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Reservations for women, India

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Rawlsian attempts to construct a freestanding justification of constitutional patriotism or not.

None of this, however, is to take away from what is undoubtedly a fine and important contribution to political theory.

Kevin William Gray
American University of Sharjah

Dhanda, Meena, ed. 2008. Reservations for Women, India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism, v. 6. New Delhi: Women Unlimited. Pp. 390. ISBN 81-88965-41-3.

Reservations for Women comes as a precious source among the main writings dedicated to the political position of women in India. It is the first collection of essays and writings that addresses the issue of affirmative action as a way of increasing the presence of women in the Indian legislative assemblies. *Reservations for Women* belongs to the "Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism" series, whose aim is to facilitate access for scholars, teachers and activists to all important writings related to gender.

Although it could be regarded as a natural symptom of the wider global context of female political locations, *Reservations for Women* also emphasizes the particularities of the Indian feminist movement.

Feminism in India is to be understood differently from Western feminism for many reasons. Firstly, the Indian woman is an epitome of the Indian culture; therefore, a feminist stance would in fact be equal to a nationalist stance. Secondly, although mainly patriarchal society (with some exceptions), Indian society has reserved a special place for women within culture through religious figures. Lastly, Indian women have defined themselves in harmony with the collective, not in opposition; indeed, in a collectively-oriented society such as India, feminism cannot be defined by individualism.

Another distinguishing element is that one cannot really speak about female oppression by men in India. On the one hand, this is because the Indian religion renders women complementary and equal to man. On the other hand, it was in fact men who initiated several social movements to improve the conditions of women in India (e.g. the abolition of the practice of *sati*). Lastly, one could argue the hierarchies among women are even stricter and more oppressive as a result of caste relations.

In spite of the above-mentioned challenges, Meena Dhanda, head of Philosophy at the University of Wolverhampton (where she has taught since 1992), aims to select the most important writings in the field of Indian political representation of women, without claiming to bring new arguments into light: "Much remains to be done and said; this book brings together what has already been said." (xvii) In a society where the caste system and communalism are major features, multiple patriarchies lead to multiple feminisms. This is why Dhanda insists that, in a heterogeneous theoretical environment, a selection of the major writings would impose a common framework for discussion.

In the introductory essay, Dhanda explains the place of this book in the Indian tradition: "Political thinkers now agree on the need for greater political participation of women. The disagreements now, as then, are about how to bring about the desired change." (xiv) In short, the volume presents different positions on the Women's Reservation Bill and suggestions regarding new methods for female political participation.

The book has four main sections. The first section presents the main divergent

views formulated by leaders of pre-independent India (1930-40's) and after. The focus of the discussion is on the divide of caste. The section begins with the *Declaration* of Naidu and Nawaz, addressed to the British Prime Minister in 1931 – where the two authors express a refusal of preferential treatment within the Parliament. The following contribution is a note of dissent to the *Report of Women in India*, written 40 years after, by Sarkar and Mazumdar (1974). The two authors insist that the reservation of seats for women must extend to legislative bodies too, and not be applicable to local administration only. A later comment by Mazumdar follows. The historical section ends with Mary E John's depiction of the last century; John emphasizes the tension between the reservation based on caste and the reservation based on gender.

The second section focuses on theoretical issues. This collection of theoretical writings addresses the legitimacy of representing women as a group, issues in defining inclusiveness in democracy, and puts into question the necessity and efficiency of top-down measures. The section begins with an excerpt from *The Quota Question* (Gandhi and Shah) and continues with one of the most cited works on the subject of gender quotas – Anne Philips' chapter from *The Politics of Presence*. Rai challenges the legitimacy of any quota policy, but not the idea of representation in itself; furthermore, she recommends the language of empowerment as instrument for female representation. The use of the language of empowerment is later criticized by Menon, since its meanings are too narrow to fit the Indian context. Last but not least, Dhanda suggests that the focus must be shifted from analyzing the consequences of policy of gender quotas to "what does it mean to engender democratic participation" (132).

The third section, called "Women as Policy Makers", is a case study of women's contributions to the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, and to female political representation in general. Omvedt fights the preconception that women would be only puppets in men's hands when politically elected, citing the experience of women in *panchayats* (local assemblies) in Maharashtra. Lama-Rewal reviews a survey conducted in 2000, which aims to show the concrete results of the Women's Reservation Bill. She concludes that "more and more women contest – and win – against male opponents." (xxvi); nevertheless, an increased female participation does not lead to a change in the House's agenda. This final point is rejected by Chattopadhyay and Duflo, whose research concludes that female representation ensures adequate delivery of public goods to disadvantaged categories. The section ends with several examples of good practice provided by Geetha.

The last section presents several alternatives to the Women Representation Bill (WRB). Kishwar's most cited work, "Women and Politics beyond Quotas", is here reproduced, along with Raman's commentary. Raman believes that ways more subtle than WRB must be found, because the WRB eventually strengthens the interests of the dominant groups. Narayan et al. present the most detailed alternative to the WRB – the Alternative Bill – while identifying its flaws (e.g. the rotation of constituency). By contrast, Omvedt praises the Alternative Bill, but suggests that a system of proportional representation (PR) is more appropriate. Lastly, Nanivadekar argues for the implementation of a dual-member constituency.

Dhanda's conclusion is that while theoretical and political debate must be continued in order to find the best solution, women representation must be implemented, even if through the (less-refined) Women Representation Bill. Apart from this, *Reservations for Women* does not focus on furthering the discussion. But in synthesizing the

main historical arguments, it serves as a precious resource for contemporary proponents of women's enhanced position in the Indian political life.

Diana Constantinescu