

When will the women's reservation in legislatures becomes a reality?

Dr N Bhaskara Rao
Primepost, September 22, 2023

Could be implemented right away if political leaders genuinely wants it to happen. But if it is as per the Bill passed in the Lok Sabha and going by the Minister's stated plan while proposing the bill, women's reservation could become a reality after two next general elections or after 2035. (Even Home Minister had stated that implementation will be **only after 2029**). But, as per the provision in the Bill, assuming it will be passed in Rajya Sabha and at least by half of the states will approve the Bill before (?) 2023, will expire as an Act in 2038. Why a fifteen year life span to the Act is prescribed is not explained or evident from any of the speeches in the Parliament. Nor why women's representation cannot be immediately implemented without linking to next population Census and delimitation exercise of the constituencies there after.

The Prime Minister had reiterated in the House Government's commitment to making a law for women's reservation. It is good. But he should set example by implementing women's representation without waiting for the Act and its implementation whenever that could be. If women representation has to go up to 33 percent from much less than fifteen percent now and hitherto, it is up to the political party leadership to rectify and take measures to catch up, without waiting for an Act. And even one leader taking initiative becomes a good precedent even if other parties do not go along with. What holds going beyond claiming credit for reintroducing the Bill for women's reservation, leaders should demonstrate their resolve. Leaders should not again miss this opportunity now.

For the Prime Minister this Bill should mean a double opportunity to realise what he has been advocating. This Bill not only fulfils long cherished desire and requirement for deepening democracy, it will also a right initiative to meet two excuses for "one election" idea. That is election expenditure and improving efficiency of governments and expediting development. For, the women's reservation invokes three distinct potential. **First**, bettering representation of people, making Governments inclusive and programmes participative. **Second**, ending the grip of certain families in one third of constituencies in the country, their continued hold to contest election after

election. **Third**, with more women candidates in contest in more constituencies the poll heat and expenditure is likely to become rationale.

What is the rationale for linking reservation of seats to population census and delimitation. It is to ascertain proportion or percent of women, it is common knowledge that this ratio is invariably between 45 and 55 percent. But then the idea of reservation is to ensure and make it obligatory. What should be pertinent is to see that every constituency is women represented at least once every ten or fifteen years. This obviously implies rotation rather than going by actual numbers or ratio of census every ten years. Every constituency should have the benefit of having a women representation. This way no monopoly or domination is possible and wait for census and lose further time to implement women's reservation.

Now that there are elections to some state assemblies immediately, political leaders in power and outside should compete to nominate more women and demonstrate their resolve to women's representation. There are good number of women activists in the country at the grass roots, affiliated to one or other political party or even outside, who could be even better representatives in the legislatures.

There is no indication neither in the Bill nor in its presentation in the parliament of taking cognizance with an introspection of endeavours spread over fifty years not just in empowering women but in giving them their due role in policy making at different levels. What has been the experience for example of 1988 legislation providing 33 percent reservation for women in panchayats and Nagar Palika. There were several research studies in different parts of the country with insights on implementation of women's reservation. For example of some states having 50 percent reservation for women in local bodies. In 1985, NTR in AP viewed that without providing equal right to women in property, legal reservation will not make a difference. That is women's reservation will make a difference when preceded by certain empowering provisions and practices. Since a couple of state had recently completed delimitation of constituencies, can this legal provision be tried out there instead of waiting for ten or more years to demonstrate this new Bill.

While supporting the Bill many opposition members in Parliament wondered why its implementation is linked to census and delimitation of constituencies. Rahul Gandhi even described the exercise from a larger perspective of "transfer of power to people" as a continuing process. Which, according to him, the reservation for women should specify further reservation to OBC women more specifically so that representation and participation becomes real.

RSS Chief Mohan Bhagat took initiative last year, October 5, 2022, on the eve of Vijayadashami by having a lady as the chief guest at Nagpur, first time in hundred years. Mohan Bhagat even reminded that without active role of women no development is possible and they should be actually empowered. Even Chief Justice of India lamented last November 11 that women are not getting right place even in the judiciary and that men dominance is continuing. Between 1999 and 2019, there were 236 women members in the Parliament against 2051 men members. These women members asked 1655 questions on agriculture against 29 questions that men members had asked. Even on health related women members had asked 1989 questions In the Parliament against 648 questions that men had asked during the period. This is only an example to remind that women are far more sensitive of realities of the country. I discussed this at length in my book last year in Telugu on women empowerment in villages. This being the trend, should we wait for another decade to give women what is long overdue and go by the opportunity of two more general elections to bring women's reservation Act to live. Do we need to ponder further?

(Dr N Bhaskara Rao is a research based policy analyst of longstanding)

<https://www.primepost.in/when-will-women-get-reservations/>