



Rashtra Mahila

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Editor's Column

Even after a year, it is ironical that the Women Reservation Bill mooting 33% reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures first introduced in June 1996, could not be tabled in the Parliament during the last monsoon session, despite all major political parties commitment to give political space to women in their election manifestos. Now there are moves to 'delay defer or delute' the adoption of the Bill.

Though women constitute nearly 50% of the population, their number in Parliament and state legislatures has always been negligible. Therefore, asking for 33% reservation for women

is certainly not an unreasonable demand.

However, the latest attempt to get all political parties to discuss the issue of reservation has reached - as it has several times in the past - a dead end. No consensus seems to be in sight with major constituent partners of the ruling

FOCUS

WOMEN RESERVATION BILL

alliance demanding 'quota with quota', to be earmarked for the Muslims, the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes and the OBCs.

Now the ball is in the government's court. But if the same kind of objections

are raised wherever a consensus is sought, the Bill would die a natural death. Can the government allow that to happen? When will India's women, who hold almost 'half the sky' would find their place in the nation's decision-making process?

As far as NCW is concerned, this is not merely a women's issue but a national issue and should be taken up as a nation's priority. Once it becomes a law, given its uniqueness and far-reaching significance, the Bill would not only revolutionise electoral politics in India but would be a harbinger of social change ending age-old discrimination in the political system.

Workshop on Sex-Selection

To commemorate the World Population Day, the National Commission for Women, UNFPA and the Centre for Social Research jointly organised an interactive workshop on Female Foeticide - 'Achieving Equality - Addressing Sex Selection' in New Delhi.

A recent census revealed that the female ratio between 0-6 years age group had fallen to 896 females per 1,000 males in India, the lowest in ten years. The situation is grave in northern states of Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, all relatively affluent among Indian states, and northwestern Rajasthan. The skewed figures are proof of the increased incidence of sex-selective abortions or female foeticide, not an isolated phenomenon but an alarming trend in many states of the country. In the last ten years from 1991 to 2001, the country has lost 1.37 crore girls to the pre-sex determination techniques.

Addressing the workshop Dr. Girija Vyas, Chairperson of the National Commission for Women said that the declining sex ratio was a matter of serious concern having various socio-economic and health implications. Not only will it lead to serious demographic imbalance and social consequences, it will increase cases of sex related crimes and violence against women. Imbalance is likely to cause rise in social problems, forced polyandry, child marriages, rapes and kidnapping of women for marriage, she said. The yearning for a son is a deep-rooted social phenomenon in Indian society. States like Bihar and Rajasthan have a long history of female infanticide - of girls poisoned, suffocated, drowned or left to die, she added.



At the interactive session sitting (from left) Ms. Yasmeen Abrar, Ms. Kiran Walia, Dr. Girija Vyas, Dr. Ranjana Kumari, Ms. Malini Bhattacharya, Ms. Nirmla Venkatesh, Ms. Neeva Konwar



Mr. P.K. Hota addressing the gathering. Others in the picture are Dr. Girija Vyas, Dr. Ranjana Kumari, Member Secretary Mr. N.P. Gupta

While addressing, the gathering, Dr. Ranjana Kumari, Director, Centre for Social Research blamed poor implementation of Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) PCPNDT Act for the declining sex ratio in the country. The other major causes included attitude towards a daughter and her role in the family where she is born (to be married and sent away), unfair sex selection practices, poor regulation mechanism, inappropriate laws and improper policies due to the lack of a clear understanding of the problem. She said that the rich and educated class has greater access to ultrasound clinics where sex determination tests are held and even greater chances of doing it stealthily thereby flouting the law simply because they think they can get away with it.

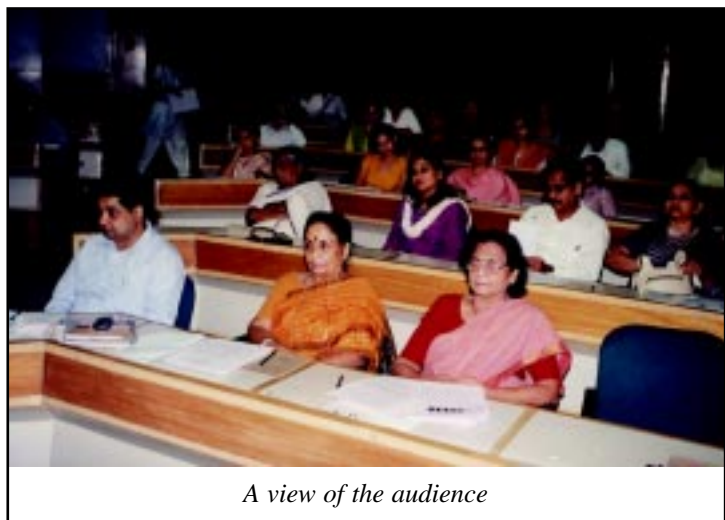
Speaking on the occasion, Sharareh Amir Khalili, representative of the UN Population Fund said, "If there is any one indicator that reflects what is happening to our

women in our society, it is that they are not even given the chance and rights to be born. Sex selection, the practice of selecting the desired sex and eliminating the unwanted one perhaps is the most shameful and worst form of gender violence".

On its part, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare suggested setting up a task force to check female foeticide that has assumed alarming proportions. Speaking on the occasion, the Union Health and Welfare Secretary, P. Hota, said that the special task force members could also include retired police officers and physicians. He said new technology like the ultrasound and blood test for sex determination had proved to be a curse as it was being misused to abort female fetuses.

Some suggestions that were received during the workshop include :

1. Punish parents/people who indulge in female foeticide. The Medical Council of India should strip/revoke the license to practice of doctors indulging in sex-determination tests. A 3 months compulsory jail term and a strong punitive action resulting in public humiliation of doctors/medical practitioners shall serve as a major deterrent.
2. People representative bodies should be made aware about PNDT authorities and should be informed where to reach the authorities in case they get to know about the wrongdoer.
3. Awareness about the penalty along with gender sensitization at the level of schools, parliamentarians, MLAs and affluent section of the society.
4. Sensitization of doctors, nurses, 'dais', etc. on the menace of female foeticide.
5. So called empowered women need to be sensitized as the problem seems to be very severe among the affluent class.
6. Religious leaders need to be sensitized so that they convey positive messages to their followers about the girl-child.
7. There is a need to develop separate action plans for the metros and large cities and for rural masses.
8. Sex ratio should become an indicator to measure the progress of the country.
9. Half-yearly reporting on the number of children born and the figures on boys and girls born should be made available to the authorities and the general public at the panchayat level.



A view of the audience

Members' Visits

- Member Malini Bhattacharya recently visited Institute of Neuro-Psychiatry and Allied Sciences (RINPAS) and Central Institute of Psychiatry (CIP) at Ranchi and investigated the condition of the female inmates. Later, she visited the Birsa Munda Kendriya Karagar, Ranchi, and inspected the female ward. There were 76 female prisoners. Among them, 41 were convicts and 35 were under-trials. 14 children were staying with their mothers in jail where there are provisions for their schooling. On her return from Ranchi, she went to Bahrapur to speak at a workshop on Trafficking organised by the West Bengal State Commission for Women and Socio-legal Research Centre.

Later, she spoke on Girl Child and social discrimination at a workshop organized by the State Center for Educational Research and Training and visited the Women Study Research Centre at Calcutta University to discuss a research project on the implementation on PNMT Act within the Calcutta Metropolitan area.

She also visited the State Planning Board and had a meeting on the Gender component within State Budget and later visited Atma Maryada, an organization of sex workers in Tolligunje locality and discussed with them about their projects for self empowerment and self improvement.

Ms. Bhattacharya attended a meeting organized by West Bengal State Commission for Women (WBSCW), and Deptt. of Social Welfare, Govt. of West Bengal at which about 52 people were present including NGOs, Government officials and Members of WBSCW. Ms. Bhattacharya discussed programmes to be undertaken by the NGOs in collaboration with NCW. Focus of these programmes will be on women's work, women's health, trafficking etc. Later, she investigated the case of rape of a minor girl at Vidhan Nagar.

She also visited Swasthya Bhavan and met the Commissioner, Deptt. of Family Welfare to discuss a project to be done jointly with Women Studies Research Centre of the Calcutta University on sex ratio of 0-6 age group within Kolkata municipality area.

Ms. Bhattacharya attended a meeting organized by the Tripura State Commission for Women (TSCW) and the Department of Social Welfare, Govt. of Tripura at Agartala to discuss with the NGOs programmes to be taken up in collaboration with NCW.

Later, she visited Homes for Rescued Girls and Residential Schools for the Physically Handicapped. She found that while the Institute was providing much needed service, some posts for trained teachers were vacant and many of the instruments were out of order. She also visited the Tripura Govt's Mahila Ashram and on her way back attended a meeting on women and media at the Institute of Development Studies, Calcutta University.

- Member Neeva Konwar attended a Regional Workshop sponsored by NCW to assess the availability, utilization and impact of Micro Credit organized by the NEDFI at Guwahati. The main thrust of the Regional Workshop was on the use of micro credit facilities in North-Eastern Region and its impact on the development of infrastructural facilities in the NE region.

Later, she visited Dhing in Nagaon District to enquire into a case whereby a woman was molested and raped by her father-in-law. She also met the victim, her relatives and witnesses.

From the Complaints Cell

- The Commission received a complaint from Smt. Shanti Devi, w/o Mangalal Rao, Village Kanana, District Barmer, Rajasthan, alleging that for the last 2 years widow pension, due to her, had been stopped. She had been declared dead. She represented to the concerned department for redressal but no action was taken by the concerned authorities. On the receipt of the complaint, the matter was taken up with the District Collector, Barmer and the Collector informed the Commission that the stand of Shanti Devi had been found to be correct and necessary instructions had been issued by the District Collector to the Treasury office, Barmer. Also the concerned Patwari had been proceeded against departmentally for stopping the pension on false grounds.
- Ms. Rupali Jain had represented to the Commission that her services in a school run by a non-governmental organization were terminated without assigning any reason. She had taken leave for appearing in an examination. The Commission had taken up the matter with the District Collector, Ferozabad, who reported to the Commission that on the intervention of the Commission Ms. Rupali Jain had been allowed to join back as her grievance was found to be genuine.
- Smt. Chanchal Bajaj, a resident of Delhi represented to the Commission that she owned a flat at Gurgaon jointly with her son. Her son got married and was residing at Gurgaon in a rented flat. Smt. Bajaj allowed her son to shift to the Gurgaon flat after getting its possession. Earlier, Smt. Bajaj was residing in government accommodation. She is now residing in a flat in Delhi on rent which she cannot afford. Therefore, she, too, wanted to shift into the Gurgaon flat. However, her son and daughter-in-law did not allow her to enter into the flat. The matter was taken up in the Commission and three counselling sessions were held. Thereafter, Sachin Bajaj, son of Chanchal Bajaj gave a cheque of Rs. 5,49,000/- to his mother after selling the flat at Gurgaon. The matter was, thus, compromised with the intervention of the Commission to the satisfaction of both the parties.

NCW Gets a New Member



A former member of the Karnataka Legislative Council, **Ms. Nirjala Venkatesh** joined the Commission on 15th July, 2005. A social activist, Ms. Venkatesh has been working for the poor and downtrodden for many years. Widely travelled, throughout India, Ms. Venkatesh's first-hand knowledge about the grassroot women of India will stand her in good stead while working in the Commission. We welcome Ms. Venkatesh to the Commission.

Women MPs Meet to Discuss Strategy

With the women's reservation bill once again failing to find place in the government's agenda for parliament, women MPs under the aegis of National Commission for women met recently to chalk out their strategy.

The meeting had been called by the NCW to discuss the scenario regarding the women's reservation bill and domestic violence bill.

NCW Chairperson, Dr. Girija Vyas appealed to women MPs, social activists, lawyers, academicians and others to take up the cause of the two proposed laws in parliament, noting that women need to build up pressure on the government. The meeting also discussed other issues that have to be taken up in parliament such as need for reforms in rape laws, the growing evil of female foeticide and steps needed to stop harassment of women for dowry.

After detailed discussions consensus emerged on the following points :

- The meeting strongly supported the passage of Bill on Domestic Violence after taking into account the recommendations made by the National Commission for Women.
- It was also agreed to request all political parties to support the Bill for reservation of seats for women in the Parliament and State Assemblies. The Bill should be introduced as early as possible in its original form.
- If need be, the Commission may meet the Prime Minister and submit a Memorandum requesting him to use his good offices in having these Bills passed. In the delegation, the Chairpersons of the State Commissions for Women may also be included.



At the meeting of Women MPs Ms. Rajni Patil, Ms. Krishna Tirath, Ms. Meira Kumar, Dr. Girija Vyas, Ms. Kanti Singh, Ms. Suryakanta Patil, Kumari Selja

Important Decisions

Talaqnama valid, say HC

The Bombay High Court has ruled that a Muslim woman who wishes to marry a second time a Hindu man can do so as the *talaqnama*, issued by the religious head is a valid document nullifying a marriage and in that case a court decree is not required and she can marry under the Special Marriage Act without changing her religion.

Witchcraft law to protect women

The Chhattisgarh government will soon enact a law to prevent atrocities on women in the name of witchcraft making witchcraft a non-bailable offence.

Also, those who harass women for witchcraft will be slapped a rigorous prison term up to five years and a fine. The law will cover those who claim to possess powers of black magic, evil eyes or who claim to be witch doctors. Those who allege others to be witches will face prison term up to three years and a fine.

Anyone claiming to be a witch herself will be subjected to a year's imprisonment and a fine.

HC upholds right of Muslim girls to reject child marriage

In a landmark judgement, the Rajasthan High Court has upheld the right of Muslim girls to reject the marriages, solemnised in childhood by their parents, after attaining the age of 15 years, but before turning 18.

The judges ruled that under the law applicable to both Hindus and Muslims, women have the right to reject such marriages.

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