

Equality of Opportunities vs Equality of Results

Improving Women's Reservation Bill

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I am as amused by the title of Meena Dhanda's article, 'Representation of Women: Should Feminists Support Quotas?' (*EPW*, August 12, 2000) as I am by its content. Firstly, the title assumes that feminists in India were waiting all this while for Dhanda's approval and clearance before they decided what stand or course of action they should take on the issue of quotas for women. Dhanda should know by now that all feminists do not support the Women's Reservation Bill sponsored by the government (GWRB). At the same time, numerous respected feminists of India, as well as many leading non-feminist women, are endorsing, and actively supporting the Alternative Women's Reservation Bill (AWRB) proposed by the *Manushi*-initiated, Forum for Democratic Reforms. Funnily enough, Dhanda's exhortation to feminists to take a positive stand on the GWRB has come four years into the debate. Therefore, it would have been more appropriate if Dhanda had subtitled her article, 'Why Meena Dhanda Received a Late Wake-up Call to Support the Sarkari Women's Reservation Bill'.

Her defence of the GWRB assumes that if flag-waving feminists support the bill, it will become a sacred cause. Actually, the bill has gotten stuck in a stalemate, not for lack of feminist support but because the vast majority of women in India have not yet put their weight behind it. Dhanda, and those who agree with her, should actually be addressing themselves to this important question rather than resting content with the thought that "women from more than 40 voluntary organisations, including both rural and urban based, called for a united support for the women's bill" (p 2975). If women's organisations who are supporting the GWRB fail to mobilise mass electoral

support, then their 'resolutions' will not take them very far.

Dhanda marshals nearly 32 authorities, half of them western academics writing and theorising in substantially different contexts, and cites from 37 articles, papers, and reports – but does not take the trouble to read even a reasonable sample of the more than 20 articles I have written on the subject of her paper (four of them in *Manushi*, Nos 96, 97, 107 and 116).

She builds her entire case on just one piece I wrote in *EPW* four years ago ('Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas', *EPW*, October 26, 1996). Even with that she labours so hard to misrepresent my argument that it is unrecognisable even for me. At the end of her article she piously declares: "If an alternative legislation were put on offer...then the alternative legislation should also be discussed along with the currently proposed one." She adds in footnote No 5, "...opposition to this legislation also needs to rise to the task of providing 'more subtle and nuanced' alternatives. Until such alternatives emerge, we should discuss seriously the legislation that is at present on offer." Is it possible that Dhanda is oblivious of our easily available, well known and much debated Alternative Women's Reservation Bill published in *Manushi*, No 116 and circulated as a campaign document by our Forum for Democratic Reforms?

In her zeal to attack my view, she also overlooks the fact that Yogendra Yadav, whose contribution she acknowledges gratefully in a footnote for having supported her "theoretical" treatise against *Manushi*'s position, has changed his position of support to the GWRB and become a co-author of the AWRB drafted at *Manushi*'s initiative. One can understand that being based in Oxford Dhanda is out of touch with ground realities in India, but being an academic she cannot afford to be so intellectually lazy that she

avoids acquainting herself with easily accessible, written material on the subject of her deliberations.

There are so many inaccuracies and false statements in Dhanda's article in relation to my position on quotas that, for lack of space, I cannot possibly deal with them all here. Therefore, I will focus on just a few while at the same time introducing readers of *EPW* to the advantages of the alternative legislation we have proposed.

Right at the start, Dhanda tells us that she feels called upon to reframe the debate on the issue in terms of concerns of "identity and representation", not realising that these have been precisely the points of reference for *Manushi* and other women's organisations engaged with this issue. What else could they be? According to Dhanda, the "bulk of the debate on the question of gender quotas has been conducted in 'consequentialist terms' ". And what does this esoteric term mean? 'Being concerned about the consequences of a particular action'. Simply put, Dhanda seems to propose that important political measures be undertaken with no regard to their potential or actual consequences.

Dhanda's article demonises me as a cynical opponent of the GWRB when anyone who has even a cursory acquaintance with what I have said or written or campaigned for would know that I do not oppose special legislative measures to enhance women's participation in our legislatures. They would know that over the last four years I have been steadfastly proposing improvements to the original bill, which is a seriously flawed piece of legislation for the following reasons:

(1) The basic shortcoming is that one-third of the seats in our legislatures are sought to be reserved through a rotating lottery system. The bill provides for the rotation of reserved seats in every general election. This rotation will automatically result in two-thirds of the incumbents being forcibly unseated in every general election. The remaining one-third will be left in a limbo until the last moment, not knowing if their constituency will form part of the one-third randomly-reserved seats or not. This will require them to scramble at short notice to find another seat from which to contest. Such compulsory unseating violates the very basic principles of democratic representation. It

jeopardises the possibility of sensible planning to contest and nurture a political constituency, for both male and female candidates.

(2) Women legislators, when elected, under a rotating quota will not be able to nurse their constituencies on a long-term basis, because after the de-reservation of that constituency after one term, they are not likely to get a ticket for the same seat. Thus, they will be deprived of a strong political base and will forever be regarded as lightweight politicians. This in effect will make their presence in legislatures ornamental, and will render less effective their participation in politics.

(3) If legislators do not have the incentive to seek re-election from the same constituency, politics will become even more predatory and unaccountable. This will contribute to a more unstable political process and make it difficult for women to build their long-term credibility as effective representatives, since they will not be able to contest twice from the same constituency. In such a situation, those men who get pushed out of their constituencies at the last moment or who see their allies sidelined, will either sabotage female contenders in revenge or spend much of their political capital helping their own female relatives in cornering these reserved seats, thus undermining the very objective of the bill. Women brought in as proxies would be expected to keep the seats safe for men until the next election, when they would again try to reclaim their seats. Such women would lack legitimacy in the eyes of the voters.

(4) Since women are not likely to be given party tickets to contest from general constituencies if the territorial quota becomes operational, this will put an artificial freeze of 33 per cent on women's representation and ghettoise women's politics.

(5) Women elected in reserved constituencies will be contesting against other women only and will lack the legitimacy and opportunity needed to prove their ability and acceptability. Confining women to fight elections only against other women, amounts to declaring that women are not competent to face men. Leadership acquired in such a manner will be seen as unnatural, artificial and as having been foisted on the electorate.

(6) The GWRB is completely silent about women's representation in the Rajya Sabha.

Dhanda's casual dismissal of these basic flaws in the lottery-based quotas proposed in the GWRB would be laughable if it was

not published in a prestigious journal like *EPW*. The fact that under the lottery-based rotation, neither male nor female politicians would be able to plan their political future, prepare an electoral base by long-term work in the constituency, because they would not be able to seek re-election twice in succession from the same constituency, is dismissed flippantly with the following comment:

If the interests of women voters are to be catered to at all, reservation by lot cannot but be a good device. The reason it would be a good device is that every constituency will have to be alert to the possibility of it being the next reserved one, so that no one who seeks election from a constituency can afford to neglect women's interests (p2971).

Such a naive statement can come only from someone who has a very superficial familiarity with the realities of Indian society and politics. Nowhere in India are women voting, or acting, as an organised vote-bank on women's issues. Caste and community considerations play an overwhelming role in women's voting behaviour – at the cost of their gender identity. Most of those who advocate reservations have no electoral base and have not managed to organise women as a political constituency. This is an important reason why male politicians have been able to get away with actually tearing the Women's Reservation Bill to shreds in parliament. Even after it was surreptitiously tabled by the law minister, Jethmalani, they have succeeded in stalling all efforts to have it discussed in parliament: They know very well that women voters in their constituency are not going to hold them to account for this. Therefore, to think that all male politicians will become sensitive to women's 'interests' simply because of rotation, amounts to living in cloud-cuckoo-land. In fact, many of our women politicians are themselves not sensitive to women's concerns.

The GWRB has met with a humiliating fate, not just because "the interests of the two [men and women] clash", – as Dhanda would have us believe – but primarily because women are not yet an organised political group, as they are in the US, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and some of the Scandinavian countries.

Dhanda asserts that my opposition to the GWRB is based on the fact that I am cynical about the calibre of women parliamentarians who will emerge out of the quota system. Much of my writing on the subject deals with the distortions in our

political system and the consequent declining standards of our political representatives – both male and female. This is not due to our various quotas. Rather, it is the product of a more fundamental weakness of our system of governance, insofar as it allows the holding of public office to be used as a licence to loot and plunder. That is why our electoral politics has come to be dominated by money, muscle power and downright criminals. Such an atmosphere is not conducive to the emergence of Hansa Mehtas, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyays or Sarojini Naidus – just as in today's polity, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Sardar Patels could not survive. Hence *Manushi* has taken on the larger task of campaigning for a comprehensive and far-reaching package of electoral reforms, in addition to lobbying for improvements in the Reservation Bill. In pursuit of that end, our Forum for Democratic Reforms has actually prepared a draft bill which we will put on the national political agenda as we did with our AWRB.

To counter the shortsighted provision of lottery-based reservations, I had first proposed a system of multi-seat or dual-member constituencies, a version of which has been recently implemented by the Labour Party in England (see *Manushi* 96 and 97 of 1996). Through these years I have been consistently appealing that we seriously examine and learn from the success of democracies of Northern Europe and Scandinavia – Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Finland – which have implemented voluntary, party-based quotas for women, with extremely encouraging results. Our Alternative Bill uses the party-based quotas model of Scandinavian countries, but with specific safeguards built into it keeping the requirements of Indian polity in mind (*Manushi* 116). The

Table 1: Independents Elected to Lok Sabha in Successive General Elections

Year	No of Seats Filled	No of Independents Elected	Percentage of Independents Who Lost Deposit
1952	489	38	66.6
1957	494	42	60.1
1962	494	20	79.0
1967	520	35	86.2
1971	518	14	94.0
1977	542	09	97.2
1980	529	09	98.9
1984	542	05	99.7
1989	529	12	98.9
1991	534	01	99.5
1996	542	09	99.7
1998	542	06	99.1

Source: Lok Satta Data Unit.

important provisions of our bill are as follows:

Alternative Women's Reservation Bill

(1) A law should be enacted amending the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to make it mandatory for every recognised political party to nominate women candidates for election in one-third of the constituencies.

(2) Among seats reserved for SCs and STs also, one-third of the candidates nominated by recognised parties should be women.

(3) To prevent a party from nominating women candidates only in states or constituencies where the party's chances of winning elections are weak, and to ensure an even spread of women candidates, the unit for consideration (the unit in which at least one out of three party candidates shall be a woman) for the Lok Sabha shall be a state or union territory. For the State Legislative Assembly, the unit shall be a cluster of three contiguous Lok Sabha constituencies.

(4) In the event of any recognised party failing to nominate one-third women candidates, for the shortfall of every single woman candidate, two male candidates of the party shall lose the party symbol and affiliation and all the recognition-related advantages.

(5) A law, amending Articles 80 and 171 of the Constitution, should be enacted providing for women's quota of one-third of the seats, elected or nominated to the Rajya Sabha or Legislative Councils. Corresponding amendments need to be made in the Fourth Schedule of the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act, 1950.

Advantages of This Model

(1) Parties will be free to choose their women candidates and constituencies taking local political and social factors into account. Parties will nurture women candidates, where they can offer a good fight, rather than in pre-fixed lottery-based constituencies, where they may or may not have viable women candidates. Thus there is flexibility and natural promotion of leadership.

(2) Though seats are not reserved, there will be a large pool of credible and serious women candidates in the fray. If parties field more women candidates, the proportion of elected women is bound to increase. This is so because the real contest

in elections is only among candidates nominated by recognised parties. Table 1 clearly shows that the role of Independents in our elections is marginal and declining. In Lok Sabha elections, as many as 99.7 per cent of Independents lost their caution deposits.

(3) A woman candidate will be contesting both against female and male candidates of rival parties. Therefore, the democratic choice of voters is not restricted to compulsorily electing only women candidates.

(4) As women members are elected in competition with other candidates – without reserving seats – they will be seen as legitimate representatives in the eyes of the public and not just beneficiaries of charitable measures.

(5) A woman candidate who wins will have been elected on her own strength, backed by party support. She will not be a mere proxy or political lightweight.

(6) There will be no need for rotation of reservations. Therefore, the elected women and men can nurture their constituencies and emerge as major political figures in their own right, with an independent power base.

(7) At the same time, in the absence of reserved seats, there will be healthy competition between men and women politicians for nomination to a particular seat.

(8) This model also provides for reservation of seats for women in the Rajya Sabha, and legislative councils, something the GWRB has altogether ignored.

(9) Parties will be able to nominate women from BCs, minorities and other communities for elective office in areas where there is electoral advantage to them. This obviates the need for a quota within quotas – an issue which has blocked the existing bill. Those who are concerned about OBC representation need not settle merely for one-third quota for BC women within the 33 per cent women's quota as they are demanding now. They can field as many BC or minority women as they think appropriate.

(10) This method is most likely to find favour with political parties and incumbent legislators, as there will be no fear of being uprooted at short notice by draw of lots. Both compulsory reservation and regular rotation are avoided.

(11) Unlike with the lottery system of reserved constituencies, in which women's

Table 2: The Gender Advantage

Though the number of women elected to Lok Sabha has not been very impressive, their success rate (per cent of contestants getting elected) has always been higher than the male aspirants

Year	No of Seats Available	Total No of Contestants	Male			Female		
			Contested	Elected	Per Cent Winning	Contested	Elected	Per Cent Winning
1952	489	1,874	-	-	-	-	-	-
1957	494	1,518	1,473	467	31.7	45	27	60.0
1962	494	1,985	1,915	459	24.0	70	35	50.0
1967	520	2,369	2,302	490	21.3	67	30	44.8
1971	520	2,784	2,698	499	18.5	86	21	24.4
1977	542	2,439	2,369	523	22.1	70	19	27.1
1980	542	4,620	4,478	514	11.5	142	28	19.7
1984	542	5,570	5,406	500	9.2	164	42	25.6
1989	529	6,160	5,962	502	8.5	198	27	13.6
1991	521	8,699	8,374	492	5.9	325	39	12.0
1996	543	13,952	13,353	504	3.8	599	39	6.7
1998	543	4,750	4,476	500	11.2	274	43	15.7
Total			52,806	5,450	10.32	2,040	350	17.16

Note: Gender-wise data for 1952 not available.

Source: *The Times of India*, New Delhi, September 14, 1999.

Table 3: Comparative Performance of Men and Women Candidates of Recognised Parties in Lok Sabha Elections

Year	Total Party Candidates Contested	Elected	Per Cent	Male			Female		
				Contested	Elected	Per Cent Winning	Contested	Elected	Per Cent Winning
1984	1,394	510	36.59	1,327	469	35.34	67	41	61.19
1989	1,523	498	32.70	1,437	474	32.99	86	24	27.91
1991	2,319	516	22.25	2,180	479	21.97	139	37	26.62
1996	2,269	530	23.36	2,153	493	22.90	116	37	31.90
1998	1,964	488	24.85	1,831	451	24.63	133	37	27.82
Total	9,469	2,542	26.85	8,928	2,366	26.50	541	176	32.53

Source: Compiled by Lok Sabha Data Unit from Statistical Reports on General Election, Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

presence is likely to get ossified at 33 per cent since there would be resistance to letting women contest from non-reserved constituencies, this model allows for far greater flexibility in the number and proportion of women being elected to legislatures. If women are candidates for one-third of all seats contested by each party, theoretically they could even win the vast majority of seats – all on merit. However, given the present state of affairs, it is likely that, to begin with, about one-third of the contested seats will be won by women. But this percentage is likely to grow over time as women gain more confidence and strength. It also ensures that their presence in legislatures more nearly reflects their actual electoral strength so that they are not seen as mere recipients of charitable measures.

Plugging Possible Loopholes

A party may be tempted to nominate women from constituencies where it is weak. However, by making the unit of consideration the state or union territory for Lok Sabha, and a cluster of three Lok Sabha constituencies for the legislative assembly, this risk is avoided. Parties will be compelled to nominate women in all states and regions. No serious party seeking power can afford to deliberately undermine its own chances of election on such a large scale. By failing to support and nurture women candidates, a party will be jeopardising the winning chances of twice the number of its male candidates who will lose the reserved symbol for this non-compliance.

In the absence of actual reservation of seats, there could be fears that women may not be elected in one-third constituencies, as the voters may prefer a male candidate over a female candidate on account of gender bias. However, evidence so far suggests that women candidates of parties have not suffered any gender discrimination at the hands of voters. In fact, very often, the percentage of success of women candidates is higher than that of male candidates. Table 2 shows that the success rate of women candidates in Lok Sabha elections has been uniformly higher than that of their male counterparts in every general election. It is possible to argue that the few women who contest are more often party candidates, and therefore, their success rate is exaggerated. However, Table 3 clearly shows that even among candidates of recognised political parties, the success rate of women candidates is higher than

that of men. While 32.53 per cent of women candidates of recognised parties have been elected to Lok Sabha since 1984, the success rate of male candidates is only 26.50 per cent. This trend is seen in all general elections since 1984, except in 1989. This points to an important strength in our polity – that is voters do not discriminate against women. Nor are they averse to preferring women over men as the career graphs of Jayalalitha, Mamta Banerji, Maneka Gandhi, Uma Bharati, and Mayawati show. Women are marginalised because party bosses do not give them tickets or even organisational responsibility. Therefore, it is the male party bosses who need to be pushed into making space for women. Voters do not need to be compelled to vote for women because they show no comparable resistance to electing women. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that women will be elected in large numbers, and that, in fact, their presence in Lok Sabha will exceed one-third in many cases, if each party gives 33 per cent tickets to women.

Regrettably, this carefully thought out exercise of suggesting a more workable formula for reservations finds not even a fleeting mention in Dhanda's treatise. As a result, Dhanda's article appears more like an exercise in using a dummy construct as a punching bag because she dares not engage with *Manushi's* real position.

The following para is one of the many examples of how Dhanda has selectively picked up out of context phrases and sentences from different parts of my *EPW* article to present a caricature of my views by stringing them together in one para and cooking up an altogether different argument and thrust from the one I intended:

She [Kishwar] takes care to note that while the electorate is receptive to the idea of women in power, the leaders may not be. Therefore, she argues, we must not look towards pushing women into the legislature amidst 'gangster' politicians, but "leaders and parties will have to initiate widespread social reform movements within their respective communities" to "realistically prepare ground for women to emerge..." [Kishwar 1996]. This, she considers, is particularly important for 'backward castes' (p 2970).

The point about the electorate being "receptive to the idea of women in power", but leaders not being ready to accept power sharing with women was made to emphasise that the low representation of women in Indian legislatures is not due to women's inability to face electoral battles and win

them as is true for many other countries where women fear rejection by voters simply because they are women. Women's marginalisation in Indian polity is due to the fact that party bosses keep them out of the electoral fray by denying them tickets to contest elections. The point made was that fielding a higher proportion of women in elections is bound to result in a higher proportion getting elected. The Indian voters have demonstrated their pro-women bias time and again with women candidates outperforming male aspirants in almost every election since 1951.

"We must not look towards pushing women amidst gangster politicians" was said to make an altogether different point – namely, that the marginalisation of women is a part and parcel of the marginalisation of decent, honest people in politics. The politics of post-independence India has proved inhospitable to women as money, muscle power and crime have come to dominate Indian politics. This point emphasises the need for far-reaching and wide-ranging electoral reforms rather than being an argument against the preparedness of Indian women to take their rightful place in the political arena.

My plea went as follows: Given the increasing criminalisation of electoral politics, women are getting sidelined. Those who survive are those who come attached to, and patronised by, powerful male leaders. By forcibly unseating a sizeable number of male leaders through an unpredictable lottery system, we encourage the tendency of male leaders to sabotage the whole process by putting up proxy women for the one reserved term. Our parliament would be filled with too many rubber stamps like Rabri Devi in that case.

I went on to plead that feminists ought not to be confined to the politics of the *zanana dabba*. They should be equally concerned about effecting overall electoral reforms. That is why the document prepared to campaign for an improved women's reservation scheme ends with a detailed statement on the far-reaching electoral reforms we envisage as a pre-condition to making our politics worthy of women.

The point about the need for political leaders to initiate widespread social reforms in their respective communities to combat the crippling restrictions placed on women was made in an altogether different context, in response to the obstructionist tactics used by male OBC leaders to sabotage the Women's Reservation Bill. They had wrongly argued that the women's quota

would be cornered by upper caste, upper class women because of caste prejudice in allocating tickets.

I pointed out that if today OBC leaders fail to find an adequate number of women candidates for electoral battles, it is because they have made no space for them in their parties. OBC women lag behind because their men impose oppressive and restrictive practices in their own communities with regard to women's participation in public life, especially in north India, where the bulk of male leaders opposed to the Bill come from. Low sex ratio, 'purdah', illiteracy, severe restrictions on women's mobility, all are characteristic features of the communities from which these leaders come. Therefore, the extent to which the OBC women remain peripheral in politics is directly related to the attitude of men in their own communities rather than due to the discrimination at the hands of 'upper' castes.

I went on to add that wherever and whenever male leaders had taken the initiative to carry out this internal reform, the results had been encouraging, as the experience of the Sharad Joshi-led Shetkari Sangathana shows. The support base of this organisation is mainly among small and middle farmers of OBC castes in Maharashtra. Yet Joshi was able to galvanise lakhs of women to play a role in the farmers' movement because he made serious efforts to empower women by adhering to non-violent modes of protest and building a culture of respect for women in the organisation. Furthermore, the Sangathana promoted all-women panels in panchayats, and made special attempts to field women in zilla parishad and Vidhan Sabha elections. His organisation made a significant impact on gender relations in rural Maharashtra by carrying out campaigns against domestic violence and liquor consumption, and by calling for the granting of inheritance rights to women. Therefore, my point was that if OBC leaders want to ensure that OBC women are not overshadowed by 'forward-caste' women, they have to learn to make respectful space for women of their communities in public life and their villages violence-free.

In her enthusiasm to prove that my appeal for cultural reform among OBC communities is derogatory to OBC women, Dhanda does not even get her ABC of politics and sociology right. She says: "Strikingly, it is women politicians of the 'backward castes' that have 'emerged' in the current

climate of flux in the Indian political scene. One is tempted to offer a straight instance of falsification of Kishwar's theory, that women are not yet ready and need a preparatory social reform movement to make a proper entry into politics. The instance is Mayawati, who is the first among 'low caste' women to become the chief minister of a state" (p 2970).

Firstly, Mayawati is not a 'backward caste' leader – but a scheduled caste politician. If one Mayawati is enough to prove that women are ready and prepared for the electoral arena, why are there not more Mayawatis in Mayawati's own party? Why does she remain the queen bee in the Bahujan Samaj Party and no one hears of any other female politician of note in the BSP? Mayawati herself does not deny, as does Dhanda, that it was Kanshi Ram's special patronage that helped her in the initial years to gain prominence. This does not blind me to the fact that Mayawati went on to create her own special base in her party and is today a formidable leader in her own right, in the same way that Indira Gandhi first became prime minister, solely on account of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, but later built up her own independent political base. Just as one Indira Gandhi, even as prime minister, did not prove the readiness of all Indian women to take on the male political establishment, so also Mayawati, the first dalit woman to become the chief minister of a state, is not proof enough that dalit women have acquired the strength to win electoral battles on their own or even that all dalit men are ready to promote women of their community in the way that Kanshi Ram promoted Mayawati.

Dhanda says it is my "unquestioned assertion" that "even the most untalented of men do not allow themselves" to be used as proxies. She goes on to allege that my "unstated conclusion has to be that even an intelligent, albeit, dependent woman, makes a worse parliamentarian than the most untalented supposedly independent man." Thereafter, she puts me in the company of Immanuel Kant who denied active citizenship to women because they 'do not possess civil independence.' In other words, she claims that my suggestions for improving the bill make me no different from all those who want women treated as subject people lacking basic rights.

It is clear that Dhanda's rhetoric lacks awareness of the history of the initiatives taken to strengthen women's rights in the last few decades. Even the worst enemy of *Manushi* would not hesitate to admit

that *Manushi* has played a leading role in putting issues of women's empowerment on the political agenda. And *Manushi* started this process much before women's issues became fashionable and much before flag-waving Indian feminists like Dhanda learnt to hurl academic jargon at us.

Finally, it is not just that Dhanda distorts and falsifies my views on the subject, she does a similar exercise in distorting the history of how the idea of reservations for women came to occupy such an important place on our political agenda. Dhanda bases her entire case on the assumption that it was the feminist lobby which took the lead in advocating for a whole decade the cause of women's inclusion in local as well as central government. To quote her: "The fruit of their [feminist] labour was the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution enacted unanimously by the parliament in 1992." She attributes the present stalemate over the GWRB to the fact that the "interests of the two collectivities [men and women] clash." For her it is "hardly surprising that the women's bill was so easily scuttled in the predominantly male Indian parliament..."

She either does not know or does not remember that the initiatives for these measures at the village, district and national level were taken by men, even before feminists thought of, or demanded, such measures. The process began in the 1980s with Ramakrishna Hegde's government in Karnataka. As an integral part of the process of bringing about significant devolution of powers to panchayats in Karnataka, Hegde and his colleague Nazir Sahib introduced 25 per cent reservation of seats for women in all the panchayats of the state. The enthusiasm generated by this experiment inspired Rajiv Gandhi to initiate a similar move in the entire country, hence the 73rd and 74th amendments. Dhanda fails to appreciate the significance of the fact that these amendments were passed unanimously by parliament in 1992, which was no less male-dominated than the present one.

In those days reservation was not a fashionable issue among feminists. Nor had international aid organisations put their weight behind this brand of affirmative action. That is why men like Hegde were neither feted nor celebrated by the feminists. Even the present bill came into existence because some of the male leaders like Mani Shankar Aiyar of the Congress Party worked tirelessly to put it on the political agenda of the Congress

Party. Most feminists, including those Dhanda cites as being the crusaders for women's quotas, were in fact opposed to women's reservation till the late 1980s. It is only when the GWRB met with resistance in parliament, when various western-aid-agency funded NGOs began to support this form of women's empowerment, that the whole issue was transformed into a rhetorical feminist battle against Indian patriarchy.

The biggest irony of this farcical bill is that the western fund-givers, who are supporting the NGOs' campaign for lottery-based quotas for women in India, would never dare suggest such an absurd form of affirmative action in their own countries. This is a classic case of third world countries being considered worthy of third rate legislation.

I challenge Dhanda to check with Anne Phillips and all the other western feminist authorities she quotes, whether they are willing to propose such a legislation for their own countries. Western feminists know that they would make themselves objects of ridicule if they dared propose such an absurd measure. That is why in western democracies they are demanding and implementing 'equality of opportunity' through party-based quotas. However, Indian feminists of Dhanda's ilk insist on 'equality of results' – they want that a certain fixed per cent of women *must* win, irrespective of whether there are grounds for such a victory or not.

I, for one, am convinced that a good part of male resistance to 33 per cent representation for women is due to the shoddy handling of the issue by the pro-reservationist activists. For years they insisted that the bill should be passed without as much as a debate. This shows utter lack of respect for democratic norms. A bill requiring an amendment to the Constitution, and with far-reaching consequences, ought to be thoroughly debated and seriously considered before adoption. Pro-GWRB women activists steadfastly refused to accept even well-meaning suggestions for improvement to the bill. Anyone, who dared to point out some of its flaws or propose a better alternative, was attacked, vilified and treated as a saboteur, as Dhanda has done in her article. If feminists of her persuasion are bent upon preventing a healthy debate and crushing even the mildest voices of dissent within the women's movement, they should not complain when they invite similar responses from men.

Finally, a comment on the gap between Dhanda's ideology and praxis. She declares rather righteously that "The feminist [approach] is committed to evolving ways of communicating between women, and in most cases between men and women." I cannot comment on how successful Dhanda is in communicating with men, but I certainly do feel that Dhanda's article fails as an exercise in building communication channels with other women, such as myself. The essence of communication is a sincere effort to understand

the other person's viewpoint, even if one does not agree with it. The essence of communication is also the willingness to listen to another person with an open mind. Those who distort, caricature and vilify another individual, and conjure up a dummy figure for attack in order to prove themselves right, cannot possibly be called effective communicators, no matter with what gusto they wave the feminist flag and no matter how many international feminist academics they quote and footnote. [FWW](#)