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## **An Open Letter to Shri L.K. Advani about Women Reservation Bill**

Dear Shri Advani,

In the early nineties, I learnt the nuances of correct political behavior while serving tea, snacks and meals to you. In those days, you were not only my guru; you were the God of many in the country. In those days you were seen as a person who was standing up for his beliefs facing up sharp criticism from everyone in the so-called mainstream media and politics. You were the icon of rising Hindu nationalism. Not many really understood (and even today understand) what Hindu nationalism means. But people liked a man who was standing up for his convictions and who was daring the country to think differently.

The world has indeed changed a lot since the early nineties. It pains me to see somebody whom I count as one of my gurus being viewed as a person who is only playing the game of politics as it comes along. I am sorry to say that you are no longer viewed as a person who has the courage to stand apart from the crowd. On 9 March, 2010 the country saw a scenario which pained all those who have a soft corner for Hindu nationalism. My heart bleeds when I say this. The fact is that on the issue of The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill (popularly called Women's Reservation Bill), under your leadership, BJP acted as a C-team of the Congress (Left being the B team).

If the BJP or you in person were acting as handmaids of Congress or for that matter of any party or individual to further national interest, I would have been the first person to stand up and applaud it. Women's Reservation Bill cannot be called in national interest by any stretch of imagination.

Reservation of seats in Parliament and Legislative bodies will surely create opportunities for about 2000 odd women to get salaries, perks and the underhand commissions / bribes that are currently pocketed by men. Can the prosperity of these 2000 odd women be called national interest or even growth of women of India? Pakistan, I understand, has almost double the representation of women in Parliament as compared to India. Does it mean that the women in Pakistan are any better off than the women of India? Do more women in Pakistani parliament mean that the democracy in Pakistan is any better than in India? Women form more than half the members of parliament of Rwanda. What does that mean for women of Rwanda? Practically nothing! Clearly there is no relationship between the status of women in a society and the number of women in parliament. Similarly, increasing the number of women in parliament does not strengthen democracy in any way.

Talking of democracy, one would have expected from a person who never tires of talking about his struggle for democracy during the emergency to abstain from issuing a whip for a controversial constitution amendment bill. Parliamentary whips are unique fascist

appendages to Indian political system. In no other large democracy, a whip issued by party bosses enjoys constitutional power. Nowhere else in the world, a Member of Parliament can lose his membership for voting as per his conscience. This is sheer mockery of democracy. The least that one expects from champions of democracy like you is to use this fascist power with some restraint.

Surely I do not need to tell you that democracy is not as much about elections as it is about free debate and discussions. Puppets dance and perform; they do not discuss and debate. It is sad that The Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, which was inserted in 1985, has reduced Indian Parliament to a place where puppets perform as per the strings moved by their masters. There can be no denying that the debates in Parliament have become a farce ever since no one is allowed to change one's mind based on what one hears. One obviously cannot expect such farcical debates to be of any standard since their meaninglessness is known to everyone. The key issue for people concerned about democracy in India should be about how to raise the level of debates in houses of parliament and legislative bodies.

Unfortunately, the direction that Indian polity has taken is exactly the opposite. Reservation of seats for women by rotation will ensure more puppets and not aid growth of tall individuals who can stand up for their beliefs. Every woman who gets elected from a reserved seat will know that she will not be able to contest a second term since in the next term, the seat will be de-reserved. Similarly, every male member will know that there is only half a chance that he will be able to contest from the seat again since there is 50% probability that the seat will become reserved for women in the next term. Much has been said about how this will lead to disinterest of elected representatives in nurturing their constituencies. But the other aspect that has been often ignored is that it will create a situation where most of the members of Parliament and Legislative Assemblies will be first-timers. The absence of seniors from the august bodies will make them hollow. It will, of course, help the party bosses who do not want elected representatives to have a mind; who want their elected representatives to be robotic animals who raise hands as per the cracking of the whip.

The need for robotic animals to fill up the benches of houses of Indian Parliament and legislative bodies is felt acutely by many. I can understand that those who want to harvest a large crop of souls in Asia during the twenty first century do not want high mental level among law-makers of India. I can also understand that one needs morons in large numbers and at key places to hand over crown to successive generations of a dynasty whose intelligence levels are constantly on the decline. Everyone knows that parties, who sympathize with terror groups, whether red or green, want to weaken Indian democracy. For all such parties and groups, nothing can be better than reducing Indian Parliament to a dysfunctional moronic state. What I fail to understand is how this fits into the agenda of a party that claims to be nationalistic.

Surely I know that as a leader of a large party like BJP, you have the unenviable task of managing your unwieldy crowd – and a whip helps. Exasperated by the difficult task, it is difficult to resist the temptation of castrating every single spirited calf and bull. And if all that one has to do is to put up a puppet-show for the benefit of gullible fools called

masses, why not just get some dwarf docile animals who rise up or sit just on cue without the need of even a whip.

Advani ji, at this point please permit me to stop and ask you a personal question. Why did you become a *pracharak* of RSS? Did you agree to devote your life for RSS and its ideology so that one day you may be a part of the process that destroys the Indian parliamentary democracy to a puppet show of dwarf, docile animals? In 1975, when Mrs. Gandhi declared emergency, she was afraid that some members of her own party may eventually turn against her. In fact this was one of the fears that forced her to order elections in 1977. With the Tenth Schedule and the Women's Reservation Bill creating a perfect *puppetocracy*, what are the safeguards to prevent a repeat of 1975? When all controls are put in the hands of a small number of people (read party bosses), it is always possible to manipulate or pressurize them. The best safeguard of democracy comes from large numbers of principled individuals with willingness to stand tall. You were one of such individuals during the dark days of 1975-77. Please do not be a part of the process that will create the background for a situation much worse than emergency.

RSS has always taken pride in its emphasis on nation building. Women's Reservation bill is based on the principle of divide and rule. In an Indian's mind, gender has been rarely a divisive issue. One always treats one's family as part of oneself. This *Ekatmta* (oneness) of the family is the fundamental building block of Deendayal Upadhyay ji's *Ekatm Manavwad* (Monistic Humanism). The moment one starts looking at individuals as independent entities and not as part of successively bigger wholes like family, country etc. one accepts the American philosophy of self-centered struggling life thereby throwing away the complete holistic paradigm that is unique to India. It is a matter of serious concern that the BJP which vows by monistic humanism has agreed to throw its weight behind a proposal which is based on American view of gender relations (war of sexes) and will do immense damage to the institution of family.

Fortunately, Indian society has so much resilience and adaptability that the damage is minimal. In rural and urban municipal bodies, where women's reservation has been around for some time, husbands of elected women representatives have acquired a status which is well-recognized by almost everyone unofficially. They flaunt designations like *panch-pati*, *sarpanch-pati*, *parshad-pati*, etc. In a way these new designations have allowed the family structures to remain intact while fulfilling the statutory obligations of reservations for women. It is indeed sad that no study has been conducted about the impact of reservation of seats in rural and urban municipal bodies in terms of the benefits that it has generated for the common woman or common man. My personal impression is that the experiment has been a total failure. It has damaged the fabric of society and vitiated the atmosphere in political parties without yielding any benefits for common person.

Talking of vitiated atmosphere in political parties, I am reminded of the dirty rumors that have been circulating about relations between a former Chief Minister and his widow daughter-in-law. I believe that the rumors are false. Yet, the damage that such loose talk does to reputations of individual politicians as well as the whole political system is real and enormous. The benefit that the poor widow has got by virtue of reservation is

negligible compared to the damage that she as well as the whole political system has suffered.

The crisis today in India is of the credibility of the political class. Any loose talk, that is in circulation, about who is sleeping with whom in the hierarchies of power, is really pushing the image of Indian political class to a new low. Artificial imposition of women by way of reservations in local bodies has created opportunities without creating sufficient supply of well-qualified capable and respectable women. Men politicians have often filled up the vacuum by providing women who are in some way or the other connected to them either as relatives or as partners in bed. In either case the damage is to the political system as a whole. When a woman gets elected by virtue of being a relative of some senior leader, other political workers resent it and when a woman rises up by giving favors in bed, the society views it with disdain and starts hating the political class as a whole.

It is indeed head-in-the-sand approach of the Indian political class that it fails to see the crisis that is building within. The problem that I mention about women rising by dispensing favors in bed to climb up the political ladder is neither imaginary nor confined to the level of municipal and rural bodies. If I remember correctly, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj said a few years ago that the political career of every women politician in India goes through the bedroom of some senior leader. My memory may be wrong about that statement of Sushma ji, but please prove wrong the ones who say that at least one woman member of the Upper House of Parliament nominated by BJP owes her position primarily to her relationship with a prominent leader and not to any other qualities.

My purpose in talking about such murky matters is not to malign BJP or any political party. I am taking the pains of putting on table something that is routinely brushed under the carpet to bring the malaise out in the open, so that it may be cured. Democracy cannot survive in India if the political class does not enjoy trust and respect of the people at large. Personal life of leaders may not be talked about in media but it is certainly the talk of the town in hush-hush rumors and that does more damage than can ever be imagined.

My fear is that artificial imposition of opportunities for women at state and national level politics will lead to a chain of events that will completely destroy whatever little credibility that Indian political class still has. I am afraid that may be the death knell of democracy in India.

Advani ji, if you are wondering about the so-called women activists and their fury, kindly ask them is to see through the smokescreen and not be fooled by the rhetoric. Reservation for women is neither women equality nor women empowerment nor liberty in any sense of the term. By making women fight with women only, it will spread more bitterness among women. More than that, however, is the fact that Women's Reservation will be truly like forcing women into dark unhygienic interiors of grand old *havelis* (palaces). I have always been opposed to *Mahila Morchas* (Women's Wing) in political parties. It might surprise you to know that I have spent quite some time working in the *Mahila Morcha* of BJP at the party's Central Office at Ashoka Road. The atmosphere there is insulting to the grand vision that I have of women. One is not supposed to discuss economic or social or national issues in the office of *Mahila Morcha*. Those are subjects

reserved for men. Women are supposed to talk about women's issues, which are obviously very limited. I hate this attitude that women discuss women's issues and men discuss everything else.

Segregation of women is the worst crime against women. True empowerment of women can only come when men deal with women as human beings based on their professional strengths and capabilities; and do not look upon them either as uncovered meat or as special creatures to be preserved in zoos. Reservation of seats for women is like special coaches in trains for women. It is India's great strength that in Indian trains, perfect strangers - men and women - travel together comfortably and fearlessly. In many countries like Saudi Arabia, this may well be unimaginable.

Talking of segregation, I am reminded of the first major 'women friendly' step taken by a woman who recently became Mayor of Bhopal – thanks to reservations. There are many beautiful parks in Bhopal next to the big lake. The parks have been around for decades. The new Mayor, in her zeal to be seen as pro-women, declared one park to be a women's only park. Even conservative mullahs of Bhopal had never demanded such an exclusive '*purdah*' zone. Surely, this leader of BJP believes that segregation of women is empowerment. Welcome to the new apartheid!

It is easy to blame the poor woman leader for her stupidity. She is an unfortunate product of a system and deserves more pity than criticism. The intellectual class of India has led the people to believe that gender, caste, community and religion are more important in deciding ability to govern than any other quality. Is it too much to suggest that there be a pre-qualification test for contesting in elections? The intellectual class has never even dared to suggest so, while it writes volumes singing praises for reservations of all sorts.

While there can be no denying the fact that Indian intellectual class has not lived up to the challenges of a young democracy, the political class has also not covered itself in glory. Generally, political parties in India have behaved like the proverbial dog who walking before a bullock cart assumes it is leading the cart. On the part of all parties, there is total absence of understanding of the issues facing the country. For the most part they play to limited interest groups and only try to add some more vote banks to their bag to be able to win the next election.

What makes me really sad is that I am not able to say with conviction that BJP is different. BJP was supposed to be a party that rose above vote bank politics and looked at the nation as a whole. After 9 March, can we truly say so?

The problem in any debate is that the people who set up the debate make it an either-or issue. In politics, such either-or / black-white scenarios are misleading. It has been projected that Women's Reservation Bill is pro-women and anyone opposing it is anti-women, male chauvinistic pig. This projection is obviously wrong. The nationalists led by BJP must do some out-of-the-box thinking and come up with some innovative solutions. Just to show that other alternatives are indeed possible, I put here two extreme solutions – both of which are based on equal representation for women:-

**FIRST ALTERNATIVE** – Let the concept of Members of Parliament be dispensed with. Let each party, howsoever small or big, nominate just one man and one woman to represent the party in the Parliament. The man and woman may attend either the Upper House or Lower House of Parliament as per their convenience. The votes cast by each party representative will carry weights depending on the constituencies where the party has won in the elections. So, if Congress has won say 150 seats and BJP won say 140 seats, the votes of Congress and BJP representatives will have weights of 150 and 140 respectively. This will save the country enormous amount of money that is currently spent on travel, allowances and salaries etc. of Members of Parliament. Party bosses may like it because it will make their power unfettered. With the reduced numbers, debates may become more meaningful and have less of the useless displays of oratory seen currently. On the flip side this arrangement is dangerous because it is easy to manipulate a handful of people.

**SECOND ALTERNATIVE** – In Parliamentary elections, every primary candidate must announce a running mate or co-candidate of opposite gender. The primary candidate may be a man or woman. The political couple will then contest the election as a unit. After elections, one of the two will sit in the Parliament and the other will attend to nursing of the constituency. Salary and other benefits etc. will be split between the two based on rules that may be worked out later. Nursing of constituencies will receive better attention and absenteeism in houses of parliament will hopefully reduce.

I do not wish to push for either of the above alternatives since both are trying to solve something that is not the main problem facing Indian political system today.

Major problems facing Indian political system are of credibility, mediocrity, selfishness, loss of moral values and characterless-ness of the political class. About eight decades ago, RSS was started with the objective of character building among people of the country. RSS has done great work but the problem is far from being solved – in fact, it has gone from bad to worse. We need to put our minds together for finding a solution to the crisis that is building everyday and may well explode on our face soon.

Advani ji, I trust that as a RSS *pracharak*, you will continue to endeavor to find a solution to the real problems facing India today. I sincerely hope that you will not be remembered as a person who helped drive nails into the coffin of democracy in India. The least that I expect from you is that you will not allow BJP Parliamentary Party to issue a whip on the issue of 108th Constitution Amendment Bill, as and when it comes up in the Lok Sabha.

Thanks & Regards,

ANIL CHAWLA

20 March 2010