a suffrage movement. Instead of being in public competition with men, distinctions “between women in the world outside the home” were far more significant: It was against conceptions of excessively “Westernized”, “traditional”, and “low-class” women that the new cultural norm was fashioned, thus setting in place a revised patriarchy whose legitimacy rested precisely on being disavowed (Chatterjee 1993: 131-133 emphasis original). Unfortunately, Chatterjee’s account stops with the turn of the twentieth century, and does not comment at all on the complex evolution of the women’s movement in the subsequent decades. In effect, then, his arguments have the following twin corollaries: On the one hand, women ceased to be relevant in the next phase of nationalist struggle; on the other hand, women’s political rights were resolved in cultural terms, as spiritual bearers of Indian nationhood. What needs to be pursued here is whether such assumptions can be sustained, or whether in fact “women” took on a vastly different identity precisely when the ground of cultural nationalism moved in the direction of the political claims of citizenship. (This section draws from an earlier essay John 2000)

Now it is indeed possible to find prominent women who drew from (while also transforming) the potent ingredients of cultural nationalism to become quite extraordinary embodiments of public politics, and who enacted this new woman on many stages—colonial, nationalist and even international. Sarojini Naidu was arguably one of the most famous of them. Already in 1918 she persuaded her Congress audience that giving women the vote would by no means interfere with the “destinies” of men and women, which were “separate” ones, but united by nationalism. Nor, in the decade that followed, can it be denied that it was the British who refused to grant women the right to vote and stand for elections on the same terms as men in the new legislative councils that were formed, even though this demand enjoyed the support of most of the women’s organisations of the time, the Home Rule League, the Muslim League, and the Indian National Congress, including an initially opposed Gandhi. By 1930, major women’s organisations were also deliberating the question of reservations of seats in

political bodies apart from women's voting rights. In her much-publicised Presidential Address to the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in Bombay of the same year, Sarojini Naidu made it unequivocally clear that women did not want preferential treatment [i.e. any form of nomination or reservation], for this would amount to an admission of women's "inferiority". This was why she was no feminist. Women's task was nothing less than the "spiritual reform of the world" (AIWC 1930: 21). Thus, even nationalism in her view limited the scope of women's transformative potential. On another occasion she evoked "the indivisibility of womanhood—frontiers, wars, races, many things make for division—but womanhood combines. The queen and the peasant are one, and the time has come when every woman should know her own divinity" (Reddy 1964: 124). Cultural distinction and political rights appear to flow seamlessly into one another, and with this crucial consequence: whereas cultural nationalism rested on claims of difference, women's politics drew upon the universal language of unity and indivisibility.

But if a figure like Sarojini Naidu could turn the experience of colonial subjection into a romantic project of feminine spiritualism and humanism, in one and the same breath dismissing feminism in the name of women's global unity, this cannot be said for many others who became active in setting up women's organisations and promoting women's issues. For some of these women who were drawn towards agendas of social reform under the changing and politically turbulent decades of the twentieth century, the question of political rights, engagement with the colonial state, the demand for the franchise and the contentious issue of reserved seats were not so easily "resolved". It may be worth recalling that the first demand for women's right to vote (presented to Montague in 1917) appears to have been something of an accidental by-product: The initial deputation by Margaret Cousins, (an Irish feminist and secretary of the Women's Indian Association (WIA) in Madras), with the backing of D.K. Karve and the Senate of Poona's Indian Women's University, was for compulsory free primary education for both girls and boys. It was only when she was informed that the terms of the Montague-Chelmsford enquiry were strictly "political", meant to initiate a constitutional process of self-government, but without having included women in their plans, that Cousins linked the demand for education to the

need for Indian women's franchise (Reddy 1956; Pearson 1989: 201-202). Sarojini Naidu led a separate delegation demanding that women be included on the same terms as men in any political settlement for India.

Unlike Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddy's relationship to the question of reserved seats was somewhat different. Born into a devadasi family in the southern Tamil country, she was educated and became trained as a medical doctor. In 1926 her name was submitted by the WIA for nomination to the Madras Legislative Council (which, along with Bombay in 1921, was the first to extend the franchise to women on the same terms as men, i.e. subject to property and income criteria). With some reluctance she agreed, only, she said, to use politics to advance her sisters' cause. Muthulakshmi Reddy's own descriptions and explanations of her work as a legislator were multi-voiced: Accounts of women's inferiority, their lack of economic independence and inheritance rights, the need for marriage law reform, abolition of the devadasi system, and so on, required reservations "to represent the women's point of view". As mistresses of the home, moreover, women were ideal administrators of the municipality. At the same time she voiced her feelings against separate electoral rolls for women—"we do not want to form a separate caste" she said, for "men and women rise and fall together". Moreover, in a situation where a majority of educated women were not qualified to vote, separate electorates would enfranchise conservative women "not conversant with the moving world" (Reddy 1930: 155-61). She also questioned men of the depressed and backward classes and minorities, her "Adi-Dravida brothers and Mohammedans", who stressed more upon other grievances than the education of their girls (Reddy 1930: 123). Indeed, the "backwardness of Hindu women" was much worse, she asserted, than the condition of backward class or minority men (Reddy 1930: 155). Unlike Sarojini Naidu, therefore, Reddy's visible feminist struggle to carry forward an agenda of social reform sharpened her misgivings about the differences between women—"modern" and "conservative", and eventually appears to have led to her own rethinking about the very purpose of reservations, when it brought in, in her view, "undeserving" women.

In one of the first extensive studies of the Indian women's movement, Jana Everett tried to account for such differences amongst women in their

relation to politics and reservations by referring to the “uplift” and “equal rights” factions among women’s organisations (Everett 1979). Several scholars have analysed this enormously complex period in the history of the women’s movement, especially from the point of view of the mixed fortunes of different women’s delegations before the British government, and the responses of British colonialists and feminists.<sup>1</sup> Geraldine Forbes has referred to different phases on this issue between 1918 and 1935 in terms of women’s relationships to politics and voting rights. It was only after 1930 (after the Lahore Declaration and the Nehru Report promising women “equal rights”) that the idea of universal franchise formed the relevant backdrop for varying stances towards the issue of reservations (Forbes 2002). Clearly there were deep differences and conflicts even within women’s organisations such as the AIWC, established in 1926, which became the most influential national women’s organisation in the next decade. In an earlier study, Forbes has pointed out how “one by one, women who had previously supported nomination and reserved seats (such as Muthulakshmi Reddy) added their voices to the demand for “equality and no privileges” and “a fair field and no favour”. The official stance of the three major women’s organisations in 1932 against any “privileges” notwithstanding, “there was a great deal of support for special electorates and nominated seats,” especially from provincial assemblies and local bodies (Forbes 1996: 107-08). Mrinalini Sinha has provided painstaking documentation and analysis of the ‘zig zags’ that characterised both debates within women’s organisations and their official positions to various committees in the wake of their successful campaign around the Sarda Act in 1929. (Sinha 2006) The Sarda Act was a moment where the social and political came together as women’s organisations acted collectively across religious identities to petition the colonial state to act on their behalf. The difficult question that needs to be confronted here is how and why the question of the relationship between the social and political subsequently came asunder, and that too, in the very quest by feminists for political unity. Or to put it the other way around, how and why did the need for women’s

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<sup>1</sup> There are a number of studies that dwell on different phases in the development of women’s organisations and their battle for the franchise. These include Everett 1979, Forbes 1979 and 1996, Chaudhuri 1993, Kumar 1993, Nair 1996, Pearson 1989, Sinha 1999.

political unity become so paramount in the midst of the welter of forces and processes of that time, even at the cost of their avowed primary concern with matters of social reform?

When the next Franchise Committee was set up at the close of the Second Round Table Conference to tour India and collect opinions in 1932, a memorandum from the all-India women's organizations (the WIA, AIWC and NCWI) reiterated their demand "for the Universal Adult Franchise—irrespective of any property or literacy qualification, and with no expedients such as nomination and reservations of seats". When their demands were not met, (once again British opinion claimed that the majority of Indian women were "not ready", that implementing the franchise across the country would be "impractical", even though their own recommendations sought to engineer an improvement in the male/female vote ratio from 20:1 to 5:1), women's organisations agreed to work out some sort of transitional compromise. It is surely significant that while they opposed many of the colonial recommendations such as the wifhood qualification, their compromise included the restriction of women's franchise to urban areas. This was because, as their written statement put it, they attached "equal importance to the quality as well as the quantity of the woman's vote"; an urban vote would ensure "a more independent and well-organised vote—factors of vital importance ... at the present juncture"; thus enabling "the educated womanhood of India to coordinate the woman's vote on the right lines" (AIWC 1933-34: 18). At the same time, opposition to any kind of reservation was reiterated—"merit and merit alone" was to be the criterion, even if it meant fewer seats. Those voices that believed special electorates and nominated seats would enable a truer representation and amelioration of the social problems facing women were sought to be won over, or accused of being disloyal.

The central aspect of this moment for the women's movement in India is this espousal of the tenets of liberal feminism. At one level, we can see how these women's strategic choice in favour of formal political equality was not unrelated to their own social, educational and individual advancement. The most significant issue here is, of course, that they thereby naturalised their own representative claims to speak for all of Indian womanhood,

while professing a language of no privileges or favours. Moreover, their official opposition to nominations and reserved seats did not stop them from demanding the presence of women in the Central and Provincial legislatures, district, municipal and other local bodies, indeed, on any commissions or committees affecting women and children, from the League of Nations to the Censor Board (AIWC 1934-35: 70, 187). Finally, as Gail Pearson has pointed out, “the very method—reserved seats—by which women were accepted as part of the Indian parliamentary culture [under the terms of the Government of India Act of 1935] was first vehemently opposed by those nationalist women whom it was later to benefit” (Pearson 1989: 199).

But at another level, the significance of this formative period in the history of the women’s movement lies in how, precisely at the height of political nationalism, a new contradictory identity was cemented: A very specific “woman” and a corresponding construction of femininity—in terms of class and caste, refinement and subjectivity—became the bearer, not just of Indian culture, but of a new universal citizen. From the 1930s onwards, it was women’s organisations more than any other group, even including the Indian National Congress, that clung tenaciously to universal formal rights, of which they were the truest embodiment. As Mrinalini Sinha phrased it “the discursive figure of the modern Indian woman, once the signifier of national cultural difference, was now rearticulated in the discourse of liberal feminism as the model for the citizen of a new nation-state.” (Sinha 2000 : 626).

It would be a major mistake, however, to isolate women’s protests against the idea of reservations and special electorates, from their resolution against the British “Communal Award” of 1932, as the Ramsay MacDonald Award was popularly called, which sought to provide separate electorates and reserved seats to Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Anglo-Indians, and made “special” provisions for the Depressed Classes, as the Untouchables were described. Though pledged not to get involved in party politics and stay focussed on matters relating to women’s status, prominent figures within the AIWC were able to condemn the award by interweaving their conception of the “best” system of representation with the theme of the unity of all women: As Rajkumari Amrit Kaur put it, “there is no question as to the reality of

unity amongst us women. We want to send our best women and our best men to the councils—therefore we do not want the canker of communalism amongst us. Once we are divided into sects and communities all will be lost...” (AIWC 1932-33: 51). Seconding the resolution, Aruna Asaf Ali referred to the “evil of separatism”. “We women must do our uttermost to see that our country is not left to the mercies of job hunters. The legislatures must be filled with those who really feel that the country’s interests stand above personal or communal considerations” (AIWC 1932-33: 53). Other members, however, raised questions and objections. Begum Sakina Mayuzada opposed the resolution, saying that desiring the good of one’s community did not imply she wished harm on others, and K.B. Firozuddin raised the problem that Muslim women representatives might be prevented from competing under a system of joint electorates due to their comparative educational backwardness. But these views were brushed aside as creating barriers and “artificial communal hedges”, which would only lead to being told yet again that “we are unfit for Self-government”. A separate resolution was passed condemning the practice of untouchability, calling on women to work whole-heartedly for its abolition and for the equal admittance of the so-called untouchables in public spaces and institutions. Gandhi’s fast was referred to in the subsequent discussion as having brought “this disgrace to Hinduism and the Hindu community” finally into prominence all across the country.( AIWC 1932-33: 60).

Women’s organisations thus insisted that they were untouched by communalism, in spite of clear expressions of disagreement. As far as possible, declarations of dissent were not recorded by the AIWC Franchise Committee, even when it came from such important figures as Begum Shah Nawaz. “Minority” opinions were regarded as numerically unimportant, since “it had been decided that only the majority vote counted” (Forbes 1979: 15). But, as Forbes goes on to add, members of these organisations had always known that Muslim women were in a minority. Maitrayee Chaudhuri has also perceptively commented on the opposed perceptions of communal representation for different women: While the unity of women and the nation were endangered by communal electorates in the dominant discourses, it was the very settlement of the communal question that would

ensure the safety of the nation in the notes of most Muslim women members (Chaudhuri 1993: 157).

### **The Dilemmas of Communalism and Caste**

Clearly, therefore, women's organisations were directly interpellated by the political turn taken by the existence of different religious communities. Right into the twentieth century, liberal nationalists envisioned the future India as being made up of discrete religious communities, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and so on (whatever the problems attached to such a vision, and parallel efforts to demarcate boundaries between "social" and "political" domains). They even publicly espoused the role of separate electorates. However, from the 1920s, and not only because of the series of Hindu-Muslim riots in many parts of the country during that decade, the meaning of "communalism" changed dramatically and came to be conceptualised in zero-sum terms, in a relation of opposition to a much narrower definition of nationalism. Nationalism now claimed to stand above and outside the primordial pulls of religious community or caste (Pandey 1990: 235), loyalty to country had to exceed that of any sectarian attachments (whose public political place therefore had to be diminished), until, finally, any reference to communities, was not just synonymous with religious community, but with all that was pernicious in the British policy of "divide and rule". What needs to be grasped here is that women's organisational opposition to separate electorates brought together in troubling ways political perspectives such as these, together with their own concerns over problems of social reform.

It is necessary therefore to emphasize that the whole terrain of personal law reform was defined in religious terms, so that women came to be identified as belonging to their respective communities. Women's organisations espoused the aim of a common code for women, even though they subsequently supported legal reform as it finally emerged in the 1930s and 40s within the contours of Hindu and Muslim codification. We might then say that in 1932, before personal law reform had got off the ground, feminists feared that any kind of autonomy granted to communities in the political sphere would close off future avenues for the kind of collective action they had achieved during the Sarada campaign. However, and this is

why it is so troubling, there is still a gap between the desire for collective solidarities capable of including different communities within a universally shared social agenda, and a politics of abstract citizenship that, in its very claim to be neutral and united, ends up being Hindu majoritarian.

The politics of representation as espoused by women's organisations thus came to a head over the Communal Award and its subsequent fall-out. No less problematic, if much less certain, is how feminists took on matters relating to caste. Gandhi's campaigns against untouchability during the 1920s certainly played a direct role in shaping women's organisations' views on caste. Having also been instrumental in nominating Muthulakshmi Reddy to the Madras legislative council, a women's organisation like the WIA was, for many years, positively disposed towards reserved seats for women. Gandhi's fast against granting special electorates to the Depressed Classes on September 20, 1932 following the announcement of the Ramsay MacDonald Award a month before, which was described as his fast "against untouchability", was not just widely reported in the journal of the WIA *Stree Dharma* but broke their own demand for reserved seats and nominations. Right up to Gandhi's fast, the WIA maintained that although universal adult franchise was the real answer,

for a transition period it suggests the reservation of 20% of the seats in the new and enlarged legislatures and proposes that they be voted for by proportional representation by the newly elected members of Council from a panel of names sent forward by the officially recognized associations of women (cited in Forbes 1979: 14).

But once Gandhi's fast began, "this was the last time such a possibility [by the WIA] was entertained". This meant that women's self-sacrifice of their interests, as proof of their commitment to Gandhi, was achieved by a less visible denial—the political rights to representation of the "Untouchables" or "Depressed Classes". Indeed, it is hard to say to what extent women's groups were aware just how such political rights were in fact being articulated, and especially of Ambedkar's own demands and representations to the British. By 1930, Ambedkar stated that the depressed

people whom he represented needed political power, which could only be gained within the framework of an independent India. His demand at the First Round Table Conference was for a unitary state, adult suffrage, and reserved seats and special safeguards for untouchables. Historians of the Dalit movement like Gail Omvedt have asked themselves why, of all things, the Second Conference and the Ramsay MacDonald Award of separate electorates should have developed specifically into Gandhi's opposition to Ambedkar, and not to the other minorities, the federal power accorded to the princely states, or, for that matter, to any of the other interest groups—landlords, commerce and industry, universities and labour—who were all granted special representative rights under the terms of the Award. "Of all the participants in the first conference, Ambedkar's position (adult suffrage and reserved seats) was actually closest to the nationalist one" (Omvedt 1994: 169).

"Those who speak of political rights of untouchables do not know how Indian society is constructed," Gandhi declared to the Minorities Committee. "So far as Hinduism is concerned, separate electorates would simply vivisection and disrupt it" (Sitaramayya 1935: 909). Indeed, Gandhi went on, it would be preferable if the Untouchables converted to Islam or Christianity. An adequate answer for Gandhi's exclusive confrontation with Ambedkar must therefore account for the unique constructions of the "Hindu", not just for explicitly Hindu organisations, but within the Congress itself. A complex mix of the politics of numbers which required proof of the numerical supremacy of Hindus at any cost; an inability to look upon untouchability as anything more than a social problem, a "blight" that upper castes must purify; and Gandhi's own reconception of Hinduism and reformed caste relations as an "indivisible family", one for which he was ready to lay down his life—all of these might go some way towards recognising why the politics of caste was so especially threatening. In any event, after a four day fast, a compromise had to be reached and the Poona Pact was signed, involving a two-tier system of voting between untouchables and a general electorate.

It is quite true that principal opposition to the Communal Award on the part of women's organisations was to granting separate electorates

on religious grounds (which was not Gandhi's problem). On matters of caste and untouchability, members of women's organisations showed, at best, limited acknowledgement but little understanding. In her Note to the Second Franchise Committee on the eve of the Communal Award in 1932, Radhabai Subbaroyan (who had earlier been in favour of reserved seats for women) made special mention of the problem of the Depressed Classes. In her view, the practice of untouchability was now steadily diminishing thanks to education and reform. Therefore, while she was in "favour of these classes having representation, this could be secured by methods which will accelerate their absorption into the mass of the population rather than separation." She added further that more women electors from the Depressed Classes should be included, "The mistake made in other communities by allowing one sided progress only, amongst men, should be avoided". (IFC vol. 1, p. 201). In his response, Ambedkar emphasized that it would be a mistake to think that untouchability was vanishing – it continued to live on, notionally if not literally, and would continue to do so until its basis in the 'steel frame' of Hindu religion was eradicated. Since the British term "Depressed Classes" did not capture their untouchable status as 'unfit for social intercourse', a better term might be the 'exterior' or 'excluded' castes. Whatever special interest groups (such as women or labour) ought to be included in the terms of the Award, this should not be at the expense of the proportion of seats being demanded by the Depressed Classes, he also added.

Such occasional and partial recognition notwithstanding, the actual directions taken by women's organisations as early as 1933 had severe repercussions for issues of caste. In the AIWC meeting of 1933 in Madras they agreed, in spite of some opposition, to a resolution to remove all special schools based on religion or caste, as well as any mention of caste in application forms – this, in a region known for the efforts of the non-Brahmin movement to provide concessions to under-represented groups (Sinha 2006 : 243). Questions about how many depressed class women were part of the organisation were evaded, and the term itself was removed from the AIWC Constitution, all in the name of abstract equality. Historians of the Dalit movement Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar have provided extended accounts of Dalit women's participation in Ambedkar's movement. But there

are no records of common platforms with the major women's organisations. By 1936, in the wake of the Government of India Act of 1935 with separate electorates and reserved seats, Dalit women's organisations in the Central Provinces demanded that one of the three legislative seats for women be reserved for « a woman from the untouchable community » (Moon and Pawar trans 2008 : 137). If Ambedkar did not wish to jeopardise the fragile conditions of Dalit enfranchisement by bringing in further conditionalities to include women, there are no signs that this idea of a sub-quota within the seats reserved for women found any takers from women's organisations. The only reference to the AIWC in the Pawar and Moon account of Dalit women's political participation is to an incident of discrimination, when a Hindu member at an AIWC meeting in Nagpur in 1938 arranged separate seating for the Dalit delegates at meal time. (Ibid. : 139) Such incidents apart, adherence to formal equality was already producing outcomes that marked women's organisations as effectively upper caste.

By 1935, when the Government of India Act was finalised, the distinct careers of the notion of the depressed classes (which continued to be the preferred term of the British), political concepts of "backwardness" which were evolving in Mysore and Madras; and the pivotal question of "untouchability" as a unique disability and form of social exclusion, came together when the need to draw up a "Schedule" or list of castes was required for "special" electoral representation. As a number of commentators have pointed out, the selection of the "Scheduled Castes" as they came to be called, proceeded without the benefit of a connotative definition, since no single criterion could be found that worked for the whole country. Even though leaders like Ambedkar kept the focus of untouchability on those who suffer exclusion at the hands of other Hindu castes, questions of economic backwardness and lack of education were also drawn upon, especially for regions of the north and east (Galanter 1984). By the time the Constitution was ratified in 1950, the principle that was applied came to rest on groups which had historically suffered both hostile discrimination and disadvantage, and for whom, three kinds of preference were envisaged: special electoral representation in the legislatures, preferential employment, and preferential treatment. (Interestingly enough, the listing from 1935 was

to remain more or less stable in the post-independence period, with only minor additions after that).

After the ratification of the Schedules for specific castes and tribes in the Constitution, the numerous pre-independence struggles and coalitions in the names of the “Backward classes or communities”, “Non-Brahmins”, “depressed classes” and so on, underwent a major change, to re-emerge as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the language of the state. As the name suggests, this was a residual category, meant to designate those groups (apart from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) who were nevertheless deemed to be in need of special treatment.

### **The Constitutional Resolution of the Women’s Question**

In comparison to the trajectories of the political rights of minorities, backward classes and the “untouchables”, the direction taken by women’s rights from the 1930s to 1950, was significantly different. We have already seen how the Communal Award not only fundamentally affected women’s organisations’ understanding of caste and communalism, but stiffened the resolve of many to hold onto “equal rights”, in spite of the costs. In the years leading up to and following the Government of India Act of 1935, women’s organisations were successively betrayed. The first to do so were the British, who refused to provide any declaration of fundamental rights or non-discrimination on the basis of sex for holding public office in the 1935 Act. Some modifications were made regarding qualifications for voting in different provinces, (wifehood remaining primary), which expanded male and female electorates to forty-three percent and nine percent respectively. Forty-one reserved seats for women were allocated. In the next elections of 1937, a total of fifty-six women candidates entered the legislatures, out of which only ten came from general seats and five were nominations. Women’s organisations therefore felt specifically betrayed by the Congress: If it was Gandhi who had been the most vociferous advocate against reserved seats for women, the Congress now had little room for any women candidates other than those who were staunch party workers in any case. Finally, for all their efforts to enlarge the number of women voters, “there was no necessary

corollary between the politicisation of women and the actual advancement of their cause” (Nair 1996: 140).

Eleven women were nominated to the Constituent Assembly to participate in its deliberations on the ultimate finalisation of the Constitution. According to Vina Mazumdar,

there is little doubt that it was the willing and spontaneous participation of women in the civil disobedience movements rather than the radical ideas of sexual equality that finally tilted the balance in favour of political equality between the sexes in the Congress Party and later in the Constituent Assembly (1979: xvi).

As she notes, the “Constitution fathers” never debated the issue, nor did they realise the social and political implications of what they were granting. Partha Chatterjee, as we have seen, argued that the question was settled much earlier, on the grounds of “cultural” not “political” nationalism, which enabled middle class “modern” women’s entry into the public sphere by domesticating the nationalist project within the home.

I have been suggesting that the issue of women’s rights was both more complex and more significant than either of these two views indicate. Conflicts over the relationship between “social” issues and the abstract universal language of political rights “irrespective of caste, creed, race or sex” took concrete form in the protracted problem of reserved seats. Women’s organisations were caught in contradictory proclamations of the “unity of all women”, the sameness of their condition, and so on, even as they effectively “reserved” for themselves—urban, educated, modern and progressive—the right to represent Indian womanhood. They aspired to unity in the name of a collectivity of women that would not be divided by community affiliation. These claims had to be maintained, however, in the face of the loss of Muslim women’s membership, and the effective negation of distinct political rights to the “untouchables”. The period of political nationalism thus saw multifaceted processes of avowal and disavowal—the celebration of a convoluted femininity by Gandhi, the claim to representativeness by dominant women’s organisations, and the emergence of women as model bearers of political unity and universal citizenship,

all of which were consolidated through definitive, if not always explicitly understood processes of exclusion.

The Constituent Assembly was not the place, however, where women members discussed these contradictions. On the contrary, they appeared eager to declare their opposition to any special privileges in the form of reservations. Thus Renuka Ray, for instance, referred to the Government of India Act of 1935, where “the social backwardness of women had been sought to be exploited in the same manner as the backwardness of so many sections in this country by those who wanted to deny its freedom” (CAD 1947: 668). Reservations prevented women from standing from general constituencies, and constituted “an impediment to our growth and an insult to our very intelligence and capacity” (CAD 1947: 669). It is worth noting that this intervention took place “spontaneously”, so to say, in the context of a discussion over requests for the modification of territorial representation for the remote and sparsely populated hill tribes of Assam. Vallabhai Patel took full advantage of the situation, regretting, as he put it, that men had not yet come up to the standard of women: “Let us hope that nothing will be provided in this Constitution which would make exception in favour of men [in a situation] where women object [to similar exceptions being made in their favour]” (CAD 1947: 674).

It is well known that women participated, and often in large numbers, in those strands of the national movement and in other movements that placed them in opposition to the British. At many moments in the nationalist movement itself engagement with colonial processes of political devolution was seen as nothing less than co-option and a deflection from swaraj. Gandhi himself viewed women’s political role within the frames of non-cooperation and openly opposed women’s active interest in obtaining voting rights and pursuing social reform with the colonial state. But even those members within women’s organisations who were inspired Gandhians chose not to agree with him here. Rather they struggled over women’s rights and social reform by placing extraordinary weight on the mechanisms made available by the colonial state, in spite of all the distortions and compromises they encountered. They opposed reserved seats because it was viewed as a betrayal of their aims for political unity, not because they did not wish to

be included as participants within the legislative process. How then did matters stand when a new generation took up women's issues in the vastly altered decades of the 1970s?

### **After Independence : Towards Equality and the Politics of Autonomy**

When the government appointed Committee on the Status of Women in India were asked to look into the condition of women across all dimensions of life, the question of women's political rights appears to have been one of the more difficult issues they tackled. The chapter on political status is amongst the shortest in the entire report, and one that comes quite late in the order of themes and issues – being preceded by chapters on demography, society and culture, the law, economic participation and educational development. Was this an indication of some uncertainty on the part of the Committee, or at least a view that this aspect of women's status could only come into its own when social, economic, legal, and educational rights have been given their due? The chapter spoke of 'regressions from the time of the freedom movement' and a sense of disillusionment among the women they met. 'Though women do not numerically constitute a minority, they are beginning to acquire the features of one' (Sharma and Sujaya eds 2012 : 301) and one of the reasons lay in their low levels of participation in the political process, especially as electoral candidates.

Interestingly, this was the only chapter that openly acknowledged different stances among its members, and their disagreement centred on the question of reservations for women. Even though the idea of reservations emerged as a demand from among many of the women they met to solicit their views, the position taken in the recommendations declared that reservations would be a 'retrograde step' from the equality conferred by the Constitution. Such a move would narrow women's outlook, isolate them from men, fallaciously segregate their political interests from their economic, social and other needs, precipitate similar demands from other groups and so threaten national integration. In a now famous formulation, women cannot be treated like a minority group – "women are not a community, they are a category". (Ibid., p.303-304).

There are strong echoes here of the positions taken by their pre-independence sisters, even though the moment could not be more different – three decades of independence under liberal democracy with universal adult franchise. It is therefore all the more remarkable to listen to those who openly opposed this view, to the point of wishing to put it on record. In their Note of Dissent, Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar begin by openly acknowledging the source of their generation’s discomfort with reservations – its association with caste. ‘Reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were nothing less than a colonial legacy that would institutionalise India’s backwardness.’ It is not entirely clear as to why and how their understanding changed, especially when this conception was shared by so many, including the small number of elected women whom they interacted with. Perhaps a major push came from their critical appraisal of women politicians, both in terms of their narrow and elite class base and their lack of awareness about women’s issues. Quoting from the studies of women in the legislatures undertaken for the Towards Equality Report, they said that

compared to their male counterparts, the background of the women legislators is considerably narrower and represents mainly the dominant upper strata of society... Their restricted origin apart, Indian women legislators suffer from other inadequacies. A considerable number of them... have not worked their way up the political system from actual work among the people, but have been drafted into the system at various levels because of their contacts with persons in positions of power and influence. Our discussions with some individual members of this group revealed that they lacked enough awareness and understanding of the basic problems affecting the majority of women in our society. (in Mazumdar ed. 1979 : 364)

Therefore, far from creating isolated pockets, reservations would bring in, Mazumdar and Sarkar believed, a broader and more diverse group of women (as was the case among men) with a better chance of representing women and their causes. Somewhere along the way they registered the principle that ‘the application of the theoretical principle of equality in the context of unequal situations only intensifies inequalities’.

Towards Equality was produced in 1974, at a time of unprecedented social and political mobilisation across the country. By 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had imposed a National State of Emergency that forced many groups to go underground but also imprisoned many more, including women who were politically active in a range of struggles and political formations. It is not accidental that new women's groups were formed in the wake of the lifting of the Emergency in 1977, taking up issues that proclaimed the rise of a fresh phase of a women's movement in India. In ways that have yet to be adequately analysed, this movement produced a new understanding of what it meant to be political as women, one that found its most frequent expression through the notion of autonomy. While the term has come to acquire many meanings over the years, such as autonomy from the State, from funding, especially from foreign sources, and the need for women only organisational spaces, its critical early deployment emerged in relation to political parties. One of the first new women's organisations to be established during this period in 1974 was the Progressive Women's Organisation (POW) in Hyderabad with direct links to the CPI (M-L), which suffered the direct repression of the Emergency. It is here that women members sought to reconstitute themselves afresh through the new language of autonomy once the Emergency was lifted. (K. Lalita 2008) The point I am trying to make is not that such women ceased to identify with a left political orientation. Rather they sought new political definitions for themselves as women's organisations that went beyond what Ilina Sen has called 'a space within the struggle' or prior assumptions of being at best 'women's wings'. This means that autonomy was not just a principle for those groups who did not wish to identify with existing political formations or parties but also for those who did have such links. (See Omvedt 2008)

The reason to dwell on the question of autonomy in this discussion is to indicate how remote the domain of electoral politics was to this fresh upsurge of the political in the 1970s and 80s. The idea of reservations within the parliamentary system is therefore quite simply nowhere on the horizon. Even in terms of priorities, left identified women's groups were engaging in mass based work in rural and urban areas, and not preparing possible candidates for a career in electoral politics. When Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah reflect on problems of autonomy and organisational

politics among the new women's groups during the 1970s and 80s, whether identified with left politics or not, their discussions cover all manner of issues ranging from organisational structures and modes of leadership, to styles of functioning and financial support (even considering the past role of business houses). But the question of entering the electoral process is not even considered, let alone the possibility of reservations for women. Critiques of national development and of violence that were so central to this phase of feminism in India certainly involved a protracted and direct engagement with the state, but did not lead to demands to inhabit the state from within through election into its legislative structures. While positions and agendas differed across groups, this was not a time therefore when the kinds of arguments put forward by Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar in their Note of Dissent had any significant takers in the women's movement. In other words, the time frame that I have been designating as the national frame was one where the Note of Dissent constituted a genuine outlier – the era of development saw little feminist investment in the idea of their electoral presence.

What changed in the intervening decades such that, hot on the heels of the seventy-third and seventy-fourth Constitutional Amendments in early 1993 that brought one-third reservations for women in local rural and urban bodies, a similar demand was raised at the state and national levels by 1996? Nivedita Menon has persuasively shown that while there has definitely been a shift in the trajectory of the women's movement, such that women have emerged as a significant force in Indian politics, this alone cannot account for the degree of support that the new call for reserving one-third of all seats in Parliament and the state legislatures for women is now receiving. The feminist stance in favour of such reservations has tied in with a very different development—an upper caste unease if not opposition to the rise of backward caste parties in the last decades, who have visibly altered the composition of parliament and the nature of electoral politics (Menon 2000/2008).

## **The Post-national Conflict between Gender and Caste**

It is actually not immediately obvious as to how, in the climate of the 1990s that I have called post-national, a more visible women's movement should, for the first time in its entire history, have become more supportive of reservations in politics. One answer would lie in the larger rethinking about reservations that emerged after the anti-Mandal agitations of 1990, when the move to implement reservations for OBCs in government service produced a violent backlash on the part of large sections of the middle classes, who protested in the language of equality and merit. For significant sections of the women's movement (and many other movements) this was a difficult moment that demanded fundamental interrogations of their own assumptions about formal equality, and the consequent invisibilisation of caste. New solidarities with Dalit mobilisation were to develop in different parts of the country. It is indeed a curious fact that although Mandal was all about OBCs this moment has been overwhelmingly linked with sensitization to questions of caste in the form of the state of play of reservations (especially in higher education) for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

But these were also the very years when the State itself was undergoing unprecedented transformations. For a movement that had been born in the mode of critique and protest over the failures of the developmental state and its Constitutional claims to equality, the new economic policies of the 1990s and rise of aggressively communal political parties with hegemonic aspirations to creating Hindu Rashtra heralded a state formation that was to all intents and purposes even less amenable, if not hostile to feminist ideals. Why then would a movement wish to jeopardise its principles of autonomy at such a juncture by supporting women's entry into the political process via reservations? The question should probably be posed from the other side. Though not often explicitly stated, it is precisely at such a time that some sections of the movement were more open to rethinking autonomy in relation to institutions, including political parties and the institutions of the state. It is not accidental, therefore, that this was during the 1990s when the Note of Dissent penned by Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar two decades earlier was to gain a fresh audience, and not only from those with closer

links to left political parties, but from many more who were drawn into the new discourses and practices of governance.

This complex moment becomes all the more remarkable when one recalls the form that the opposition to reservations for women took from 1996 onwards. Right from when it was first tabled, the main opposition to reservations for women in parliament was expressed in terms of sub-quotas for women from the OBCs and Muslims, and additional quotas for Dalit women. OBC leaders put forth the argument that a blanket reservation policy in favour of women would bring in privileged, upper caste women, thus effectively reducing the number of OBC seats—hence the need for sub-quotas. In other words, despite misleading media images, there was not a simple opposition between feminist support and patriarchal opposition. Vocal political dissent invoked the interests of already disadvantaged castes and communities; opposition to reservations for women as such emerged from prominent individuals—both men and women, notably from within the media and corporate world. As Nivedita Menon pointed out, the reference of the Samajwadi Party leader Sharad Yadav to the ‘short-haired women’ who would take over Parliament is indeed a misogynist and sexist stereotype, but this neither detracts from the argument behind it, nor carries any implication that ‘all support for women’s reservations comes from those who contest and reject such stereotypes’. (p. 166) Indeed, I would also add that the media’s eagerness to demonise backward caste and Muslim politicians who opposed the Bill also obscured the unspoken patriarchies at work in every political party. There is no other way to explain the low presence of women candidates among political parties in favour of women’s reservations in all the national and state elections since 1996.

Compare the turnaround among sections of feminists from the language of formal equality and abstract citizenship, with the trajectories of caste based reservations after independence. The special case of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes—for whom reservations in higher education, government services and legislatures became part of the Constitutional mandate—was treated as an exception to the fundamental right to equality. It must not be forgotten that the actual form that reservations through quotas took represented a loss for Dalit leaders like Ambedkar, who had

campaigns for a form of “power sharing” in the nation. As already alluded to, the special electorates whereby Dalits as a group would be able to elect their own leaders in proportion to their population had to be modified after the Poona Pact. Moreover, as Anand Teltumbde has pointed out, the Constitution did not sufficiently acknowledge the substantive forms of discrimination and disenfranchisement that these groups experienced over history, relying instead on the language of their “backwardness” (2010: 13). Meanwhile, the residual category of the OBCs, composing all the so-called lower castes who were “socially and educationally backward” was also constitutionally notified, but left to the respective states for further action. It is from amongst these castes that a new class of political leaders emerged, first in southern India where anti-Brahman movements had a long history and by the 1970s across north India as well. Drawing upon their rural dominance to gain entry into electoral politics, these castes clearly changed the composition of Parliament significantly and diminished the prior hold of upper castes in the political sphere. Since the 1990s, OBCs also gained new forms of reservations—first in government service and more recently in higher education, often referred to as Mandal I and Mandal II.

As already mentioned, there was never any opposition to the passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments which brought one-third women into local self government (with primary attention to the village panchayats and much less interest in the municipal corporations). Since 2004 the proportion of seats reserved for women at the local levels has been further raised to 50%. One way of interpreting this consensus at the lowest level of decentralisation would be that it could be accommodated within the larger project of ‘good governance’ in the neo-liberal era; women’s participation at this bottom tier of the political process was therefore widely perceived not so much as political as welfarist. Even though there are plenty of accounts of the kinds of local political forces that elected women in the panchayats have had to contend with, and of the differential role of political parties, the larger frame remains that of development. Stalwarts of the autonomous women’s movement like Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, reflecting on the experience of reservations at the local level in the state of Maharashtra in 1999, were able to overcome their misgivings about the possible co-option of the women’s movement through local electoral

politics by pointing to its democratic potential—but they are among those who nonetheless concluded that its extension to the state or national levels should wait (Gandhi and Shah 2008).

But others, as we have noted, saw a new need to address the low presence of women in India's legislatures. So much so, that in place of the language and frames of formal equality and an opposition to special rights, there were now unprecedented references to patriarchy as a structure of oppression and exclusion. In spite of different positions in relation to the actual mechanisms required to improve women's participation in the electoral process, including rejections of the existing Bill in favour of alternatives, there has been widespread endorsement of the untenability of the present situation. On the other hand, why has the demand for sub-quotas, with a few exceptions, been largely rejected? What does this imply about the category of "women" in India today? It is tempting to compare this situation with that in other countries, given the global concern over women's low political presence. One might look at the trajectory taken by the movement for parity in France in the 1990s, where the pro-parity position took the form of arguing that parity was emphatically not a quota, but an acknowledgement of the universal nature of the division of the sexes. Parity for women was thus contrasted to 'other' kinds of quotas based on race, ethnicity, class, immigration status and so on. The work of Anne Philips on the 'politics of presence' has also been drawn upon. In her critique of the arguments of Anne Philips, Menon sees a problem in Philip's very distinction between a politics of presence and a politics of ideas, and with her argument that women's political presence should not require any justification (such as representing women as a group) other than their presence in society. According to Menon, this leads to the untenable position of treating women as a pre-political, natural category. Rather, women are not a neutral category—"there are not 'women' who might be right wing or left wing, white or black—there are people who may respond to different kinds of political mobilisation, as 'white', 'left wing', or as 'women' (Menon 2008: 176). Creating the category of 'women' is therefore the goal of a feminist politics. The question then, becomes, are those in favour of reservations for women in contemporary India making similar arguments about the natural status of women as a category?

I think Menon's argument that there are only 'people' who respond to different kinds of mobilisation in different contexts needs to be rearticulated somewhat differently. After all, we are dealing with a moment in the 1990s when reservations emerged as a response to a new perception of the unacceptability of women's marginality from politics. Furthermore, it is only in liberal theory that there are 'people'; socially it is men who are 'people' while women's subordination includes being named as women, if in multiple and even contradictory ways. Similarly, it is upper castes in contemporary India who get to be casteless, while lower castes and dalits are consumed by their caste identity. This is why gender, caste, race etc. are not internally composed of symmetrical categories but work through profoundly asymmetrical forms of identification. It is for a feminist politics to expose the social mechanisms of these unequal and interlocking structures at specific historical moments. What is definitely true is that there is no natural link between such social mechanisms and their politicisation, between, say, women in all their multiplicity in the world and women in all their political potential.

This is why it is so crucial to track with some care this specific moment in the history of the women's movement when reservations for women have been welcomed by so many. There is little doubt that much of the new non-feminist support for a blanket reservation for women comes from a readiness to see the caste composition altered away from its current lower caste (male) preponderance. But what is harder to fathom is the seeming intransigence of many progressive and feminist groups in coming to grips with the interlocking nature of hierarchy and its patriarchal consequences. Rather than see the problem as one of working with a pre-political understanding of women, it appears more as one of working with a uniform and selective notion of patriarchy and its exclusions. There is the further problem of inconsistency even in the deployment of patriarchy. Thus, for instance, OBC male leaders have been blamed, over and over again, for not fielding more women candidates. This is why their demand for sub-quotas should be dismissed and only treated as a ploy. Such an argument is inconsistent for at least two reasons. First of all, since no political parties have been fielding more women candidates it is unclear why OBC men should be singled out here. Secondly, it can be argued that patriarchies are

diverse and, indeed, unequal. For all the heterogeneity of the category of OBC, OBC women are particularly trapped within low levels of education, the absence of property rights especially in land, and powerful ideologies of domesticity. Are these not sufficient reason to struggle not just on their behalf but for their greater political presence? In other words, a plausible feminist argument could well be made for the need for sub-quotas for OBC women, but these have been few and far between. (Menon 2000; Raman 1999, Omvedt 2000) The absence of OBC women from this debate has also been noteworthy, with the exception of rare figures like Uma Bharti from the BJP , who in 1996 was willing to question her BJP party's own position against sub-quotas, though she spoke up only for OBCs not for Muslims.

Missing therefore has been a larger political understanding of the inequalities of caste and community that continue to divide all social groups, including women themselves. As recently as 2010 when there was a sudden flurry of activity as the Bill made it as far as the Rajya Sabha, women leaders—including an otherwise reticent Sonia Gandhi—were quite articulate when describing the various excuses” used by all political parties to marginalise women and clearly outlined the structural features of the electoral process that conspire to consign most women to the “unwinnable” category. Why, then, are the same women unable to see that caste and community will play a central role in shaping the profile of the “winnable” woman candidate of the future? This is largely because existing modes of thinking appear to be shaped by the political fortunes of men of different communities and castes rather than an appreciation of the effects of unequal patriarchies. So, if OBC men have muscled their way into politics, so can their women.

It is important to tease apart the OBC case because it has proved particularly sticky. There is no question that OBC men have entered parliament in sufficient numbers without the need for reservations, much to the consternation of others. However, the whole point is that a system of reservations for women (however it may be designed) is going to witness an unprecedented situation of a vast increase in the number of women candidates. A frequent argument has been that once such a blanket reservation is in place, OBC men can field OBC women wherever seats are now reserved

for women. There is no allowance for the altered dynamics of a situation in which new women are going to be fielded, and, that too, against each other. More tellingly, it is evident from the location of the speaker, that he or she has no particular interest in expanding OBC women's political presence. The fortunes of OBC women are thus consigned to political expediency and not recognised as being an excluded group in their own right.

Because the fortunes of women continue to be tied to that of their men, it is only in the case of Muslims that there has been a very belated recognition in some quarters such as the CPM of the declining status of the Muslim community over the decades and their low representation in politics. However, even though "women's reservation in its present form may or may not increase the participation of Muslim women in legislatures", this is still not seen as a sufficient reason to oppose the existing form of the women's reservation bill. Instead, "a broad based consensus in favour of the women's reservation bill today can only facilitate a similar agreement on Muslim reservations tomorrow. And when that happens, thirty-three percent of those seats will also get reserved for Muslim women" (Bose 2010: 11; see also Hussain 2010).

It is also noteworthy that in the prominent alternatives to the present Bill, the question of the need for sub-quotas is seen as redundant. In the alternative Bill proposed by Madhu Kishwar et al, (Kishwar 2008; Narayan et al 2008) political parties are to be forced by the Election Commission to put up one-third candidates of women (rather than by reserving constituencies for them). Critics have been quick to point out that this method is both undemocratic in the role being granted to the Election Commission, and is further not likely to yield significant results as women can be fielded in weak constituencies. In the alternate Bill Kishwar and others proposed, it is up to such parties to decide where and whether they wish to nominate OBC, minority or other women in particular constituencies "depending on electoral advantage". This means that should there be no electoral advantage then no such women would presumably be nominated. In another alternative proposing double member constituencies (one woman one man), once again any further considerations are seen as unnecessary (Kishwar 2008).

## **Concluding Remarks**

Unlike in the pre-independence era, therefore, when leaders of the women's movement contrasted the stance of a united womanhood against the claims of caste and minority groups by opposing reservations as a whole, today we are seeing a new stance in favour of reservations for women. But this is being accompanied by a marked opposition to opening up this category through sub-quotas for OBCs or Muslims. In a strange sense, then, a complete turnaround on the question of reservations for women has nonetheless refigured caste and community identities as a problem. According to one particularly pessimistic commentator, Anand Teltumbde, the failure of quotas for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes to produce an effective dalit or adivasi voice in the Indian Parliament has not been sufficiently noted in the first place. In place of Ambedkar's desire for separate electorates, the existing system has only yielded candidates under the control of their respective parties. He believes that much the same will happen with a quota for women—that in the present era of coalition politics, large parties will seek to field women in considerable number in a 'feudal' mode so as to retain greater hold on the elected population. This is why smaller parties of the Dalit and backward castes fear that such reservations will erode their base. (Teltumbde 2010)

Those who are less pessimistic about the final outcome of a reservations policy for women, must ask themselves what precisely would be historic about bringing a critical mass of women into electoral politics. Popular expectations about women bringing in a "cleaner" government untouched by male power and pelf—or about women's interests being better represented by women—may not so simply be fulfilled. But in the final analysis, if we go back to the original vision of leaders like B.R Ambedkar, what is at stake is nothing less than power sharing and participation at all levels of the electoral process. The women's movement may have moved considerably from its prior opposition to the idea of reservations, but it remains to be seen as to how open its claims upon the political can yet become to the inequality of patriarchies.

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