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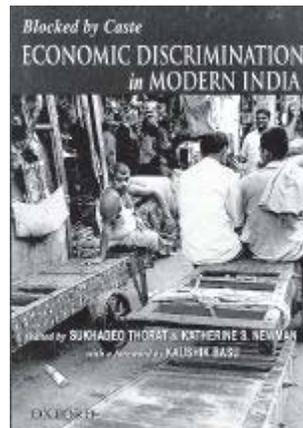
BOOK REVIEW

HINDU 9.3.10 BOOK REVIEW

Caste & the labour market

MADHURA SWAMINATHAN

Caste discrimination not only persists but has taken new forms and penetrated into new systems



BLOCKED BY CASTE, ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION IN MODERN INDIA: Edited by Sukhadeo Thorat, Katherine S. Newman; Oxford University Press, YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi-110001. Rs. 750.

This is an excellent volume — carefully-researched and eye-opening — on caste-based injustice in our society and economy. Now, while there is a literature that documents discrimination and the denial of civil liberties, there is very little understanding and research on the practice of caste discrimination in markets, notably in modern, urban and metropolitan settings, and in public institutions. This book takes up the challenge of understanding the latter by means of systematic research on

the question.

A useful four-fold classification of the types of discrimination is proposed by Thorat and Newman: complete exclusion, selective inclusion, unfavourable inclusion, and selective exclusion. Complete exclusion would occur, for example, if Dalits were totally excluded from purchase of land in certain residential areas. Selective inclusion refers to differential treatment or inclusion in markets, such as disparity in payment of wages to Dalit workers and other workers. Unfavourable inclusion or forced inclusion refers to tasks in which Dalits are incorporated based on traditional caste practices, such as bonded labour. Lastly, selective exclusion refers to exclusion of those involved in “polluting occupations” (such as leather tanning or sanitary work) from certain jobs and services.

Study in rural areas

There is a body of research on discrimination in rural areas and on the continuation of caste barriers to economic and social mobility in village India. There is a myth, however, that caste does not matter in the urban milieu and that, with the anonymity of the big city and with education and associated job and occupational mobility (assisted by affirmative action), traditional caste-based discriminatory practices disappear. This book explodes that myth in a set of chapters that focus on the formal labour market. These chapters use methodologies developed in the United States to study racial discrimination, and are written in collaboration with scholars from the U.S.

Thorat and Attewell ran an experiment to test caste discrimination in the urban labour market. For one year, researchers collected advertisements from leading English language newspapers for jobs in the private sector that required a university degree but no specialised skills. The researchers then submitted three false applications for each job. The applicants, all male, had the same or similar education qualification and

experience. One of them had a recognisable upper caste Hindu name, another a Muslim name and the third a distinctly Dalit name. The expected outcome was a call for interview or further screening.

An analysis of the outcomes, using regression methods, showed that, although there were an equal number of false applicants from three social groups, for every 10 upper caste Hindu applicants selected for interview, only six Dalits and three Muslims were chosen. Thus, in modern private enterprises (including IT), applicants with a typical Muslim or Dalit name had a lower chance of success than those with the same qualification and an upper caste Hindu name.

In another chapter, Jodhka and Newman report on detailed interviews with human resource managers of 25 large firms in New Delhi. All the managers insisted that hiring was solely on the basis of “merit,” and old practices such as hiring kin or members of the same community did not exist.

At the same time, every hiring manager said “family background” (including the educational level of parents) was critical in evaluating a potential employee. This is clearly discriminatory, for Dalit applicants may not have the same social and educational background as those from the upper castes. As the authors note, “one must take the profession of deep belief in meritocracy with a heavy dose of salt.”

These findings raise serious questions about allowing the corporate sector to monitor itself in respect of “inclusive employment” instead of making it abide by a policy of reservation.

Another set of chapters explores the patterns of discrimination in public services and public institutions, including in health care services, in schools, and in programmes of food security.

Sanghmitra Acharya gives a detailed account of various forms of discrimination experienced by Dalit children in gaining access to health

care from both private and public providers in rural Gujarat and Rajasthan. Untouchability was reported by children “seven out of 10 times” from “doctors, laboratory technicians, and registered medical practitioners”, and it was “more vigorously practised by pharmacists, ANMs and AWWs.” Geetha Nambissan writes of similar experiences of Dalit children in schools in rural and urban Rajasthan.

Or, take the case of the public distribution system (PDS). Fair price shops are owned privately or run by cooperatives or, in a few cases, by government. An analysis by Thorat and Lee, drawing on a survey of PDS outlets in 531 villages across five States, shows that there was discriminatory behaviour against Dalits by the PDS staff in respect of prices in 28 per cent of villages and in respect of quality in 40 per cent. In 26 per cent of the villages, dealers practised untouchability “by dropping goods from above into cupped Dalit hands below, so as to avoid ‘polluting contact’.”

As the authors say, to term the prevalence of such practices as merely the “phenomenon of caste discrimination remaining or still continuing or lingering” is to not understand that these practices are associated with new institutions set up after Independence and after the legal abolition of untouchability.

Penal action

An important and urgent policy implication of this set of studies is that the government needs to ensure that its own policies and programmes (such as the public distribution system or provision of mid-day meal to school children or of health care at Public Health Centres) are implemented in a non-discriminatory manner. Institutions (whether public, cooperative, or non-governmental) that accept government funds or implement government programmes must be held responsible and penalised if they practice untouchability.

A fair-price shop dealer is both a private individual and an arm of public

policy, and the severest action should be taken if he is found to discriminate against Dalits or those from other socially disadvantaged groups.

In conclusion, this book — based on careful and a methodologically innovative research — shows that caste discrimination not only persists but has taken new forms and penetrated into new systems and institutional structures. It also raises serious questions about patterns of economic development.

HINDU 9.3.10 BOOK REVIEW

Chaotic confusion

PREMA NANDAKUMAR



KRISHNA'S MANDALA BHAGAVATA — Religion and Beyond: D. Dennis Hudson; Oxford University Press, YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi-110001. Rs. 725.

Among the foreign Dravidologists of recent times, Dennis Hudson has a special place. He did have varied interests in south India's religious world (Christianity, Buddhism, Vaishnavism and Saivism), but his centre of literary research was the Vaikuntha Perumal temple in Kancheepuram. Krishna's Mandala is a posthumous publication edited by John Stratton Hawley, who is himself well known for his work on the bhakti poets of North India. Hawley's detailed introduction to the assorted essays presents Hudson's style of work in its proper “surround,” which had its accent on relating Hindu temples to the text of bhakti poetry. Hudson had linked the Vaikuntha Perumal temple to Tirumangai Azhvar's decad. A natural extension of this line of reasoning led him to study Andal's poems and the Srivilliputtur temple. The outcome of this research forms a substantial portion of the book.

Unfortunately, by falling in line with the style employed by some of his U.S. colleagues in the discipline of religion (Jeffrey Kirpal and Sarah Caldwell, among them), Hudson slips into the Serbonian Bog of Freudian analysis. “Historical interpretation of poetry necessarily requires conjecture,” he says. But how far should speculation be stretched? An eroticised view that marks his essays on Andal leads the

argument through mis-translations (the term 'cankam' used by Andal has nothing to do with classical Tamil) and a generous sprinkling of twilight terms like 'may be' and 'probably' till it ends up with an insinuation of incest: "I doubt, however, that Andal engaged in sexual rites with a man, although by having brought Vasudeva into his own through mantra, her acharya would have embodied Vasudeva Krishna for her." There is more to come in the detailed 'notes'! This Tantric (of the Vamachara mode) visualisation of the sadhana of bhakti reveals a chaotic confusion of categories in Hudson's critical paraphernalia, sometimes descending to the level of 'Kamasutranics' presented in slick academic diction.

Curious interpretation

The last verse of Andal's Tiruppavai gets a curious interpretation: "The fact that she speaks of correct recitation rather than of correct understanding of her poem as the criterion for receiving the Lord's grace suggests that the poem itself is meant to serve as a verbal means for approaching Narayana, a means adapted to the intellectual and spiritual limitations of people living in the present age." Apart from the misconception of the term tappaame (actually it is a suggestion, lest jumbling of the verse-order lead to misunderstanding the theme), it sounds rather crude to comment like this as though the intellectual and spiritual powers of Srivaishnavas are going downhill. After straining himself to explain the sitting, standing, and reclining images in the temples, Hudson takes his own elucidations to be authorised commentaries and breezily proceeds with, "given those meanings ...". A farce too droll to be described as Hudson's epiphany by Romila Thapar. Going through the book one gets plenty of educative titbits such as: "antagonism between brothers-in-law is a realistic fact in ordinary Tamil families." To borrow from Hudson's own words elsewhere in the book, Krishna's Mandala has no vijnana. And, that is the pity.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Vision 2010: a dangerous myopia

Amiya Kumar Bagchi

The Central budget of 2010-11 is a further step in the realisation of a vision of India vibrant with the income, wealth, saving, education and the entrepreneurial energy of the top 5-10 per cent of the population and the rest of Indians, serving that minority and surviving as barely literate, malnourished multitude.

With the accession of Rajiv Gandhi to power, a vision began to germinate. That vision was that of an India that would be vibrant with the entrepreneurial energy of the few, and the rest of the population serving those few with their labour.

The argument was that despite more than 40 years of independence, with slogans of a 'socialistic pattern of society,' Indians remained desperately poor. Most of them also remained actually illiterate or barely literate. The free market advocates backing Rajiv Gandhi thought that the energy of the business community could both enrich the rich and, through trickle-down effects, better the condition of ordinary people. The Central budget of 2010-11 is a further step towards the implementation of that vision.

Look at the successes of the budget: the professional middle class is happy with the cuts in taxes collected from it. The business community, including foreign investors, is happy, because of further privatisation of public assets by which the Finance Minister proposes to raise Rs. 25,000 crore, because of the looming privatisation of many operations of the Indian Railways, whose kitty is nowhere near what it should be for even partial implementation of the projects announced by the Railway

Minister, because the FDI path would be further smoothed and because licences would be issued for fresh private banks. Never mind if they fail as the Global Trust Bank did, the government will pick up the bill directly or indirectly, in accordance with its earlier record and the recent practice in the United States and Britain where banks failed but bankers remained prosperous. The Indian stock market responded positively, thus sending a message of welcome to the budget and generating profits for the bulls.

The Finance Ministers of the neoliberal Central government had earlier instituted the Fiscal Responsibility and Responsibility Management Act. This became their excuse to drastically cut down public investment and expenditure on the social sector. As soon as the global financial crisis hit India and the interests of the Indian rich demanded fiscal stimulus, the government overthrew fiscal orthodoxy and budget deficits soared. North Block policymakers can claim that the stimulus worked and the growth rates did not crash. The problem is with the content of that growth.

The Indian Constitution is only quasi-federal. Using and abusing the power of centralisation vested in it, the neoliberal policymakers have concentrated more and more financial powers in their hands, leaving the State governments with scantier resources to carry out their constitutional responsibilities of providing health care, education and rural livelihoods. The Central government has introduced an enormous number of Centrally-Sponsored Schemes and encroached on the States' jurisdiction. The Centre has handed over much of the financing to aid agencies of the U.S. and European Union governments, which have imposed fresh conditionalities on the States. The irony is that the more backward the regions are, the less able they are in fulfilling the conditions. Hence, the greater the deprivation of those areas.

The centralising tendency has been rampant in the field of education: the government has established Central universities not just in backward or

remote areas but in States with well-established universities, which continue to suffer stagnation because of lack of resources as well as political manipulation. Instead of learning the proper lessons from the often tardy responses of the over-centralised AICTE, NCERT or UGC, namely, that they need more and more assured supply of public money and must devolve some of their powers to regional bodies, the Ministry of Human Resource Development has decided, with the proposed National Commission on Higher Education and Research (NCHER) Bill to concentrate all powers in its single wise head. Not all wisdom resides in persons who tread the corridors of power in Delhi.

Moreover, the policymakers have proclaimed that they want the institutions to be of international standard, and that the scholars employed there will be judged according to international (read U.S. establishment) accreditation criteria. The idea that there is a single, uncontested international standard in economics, history, political science or sociology is laughable. In areas of technological education too, local adaptation is critical and 'international' standards will not provide the knowledge of the local cost-benefit conditions in the diversity that is India. How would 'international' standards be applied to scholars of Tamil or Bengali or Marathi literature, culture and history who do not write in English?

The acceptance of the NCHER Bill will have many unacceptable consequences. First, under an NCHER endowed with powers far exceeding its optimum span of control, decisions will be even slower in critical areas of education than they are now. Second, with a niggardly Central government, tuition fees will rise far beyond the paying capacity of poor students and, therefore, will exclude much larger numbers of meritorious but poor students from higher education. Third, the step will lead to further dilution of the quality of teaching in State universities, the further proliferation of private colleges doling out poor-quality education.

The Union Cabinet recently approved an agreement with the U.S. on 'Agricultural co-operation and food security.' Under an India-U.S. Agricultural Knowledge Initiative, multinational agribusiness firms such as Cargill and Monsanto can become members of the policymaking body. This is ironical since most of U.S. agribusinesses are conducted under the umbrella of huge government subsidies, while the current budget has cut the measly subsidies poor farmers enjoy in India. Indian agriculture has grown slowly in recent years, and food grain production has lagged behind population growth.

Ordinary Indians are badly malnourished and calorie intake has fallen over time. An Expert Group appointed by the Planning Commission has proposed 1800 calories per day as the norm of consumption by an adult for fixing the poverty line. This norm is applicable only for light or sedentary work. How is a construction worker with heavy head loads or an agricultural worker driving buffaloes in a flooded paddy land going to do his work and lead a healthy life or survive long? Even this norm yields an estimate of poverty of about 42 per cent in 2004-05, much higher than the estimates quoted officially. If the Food Security Bill is passed by Parliament, it will presumably be implemented by accepting the older estimate or the new estimate of the Expert Group. Either way, a vast number of people who are malnourished will remain in that state.

Under the Common Minimum Programme, the first UPA government adopted the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Even its partial implementation has helped the desperately poor and yielded rich dividends for the ruling parties under whose auspices there has been a better record of implementation. But this can be regarded only as a halting step towards a universal public distribution system, which is the proper way to address the issues. The budget is still focussed on the interests of the middle and richer classes and on tie-ups with the U.S. as the exemplar and leader of the system that the advisors want. The Right to Education Act, for example, excludes the education of children below the age of six, and the ICDS programme that is supposed to look after

them is still poorly funded and poorly governed. The allocation in the current budget for mid-day meals for school children is far short of what would be needed to universalise them.

Finally, the whole saga of the nuclear agreement with the U.S., currently developing into a bill that caps the liability of suppliers and operators at Rs. 500 crore whereas a Chernobyl-like development could impose unimaginable costs on the current and future costs often appears like a black comedy in the making. We should remember that crime rates in U.S. cities still remain high, and there is a continual war going on on U.S. borders against 'illegal' immigrants from Latin America. Do the policymakers at the Centre want a permanent state of civil war with the disaffected inside to be added to the worries on subversion across India's borders?

(Professor Amiya Kumar Bagchi is Director, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata.)

HUMAN RIGHTS

Humanising the Border Security Force

R.K. Raghavan

A senior BSF officer's arrest in J&K for the killing of a youth poses new challenges. Officers and men need to be told that the government and the force would take care of them only as long as they are sensitive to human rights.

The arrest of Border Security Force Commandant R.K. Birdi in Jammu and Kashmir for allegedly ordering the shooting of a 16-year-old Kashmiri should send shock waves across the ranks in that critical paramilitary force. K.F. Rustamji, the legendary founder of the BSF, was a dynamic and respected policeman who built the BSF brick by brick and paved the way for it to become the premier ally of the Army that it is today in defending the Indo-Pakistan border. (It was just the other day that I was reviewing for The Hindu a diary he left behind.)

Ironically, Rustamji was the father of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in India. Two articles he wrote in 1979 in a national daily formed the substance of the first petition of this genre: it drew the Supreme Court's attention to the miserable plight of undertrials in Karnataka and Bihar and ensured the release of nearly 40,000 prisoners languishing in Indian jails. This he did in his role as a member of the first National Police Commission (NPC) set up in 1977. He was known for his ethical principles and respect for human rights. He should be turning in his grave as a single BSF officer's misconduct and total insensitivity have brought ignominy to the organisation.

From what has been reported on the incident of February 5, 2010, Birdi's action was utterly impulsive and thoughtless. He was a total stranger to

his victim, Zahid Farook Shah, a high school student. He did not therefore have any motive for the killing. (When the case against Birdi ultimately goes to court, this factor of an absence of mens rea could weigh in the mind of the judge while awarding the sentence, once other facts establish Birdi's guilt.) That there was no motive does not by itself take the sting out of an otherwise horrific act. It will also be poor consolation to the distraught parents.

These are the basic facts of the episode. Birdi and his fellow-BSF men of a battalion posted in J&K were travelling in a convoy one evening to their camp in Shalimar. On their way, they were confronted by a jeering group of youth returning from a rain-abandoned cricket match in Nishat, on the outskirts of Srinagar. Birdi, who was in civilian clothes, was so provoked by their behaviour that he jumped out of his vehicle, seized a weapon from one of the patrol party accompanying him and waved it at the boys to intimidate them. When this possibly did not work, Birdi ordered one of his jawans, Constable Lakhwinder Singh, to open fire at them. One of the two rounds fired by Lakhwinder from his AK-47 rifle killed Zahid.

The incident naturally led to a public uproar. An internal enquiry clearly pointed to misconduct. Lakhwinder was arrested on February 10. This did not assuage public opinion, as rumours were swirling that he was forced by his Commandant to open fire. Sensing the public mood, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah took up the matter with Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram during his recent visit to the State. The State Special Investigation Team concluded, following severe questioning of Lakhwinder Singh and his colleagues, that Commandant Birdi was the principal culprit. He was also found guilty of fudging official records in an amateurish attempt to save himself. His subsequent suspension was a logical outcome. Birdi was handed over to the SIT and has since been remanded to custody.

The Nishat incident is significant. First, it highlights the might of public opinion against the highhandedness of security forces. The BSF is not part of the conventional police force. Also it operates in extremely tension-ridden areas close to the international border. These are at best extenuating circumstances which do not at all dilute the responsibility and accountability of its members. They are basically 'public servants', with only limited immunity from the law of the land even when they function in a disturbed area like J&K.

The stern action against Birdi sends out a warning to all policemen that, irrespective of their rank or the degree of hardship of their physical location, outrageous behaviour of the kind indulged in by Commandant Birdi against innocent civilians will not be condoned. One must compliment the firmness of Mr. Chidambaram and the doggedness of Mr. Abdullah in pursuing the legitimate complaint against a misbehaving Central force. Fortunately, the Centre-State divide and the crass politics that clouds many public security issues were not allowed to come in the way of delivering justice to a family that was blighted by the tragedy. Kudos are also due to the BSF leadership for being honest in its internal enquiry. This, again, is an example that should be emulated by other forces whenever a human rights violation is reported. These are times of transparency when a cover-up of a misdeed is not only not possible but is stupid and dangerous.

Having said this, we must ask ourselves why Birdi acted as recklessly as he did. First, I would like to have more information on his past. Has he come to adverse attention for erratic and impulsive behaviour earlier? If he had been reported against in the past, what did his supervisors do to discipline or counsel him? More important, what did his men in the battalion think of him? Without answers to these vital questions, we cannot fathom why he reacted so brutally to a most minor slight by a bunch of youngsters.

Let us not forget that life in the BSF — for that matter in most of the paramilitary forces — is tough. Men are posted in inhospitable places for long spells, away from their families. The sheer loneliness and physical hardship could kill the soul. A number of imaginative measures are being taken to reduce the intensity of the pain of separation from families.

The fact, however, is that ultimately, for one in a stressful profession like the police, nothing compensates for a wholesome life with one's wife and children. Whether Birdi was indeed a victim of suppressed emotions, only his close associates could tell. The history of the armed forces the world over carries many tales of recklessness by serving soldiers, and Birdi's is one of them.

The remedy lies somewhat in better person-management. To an outsider this may seem too naïve and fundamental. But it is hardly so. Mr. Chidambaram is a man of bright ideas and with tremendous faith in modern management practices. This combination can bring about a transformation in the way forces like the BSF are recruited and administered. That may not be a guarantee against officers like Birdi getting into senior positions in the future, where they can cause havoc. But then, there is no other way we can attempt to build sensitivity into the minds of the men in uniform who, because of the harsh environs in which they operate, have a short fuse that could blow at the slightest provocation.

Finally, one theory that will quickly circulate among many is that actions such as the arrest of a Battalion Commander could demoralise the men in the lower formations and make them ineffective and supine in the field. This is a legitimate fear that cannot be wished away. It is clear to everyone that Birdi's arrest was not a case of capricious administrative action fuelled by politics. It now requires adroit communication skills to convince the grassroots personnel of the BSF

that they have nothing to worry as long as their conduct is civilised and in the interests of the nation.

It is not the freedom to respond to enemy fire that is now being sought to be curtailed. What is being stifled is unwarranted aggression against a civilian community which, at its worst, is misguided by the enemy. As long as the essence of this message percolates down the line through imaginative communication channels, there is little to fear in terms of loss of morale in the BSF's lower echelons. I am confident this will be taken care of, because the BSF has excellent men at the top, chosen on merit and not on extraneous considerations. It is gratifying that the force retains its professional élan despite an extremely difficult and contentious charter in J&K. More than that, it has not yet been politicised.

(The writer is a former Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation.)

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Winning Formula

India and the 27-nation European Union resolved last week to speed up talks so as to ink a free trade agreement by end-2010. The October date needs keeping, since a trade pact has been hanging fire since 2007. If the FTA means \$9 billion worth of immediate business for India, the gains aren't just on one side. The world's second fastest growing major economy, India has a huge consumer market that'll attract anyone scouting for trade allies. Besides, India and EU are strategic partners owing in large measure to their shared belief in democracy and respect for human rights. Even if India-EU trade is below one-fifth of EU-China trade, the FTA will be based on political convergences that are always value add-ons to economic ties and enhance their potential.

True, there are differences to be sorted out. One major sticking point is the EU's insistence that social issues child labour, human rights, climate change be discussed. India rightly opposes this. For one thing, it meets the economic criteria listed in EU's Global Europe strategy on FTAs, including market potential. For another, there are appropriate forums for diplomatic wrangling on social issues. For the EU to link, say, climate with trade is a too-clever-by-half way of raising non-tariff barriers (NTBs). The EU's focus on issues extraneous to trade protectionism by another name could be a deal-breaker.

India demands that EU cut farm subsidies. Studies show Europe's common agricultural policy mainly benefits big agro-industrial conglomerates, which resort to dumping in developing countries. But single-point issues mustn't derail the pact. If, for instance, the EU insists on food safety standards or India guards its government procurement market, these issues can be shelved for another day. The focus must be

on identifying areas of agreement. For instance, services, India's fastest growing sector, will bring huge gains on both sides.

The EU has some legitimate grievances. In India, insurance FDI is restricted and multibrand retail out of bounds. Greater liberalisation here is desirable even without external prompting. The same goes for labour reform, building a common market or easing FDI inflows. With a relatively sorry rank on the "ease of doing business" index, India should reduce its own versions of NTBs like convoluted customs formalities and import licensing. Finally, it helps when FTA negotiators focus on the big picture. India-EU trade, at \$107 billion today, has increased by an annual 16 per cent, signalling the potential benefits of opening up. Petty bickering mustn't mar a win-win situation for both sides.

India, US to sign pact for boosting trade on March 17

WASHINGTON: Commerce and industry minister Anand Sharma and the US trade representative Ron Kirk would sign the India-US Trade Policy Forum Framework for cooperation on trade and investment in Washington on March 17.

During his two-day visit to Washington on March 17-18, Sharma is also scheduled to meet the US commerce secretary, Gary Locke, and agriculture secretary Tom Vilsack, during which the minister is expected to discuss a wide range of issues aimed at boosting trade and business relationship between the two countries.

The Framework for Cooperation on Trade and Investment, to be inked on March 17, seeks to facilitate trade and investment flows between the two countries, Indian Embassy spokesman Rahul Chhabra said.

The India-US Trade Policy Forum was established after the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the US in July 2005. Kirk and Sharma are the co-chairs of this forum. Five Focus Groups have been discussing various trade policy issues of mutual interest relating to tariff and non-tariff barriers, services, agriculture and investment among others.

The India-US Private Sector Advisory Group (PSAG) comprising prominent trade personalities from India and the US would also meet on March 17. The PSAG was established in September 2007 to provide strategic recommendations and insights to the Trade Policy Forum.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

How fit are our netas to rule us?

Jug Suraiya

How fit are our netas to rule us? And the answer to that is that we don't know. By fit I don't mean how fit they are to govern us: most of them have shown that they're not fit to govern us at all, being lazy, inefficient or corrupt, or all three at the same time.

By fit I mean physically fit. Do our political leaders, unknown to us, suffer from a variety of ailments – from hypertension to diabetes to cardiac problems – which could impair their physical, emotional and psychological functioning in carrying out their official duties?

Barring a few cases, we don't know how physically fit our netas are. This is in stark contrast to the US, where President Barack Obama has just been cleared by doctors in a medical check-up that is obligatory for all White House incumbents. American presidents must regularly subject themselves to a thorough medical examination to show that they are at least physically fit to lead the country.

In Obama's case his popularity rating may have slipped, because of Afghanistan and unemployment within the US, but in personal health terms he is one of the fittest presidents America's ever had. With a resting heart rate of only 56 beats a minute, BP of 105/62, a body mass index of 23.5, the 48-year-old Obama appears to be in the pink of health, as he should be as a regular gym-user. His cholesterol, at 209, is marginally on the high side, and his medical team has told him to go easy on the fast-food cheeseburgers he sometimes indulges in. But his biggest no-no, health-wise, is smoking. Apparently he is a light smoker, and has been told to quit the habit. Compare this transparency of gauging

the political health of the nation with the opacity that shrouds India's leadership, much of which continues to be of advanced age, despite a recent injection of young blood.

The powers-that-be generally frown at any media comment on the fitness or frailty of our political leaders. When the TOI carried a front page photograph of the then president, Shankar Dayal Sharma, stumbling at a public function and having to be helped up, the newspaper drew official flak for showing 'disrespect' to the office of the president. When the TOI broke the story that the then PM, Narasimha Rao, had been secretly admitted to a medical facility following an unspecified health problem, the paper was taken to task by a disapproving officialdom for what – in the official view – was tantamount to divulging a state secret.

A notable exception to this veil of secrecy about our netas' health was the full disclosure made about PM Manmohan Singh's heart surgery – the second one he's had – a couple of years ago. But by and large we never question – and are not allowed to question – the health of our political leaders. This is in glaring contrast to personnel of the various police forces and the defence services for whom the passing of annual medical examinations is a must. In the private sector, many companies insist that, after a certain age (generally 40), their executives undergo a yearly health check-up.

So, should the health of our netas be open to scrutiny in the public interest? Or should we continue to be a secretive – and, for all we know, often a literally sick – polity? What do you think? Would you like your MP and your MLA to have a health check-up and make the result public? Or do you think they're truly fit to rule you, the way they are now? Let's hear your opinion on the political health of our nation.

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Onward to real political reform

T K Arun

The passage of the women's reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha has a number of plus points. For one, it puts to rest the lingering suspicion that the leadership of the ruling party belongs outside the fauna grouping, Phylum Chordata, Sub-phylum Vertebrata. For another, the lot of Indian women might actually improve. The biggest plus point is that the system shows some sign of being capable of pushing through the most important reform we need, political reform.

Much of the Bill's criticism is specious. One complaint is that upper caste women would hog most of the seats, lowering further the legislative presence of backward castes and Muslims - the basis for the demand for quotas within the women's quota. Take a constituency that favours a backward caste or Muslim candidate. Would the gender of the legislator change any of the factors that stack the odds against an upper caste candidate? Such a possibility would arise only if the social prejudice against their own women entering the public sphere is stronger among backward castes/Muslims than the desire to elect one of their own or to defeat an upper caste representative. Concretely, in a constituency where Muslims could tilt the result against a Vishwa Hindu Parishad activist by voting for a Muslim woman candidate, would they hold back on the ground that they would be encouraging unorthodox permissiveness among their women? This is entirely unlikely. Only the

Taliban and reactionary clergy would endorse such a course. Let's not forget that Muslims of the subcontinent have generally voted for liberal leaders, not those who posit piety as their first virtue, leave alone fundamentalists. Whether Jinnah, Bhutto or Mujib, popular Muslim leaders of the subcontinent have been nonreligious leaders of the community.

Another objection is that reserving seats for women is futile as they would just be proxies for male leaders who temporarily have to vacate their seats because they've been reserved for women. This would be true, to a large extent. But then, are those who raise this objection also saying that all Congress MPs voted in favour of the Women's Bill because their conscience told them to, and not because of a party whip? Parties decide, not individual representatives, for the most part. Then again, the experience of reserving, in panchayats, one-third of all seats for women shows that once elected, many women discover their own voice, acquire new agency and transform into community leaders. The process is likely to continue at the higher tiers of government.

The proxy-for-men argument actually contradicts another objection raised in the same breath: this system of rotating constituencies prevents leaders from nurturing their constituencies. True enough, reserving one-third the seats for women, in combination with the provision that the same constituency would not be reserved for two consecutive terms, does mean that two-thirds of the constituencies would not see the same person representing them for two successive terms, unless, of course, a woman MP's record has been so successful as to make her party field her for a second term as its candidate from a general, unreserved seat. This lack of continuity could disincentivise a leader to nurture a particular constituency. But not if a woman MP were just a proxy for her powerful male relative. Through her, the male leader would continue to nurture the constituency.

But then, is it an MP's job to nurture his constituency? A citizen's

welfare is the combined result of the policies and actions of the three levels of government: local, state and Centre. A legislator's job is to exercise his constituents' right to shape policy at his level and hold the government to account. For an MP to busy himself with roads in his constituency is to abdicate responsibility to shape the Centre's conduct on say, delayed defence procurement or limiting the liability arising from nuclear accidents . But the first-past-the-post system that India follows nurtures the travesty that an MP's job is, indeed, to engage in local area development. So much so that we have even assigned MPs their own LAD funds. This must change, not be preserved at all costs.

The popular response to the earlier stand on Mumbai's Indianness and the present one on the women's bill should convince the political leadership that boldness pays. People elect leaders not to reign or wilt under pressure, but to run the country. If that entails taking controversial decisions, please take them in the country's interest, and the people will stand by you.

The leadership should take the momentum forward and push the envelope further on political reform. We need reform of political funding, abandoning the present methods of looting the exchequer, sale of patronage and extortion from the public. These methods suborn the bureaucracy as well, destroy the nation's moral fibre, make nonsense of corporate governance and make India one of the worst places in which to do business.

A more fundamental reform would be to move towards proportional representation, abandoning the present first-past-the-post system. Parties would have seats in proportion to the votes they secure. Instead of individual politicians nurturing constituencies, parties would have to focus more on delivering governance and differentiating themselves from other parties on policy. The biggest gain would be to make coalitions the rule rather than the exception. This would eschew extremist politics, produce more active and continuous engagement with

the electorate and not just with the elected representatives and put pressure on political parties to turn internally more democratic . Implementing women's reservation would be far simpler as well.

Much of Europe already follows variants of the system. Even Britain, whose electoral system India imported after gaining independence from it, has adopted a form of proportional representation for elections to the legislatures of Scotland and Wales.

Political fortune favours the bold and spurns the timid and the indecisive.

POVERTY

HINDU 10.3.10 POVERTY

Livestock rearing — key to poverty reduction strategies

Gavin Wall

From equity and livelihood perspectives, livestock rearing must be at the centre stage of poverty alleviation programmes.

Livestock rearing is a key livelihood and risk mitigation strategy for small and marginal farmers, particularly across the rain-fed regions of India. Livestock products comprised 32 per cent of the total value of agriculture and allied activities in 2006-07 which was a noticeable increase from 27 per cent in 1999-2000 and from 1980-81 when it represented 14 per cent of the agricultural gross domestic product. The livestock sector has therefore been growing faster than many other sectors of agriculture and if this trend continues then the sector will be the engine of growth for Indian agriculture that many have predicted.

Most often we see livestock as providers of essential food products, draught power, manure, employment, household income and export earnings. However, it is a very important fact that livestock wealth is much more equitably distributed than wealth associated with land. Thus, when we think of the goal of inclusive growth, we should not forget that from equity and livelihood perspectives, livestock rearing must be at the centre of the stage in poverty alleviation programmes.

There are two other important aspects: firstly, livestock rearing at the household level is largely a women-led activity, and therefore income from livestock rearing and decisions related to management of livestock

within the household are primarily taken by women. Interventions in India have demonstrated that support for livestock rearing has contributed significantly to the empowerment of women and an increasing role in decision making at both the household and village level. Secondly, livestock rearing, particularly in the rain-fed regions of the country, is also emerging as a key risk mitigation strategy for the poorest. They face increasingly uncertain and erratic weather conditions which negatively impact crop productivity and wage labour in the agriculture sector.

Three overarching messages

A global analysis of the livestock sector by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) was contained in the recently released State of Food and Agriculture and it highlighted three overarching messages that merit discussion in the context of India.

First, although livestock products make important contributions to food security and poverty reduction for many low-income rural families, the policy and institutional framework in many countries has failed to serve the needs of these poorest households and to get them onto the conveyor belt of development. A lack of public services in animal health that reach out to the poorest in rural areas and a failure to link small holder livestock keepers to better paying markets are but two examples of common failings. The institutional and policy frameworks tend to support intensive and commercial livestock rearing, both in the provision of services and also in facilitating access to markets.

Second, livestock producers, including traditional pastoralists and smallholders, are both victims of natural resource degradation and contributors to it. Corrective action most likely lies in a mix of public goods related to environmental protection, ecosystem services and through incentives for private investment to improve animal productivity, particularly in remote regions. In the case of India, there are numerous examples of community-led interventions where

community management and sustainable use of natural resources has positively impacted small holder livestock rearing.

Third, animal health services not only combat animal diseases that cause mortality and reduce animal productivity, they also protect human health because of the risk of animal to human disease transmission. Animal health systems have been neglected in many parts of the world and this has led to institutional weaknesses that in turn lead to poor delivery of animal health services and higher risks to livelihoods and human health. In correcting this situation it must be recognised that the poor face different risks and have different incentives and capacities to respond than do intensive commercial farmers. Therefore, animal health service providers have the additional challenge of recognising the differences between their stakeholders and developing mechanisms to reach them all.

Moving forward on these key findings is not possible by relying either on individuals alone or a single string of actions. Progress requires attention from all actors in the social, environmental, animal health, human health and agriculture sectors; that means public, private and community organisations being actively engaged together. The livestock sector is far too important to accept anything less. — Courtesy: United Nations Information Centre for India and Bhutan.

(Gavin Wall is FAO Representative in India and Bhutan.)

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

City of blights

Eat your heart out Mumbai, Delhi has topped the show in the Liveability Index among all Indian cities in a Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Institute for Competitiveness (IFC) survey. Liveability in the urban context takes in the mental and social well-being of its citizens apart from infrastructure. We want to add to this. Life in Delhi improves your moral fibre and your physical stamina. For example, if you want to negotiate the BRT, you will require the skills of Michael Schumacher, the patience of Mother Teresa and perhaps the fighting acumen of Bruce Lee.

Now this will come in handy in many spheres of life. Then during the frequent power cuts, you can learn the art of sweating it out without frequenting expensive gyms. And when you're left in the dark at night, think of how much better your other senses develop. Your social skills will be honed razor sharp when say you try to tell the gent next to you to give you right of way on the road. It's a different matter that you may end up in hospital, but have no fear, Delhi's health system ranks at 17. And if you are one of those who want to make a mark in civil society, be assured that we have regular dharnas, marches and disruptions in Parliament which should give you all the training you need in this field.

We have many role models who can teach us the art of survival irrespective of where we are, starting with our political class which has demonstrated that it pays to take what you want, be it public resources or road spaces. So on the whole, while the Sena is wittering on about whom

Mumbai belongs to, those in Delhi have evolved to higher things. This will also go down well when the Commonwealth Games start. People will go back startled at our policy of ask not what you can do for your city, instead ask what your city can do for you.

HINDUSTAN TIMES 9.3.10 URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Delhi gets India's first remote controlled street lights

In a major move towards energy conservation, the capital's main civic agency Tuesday launched the country's first remote-controlled street lights that can be switched on and off using an internet-enabled main server located in the heart of the city.

The first phase of this street light upgradation project, under the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), will become operational Tuesday and will cover a distance of 101 km on 52 roads.

These include main roads like Lodhi Road, Bhisma Pitah Marg and Jawaharlal Nehru Marg. In the first phase, 2,235 light poles have been erected.

"The system is based on global satellite monitoring (GSM) and general packet radio service (GPRS) on which the mobiles work. While the system eliminates manual or timer based operation of street lights, the lights are automatically turned on and off according to the sunrise and sunset time. This conserves energy and reduces carbon dioxide emissions," said MCD Commissioner K.S. Mehra who inaugurated the project Tuesday.

The central server will be located at MCD's Civic Centre office on Minto Road here.

The project is being implemented by a consortium of companies -- Phillips Electronics Ltd, BP Project Pvt Ltd and Sweka Power-Tech Engineers Pvt Ltd. Delhi-based Sweka is responsible for developing software and related technology.

MCD's supervising engineer D.K. Sukan, who is in charge of the project, told IANS that the second phase of the project covering an additional 157 km and 107 roads is slated to finish by May this year.

"The unique system has not been used in India before. Some European cities have used the same system. The main objective of using it here is to ensure that energy is saved. In event of any fault or a power theft from a feeder pillar, the alarm will go off in the main server and an SMS will be sent to the area's maintenance staff for correction," he explained.

The system server will provide a report of operative and non-operative street lights also.

Each feeder pillar, powering approximately 70-80 lights, will be controlled by a device which has a SIM card with GPRS connectivity. The new system also facilitates auto-remote metering of energy consumption and can monitor power quality such as low or high voltage or frequency. The lights can be simultaneously turned on or off during bad weather or traffic conditions.

The MCD has spent Rs.3.2 million on the project.

Once the second phase is completed, the status of the lights on individual roads shall be available to the public on the MCD's website - www.mcdonline.gov.in.

WOMEN

Reservation as panacea does not work

Abantika Ghosh

It has been sixty years since the constitution of India that guaranteed reservation for people from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes came into effect. Reservation was in place even before that. It was a means of empowerment. Tellingly, even now, politics is played out over nights spent in the huts of people from these communities and over meals shared with them. Assemblies witness noisy scenes over an MLA being called a chamar. And a student of the country's premier medical institute commits suicide, allegedly because he is discriminated against.

How then, has the notion of reservation as the panacea for all social ills survived? Facile politics or just an laziness in getting down to the real issues and addressing them effectively? Probably a mix of both.

The top down approach works politically almost as well as the symbolism of introducing a bill pending for 14 years on International Women's day. Far more difficult is to ensure right to education at all levels that would make women more equipped to empower themselves than probably fighting an election in a constituency reserved for them which otherwise, may be the husband would have fought. If reservation is empowerment then a former chief minister of Bihar should be its biggest mascot. She became the chief minister of a state because her husband – now one of the staunchest critics of the Bill for his own entirely political reasons - wanted to keep it reserved for himself. In

much the same way that passengers in Howrah's local trains put a handkerchief or an umbrella to "book" their seats.

It is outrageous how a country that, decades after it had talked of equal rights for all in its constitution, could not even safeguard the right to live of the unborn girl child and is now talking of almost pushing her into the Parliament without even granting her the resources to present her case cogently. Is that the kind of elected representatives we want? Somebody who will be just a rubber stamp of her fathers/brothers/husbands? Because without the wherewithall that is exactly what she is likely to end up becoming.

A survey by an independent research agency has shown how in the present Lok Sabha, women members, who make 11% of the strength, have participated in fewer debates than their male counterparts, asked fewer questions and have essentially made up the numbers when it comes to voting. Where is the ground for the assumption that simply trebling their numbers – which would also mean a lot of women being elected merely because the parties need to be seen to be adhering to the legislation they managed to clear so painstakingly – will have a multiplying effect on their effectiveness too?

I would rather have a male MP who – hopefully – talks about issues that concern me than a woman who is there merely because of her sex. It is a waste of my vote.

HINDU 9.3.10 WOMEN

A turning point for gender equality

Helen Clark

Nations in the Asia Pacific should work towards empowering women not only as a laudable goal and a human right but also to boost their economies.

The Asia Pacific region has made impressive progress on many fronts, and seems poised to recover from the global economic downturn more rapidly than other regions. Long term, sustainable progress, however, requires that more support is given to the empowerment of women.

Achieving equality for women is not only a laudable goal and a human right. It is also good economics, helps deepen democracy, and enables genuine long-term stability.

The latest Asia Pacific Human Development Report, *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific*, estimates that the under representation of women in the workforce costs the region about \$89 billion each year — roughly equivalent to the GDP of Vietnam.

As well, inequalities in the workforce and obstacles to women's advancement there persist. For example, agricultural jobs account for more than 40 per cent of women's jobs in East Asia and 65 per

cent in South Asia. Yet, only seven per cent of the farms in these regions are controlled by women.

The inequalities do not stop there. There are large gaps worldwide between the political participation of men and of women. In the Asia Pacific, however, these gaps are among the largest in the world. The Pacific sub-region alone has four of the six countries in the world with no women legislators at all.

In South Asia, on critical issues such as health, adult literacy, and economic participation, the gaps between men and women are very large by world standards.

According to this latest Human Development Report, almost half the adult women in South Asia are illiterate, a higher proportion than in any other region in the world. Women in South Asia can expect to live five fewer years than the world average of 70.9 years.

South Asia also has the highest malnutrition rates in the world — two out of every five children are underweight, compared to one in four in sub-Saharan Africa.

More women die in childbirth in South Asia — 500 for every 100,000 live births — than in any other part of the world except for sub-Saharan Africa.

To remove these obstacles, far reaching changes are needed in the interlinked areas of economics, social policy, politics, and the law.

In the realm of economics, policies which ensure that women and men have the same inheritance rights and rights to land title will put assets in the hands of women, and significantly improve their ability to make their voice heard inside and outside the home.

The Human Development Report estimates that increasing the

proportion of women in the workforce to 70 per cent, equivalent to the rate of many developed countries, would boost annual GDP in India by 4.2 per cent, in Malaysia by 2.9 per cent, and in Indonesia by 1.4 per cent.

Political reforms

Political reforms are needed so that more women can enter legislatures and positions of power. This region has produced a number of women Presidents and Prime Ministers. More women in power at every level will ensure that women's needs get higher priority than they currently do.

Nations in the Asia Pacific committed to achieving real progress for women when they signed the Millennium Declaration in 2000 and backed the Millennium Development Goals. In countries where the needs and status of women are given low priority, there is the least progress on the goals. If women's status is lifted, that greatly improves the prospects for achieving the MDGs.

Reducing maternal mortality will also have positive spill over effects on the goal of improving children's health and access to education, and of reducing poverty and hunger. Providing girls with education will, in time, be positive in reducing child mortality, and improving child nutrition and health for future generations. Tackling the scourge of sexual and gender-based violence not only addresses a basic human right, but also helps reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The Millennium Development Goals summit at the U.N. this September is a major opportunity to show how prioritising meeting the needs of women can transform development progress.

As we commemorate International Women's Day, we can all commit to these goals and to ensuring that women's needs are

elevated, not marginalised.

(The author is a former Prime Minister of New Zealand and is the Administrator of UNDP and the Chair of the U.N. Development Group)

INDIAN EXPRESS 10.3.10 WOMEN

Let's junk the hypocrisy

Jaithirth Rao

The drama surrounding the proposed reservation of seats for women in Parliament and in the state assemblies has taken an interesting turn. The supporters are parties which are otherwise always locked in opposition to one another. The Congress, the BJP and the Left are all supporters, although the enthusiasm of all their members is suspect. The SP, the RJD and the BSP are opponents and are very vociferous and obstructive about it. The mystery remains: are the supporters pro-women and are the opponents anti-feminist? Does this simplistic analysis say it all?

Far from it. Issues of franchise are always political. Parties may appear to be taking a progressive stance or a reactionary one. Quite simply, they support the position that would help them. The Congress, the BJP and the Left believe that the change will help them get more seats in Parliament, if not more votes. The opposing parties are legitimately concerned that if fundamental processes associated with the electoral exercise are changed dramatically at one stroke, then they could be losers. In 1909, when the British introduced the Minto-Morley reforms, they came up with the then novel idea of “separate electorates”. The

principal beneficiaries were rich Muslims — mind you, not Muslims at large, but rich Muslims. No wonder, the super-rich Aga Khan himself led a deputation of similar “leaders” to ask the Viceroy for this concession. This is not to suggest that the Aga Khan and his friends did not make high-sounding arguments about protecting the rights of Indian Muslims. Political arguments are always couched in such rhetoric. Let us consider the possibility that Minto and Morley, instead of creating a separate Muslim electorate, had in fact created three Muslim electorates, one for the Ashraf, the Muslim aristocracy who claim descent from immigrants, one for the Ajlaf, who are generally considered to be the descendants of lower caste Hindus who converted to Islam, and one for the Arzal, who are assumed to be descended from Dalits who converted to Islam. If the subsequent elections had reflected three separate electorates, it would have been very difficult for the Muslim League to have come up with the slogan that an imagined homogenous form of Islam would be in “danger” in a Hindu majority India. Indian history could and would have taken a different course. When Ramsay MacDonald introduced the “communal award” which conferred separate electorates on the Dalits, Mahatma Gandhi went on a “fast unto death” to oppose this. While undoubtedly the Mahatma’s stance was prompted by his strong opposition to untouchability and his deep, sincere personal convictions, it should be noted that a joint electorate of all Hindus, including Dalits, was beneficial to the Congress Party. In the absence of a joint electorate, the Congress could not have had the oversized influence it had in the independence negotiations with the British. Again, history may have taken a different turn.

The SP, the RJD and the BSP are grass-roots political parties who have been beneficiaries of the present electoral system. To expect them to commit political hara-kiri by agreeing to the new bill is naïve. The fact of the matter is that whatever may be its claims about being inclusive, the Congress’s leadership has always been drawn from the upper castes. The same is the case with the BJP and strangely enough with the Left. The late Kanshi Ram used to point out that while the rank and file

members of the communist parties were from lower castes, the Politburo was always dominated by members of upper caste origin. The political parties who draw their support from backward castes and Dalits are convinced that the entire women's quota idea will help upper caste women candidates and hence reverse the trend of the last four decades where gradually the lower castes have been acquiring political power. Instead of moving from seats of power in the state capitals to power in Delhi, their political aspirations will get derailed. Is this fear justified? Why can these parties not put up women candidates and win? No one can predict the future. But there is a distinct possibility that upper caste women can use their female identity to appeal to women and transcend caste identities — a little bit like rich Muslim leaders of the Muslim League appealing to poor Muslims exclusively on a religious basis, bypassing class considerations.

Many have argued that the women's movement in the United States has done a disservice to blacks. By combining issues of racial discrimination with issues of gender discrimination, the beneficiaries have been white women and this has been detrimental to the interests of African-Americans as a group. A similar probable consequence is at the root of the opposition by the SP, RJD and the BSP.

From a strictly constitutional position, one can argue that a radical change in the electoral system would constitute an assault on a "basic feature" and would thus go against the celebrated Keshavanand Bharati judgment. We already have completely discriminatory laws, for instance, women pay less income tax than men. This absurd proposition seems to forget that it is income that is taxed and income does not have any gender. If the Congress-BJP-Left combine to push through this measure, I believe that the opponents will have a strong case to get it struck down by the Supreme Court. The present franchise system — no separate electorates, reservation for SCs and STs, nominated seats for Anglo-Indians, etc — did not come out casually or by accident. The Constituent Assembly discussed and debated these matters at length, and

guess what, consensus was obtained. The Muslim members of the assembly supported the abolition of separate electorates. For the Congress-BJP-Left upper caste leadership to ram down a major constitutional change that can have implications similar to the Minto-Morley reforms, pretending to be women-friendly while actually improving their own electoral prospects, is a dubious measure. On this one, believers in constitutional rectitude must support the SP, the RJD and the BSP — even if their parliamentary tactics are too noisy for comfort!

TIMES OF INDIA 12.3.10 WOMEN

Reserving Judgement

Ronojoy Sen

The women's Bill, if it does cross the Lok Sabha hurdle, will indeed be historic. But it might not be so for the reasons being aired on television and newspapers. Whether the Bill will bring about real political empowerment of women we don't really know. However, the Bill could bring about radical changes in the way Indian democracy functions.

According to the Bill, one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies reserved for women will be allotted by rotation, which means that once in every three elections a seat will be set aside for women and for the other two revert to a general seat. How in effect would that work? A woman who wins in a reserved seat won't have the cushion of running against only women if she contests from the same seat in the next election. But she would of course be able to run for re-election so long as she is nominated by her party and is willing to contest on a mixed slate. Conversely, in one-third of the seats, incumbents, whether male or female, will have to sit out once in three elections. Is that such a bad thing? Not necessarily.

Critics have pointed out that there won't be any incentive for elected representatives to work for their constituency if there is no guarantee that they will be allowed to run again in the next election. It could also result in a lack of accountability, prompting MPs and MLAs to squeeze as much as possible from their constituency in one term. But there is a flip side too. Reservation could deal a blow to the phenomenon of pocket boroughs, of which there are several across India, where the same candidate gets elected year after year. And it could undermine the politics of patronage where an incumbent builds up an elaborate network to transfer funds and other favours to his constituents. Political parties, rather than individuals, stand to benefit from this trend, which would be a good thing.

Of course, there are always ways to get around this. We already have a number of bahus and betis in politics. Reserved seats might see an upsurge in the nomination of proxies or relatives of male candidates who are forced to vacate a constituency. The lessons from reservation for women in panchayats do not, however, entirely support this contention. Although initially there was a tendency of male leaders to nominate - and dominate - their wives in reserved constituencies, a 2008 study by the panchayati raj ministry has found that over time reservations have led to greater assertiveness and confidence on the part of women representatives. The same survey though points out that women panchayat members are still battling patriarchal values and prejudices.

Another independent study has found that compared to male counterparts, women representatives tend to focus more on basic issues such as health, education and sanitation that are most critical for vast swathes of India's population. Besides, in some states women representatives now exceed the numbers reserved for them, which goes to show that reservation has had a healthy ripple effect. The same could happen in Parliament and state assemblies.

There are other objections against the Bill which need to be heard out. Lalu Prasad, Mulayam Singh Yadav and others from caste-based parties have been the most vocal. They have sound political reasons for protesting against the Bill, but their demand for sub-quotas is dubious. What stops them from nominating more other backward classes (OBC) women in reserved constituencies? There are some who have argued that reservation for women dilutes the first-past-the-post system by smuggling in proportional representation through the back door. But since we already have reservations based on caste, reservation for women isn't such a radical constitutional departure.

The more serious objection is whether quotas are the best route to women's - or indeed any disadvantaged group's - empowerment. One, there is the perennial question of whether quotas perpetuate inequality rather than alleviate it. During the Constituent Assembly debates, Renuka Ray had raised precisely this issue: "When there is reservation of seats for women, the question of their consideration for general seats, however competent they may be, does not usually arise. We feel that women will get more chances if the consideration is of ability alone."

Two, quotas are a visible and politically lucrative form of public policy but their efficacy isn't always very clear. As we have seen with caste reservations, particularly with relation to OBCs, a creamy layer tends to profit from quotas whereas the intended beneficiaries tend to get squeezed out. This could well be the case with women's reservation too. The ideal way, of course, to increasing women's representation would have been for political parties to have quotas for women. Some of the countries with the most number of women in Parliament, such as Norway, Sweden and Argentina, do have such a provision. But unfortunately some 60 years since independence our parties haven't been able to muster the will to do it.

If the women's Bill does become reality it might not achieve what it set out to. But it could well change the rules of Indian democracy.

TIMES OF INDIA 9.3.10 WOMEN

Block And Tackle

Fourteen years after it was first tabled, the women's reservation Bill - which faces stiff opposition from regional outfits that depend on caste vote banks for political survival - looked set to be passed fairly easily in the Rajya Sabha yesterday when the BJP and the Left pledged support. Both these parties must be commended for displaying exemplary bipartisanship on such a nationally significant issue and we hope they will remain steadfast in their commitment. But as was proved yet again yesterday, one can never underestimate the resolution of parties like the RJD, SP and BSP to employ any tactic possible to stall the progress of the women's reservation Bill.

When outnumbered, legislators from these parties resorted to unruly obstructionism, which increasingly seems to be the preferred mode of expressing dissent at the highest platform of our democracy. The RJD and SP have withdrawn support to the government, a choice they are entitled to. But they have no right to create a ruckus in Parliament, wasting precious business hours funded by taxpayers and holding the nation to ransom. The hooliganism we witnessed yesterday underlines

the need for an overhaul of parliamentary politics in India. Easing the path for women to participate in greater numbers at the highest levels of legislation cannot come a moment too soon.

The government should have seen this coming and have been better prepared to ensure that the Bill went through this time around. Every time this Bill - which holds the potential of transforming India's political reality and substantially empowering women - has been tabled in the past, it has met with stiff opposition from the RJD, SP and BSP, among others. These parties want further quotas for their own constituencies (OBCs, Muslims and Dalits) within the 33 per cent women's quota, ostensibly because they are concerned about women from these disadvantaged groups getting fair representation. As we have pointed out before, if that concern was indeed genuine, why have these parties not nominated greater numbers of OBC, Muslim and Dalit women candidates so far? In fact, it's the deep-rooted reluctance among some sections of our political class to create more space for women in our Parliament and state legislatures that is the real issue.

The government, along with the BJP, Left parties and other supporters of the Bill like the JD(U), should stand up to the opponents of women's reservation and ensure that it is voted upon and passed today. Otherwise it will not only cut a very sorry figure but also pay a heavy political price.