

# RAJYA SABHA PASSES HISTORIC WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL



Disrupting MPs attempt to break microphones on desk of Vice President Dr. Hamid Ansari  
Press Trust of India ([click for source URL](#))

On the 9th of March 2010, the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) of the Indian Parliament passed a Bill providing 33% reservation of seats in the national parliament and state assemblies to women MPs, amidst intense scenes of political violence, disruption and other dramatics. It's been an exciting time for all of us on the India team as we have been glued to our screens following all the excitement and the numerous political analysis and panels discussing these events. In this brief newsletter, we would like to briefly introduce the Bill, the drama and (implicitly) the significance of these events for our research.

The Women's Reservation Bill, in various forms, has been introduced on least seven other occasions since 1996, seeking to reserve one third of all seats in the Lower House (Lok Sabha) and in state legislatures for women. Though incumbent governments have had more than the requisite numbers of MPs supporting the Bill, it has faced severe challenges in its very introduction, as opposed to later legislative stages of deliberation or passing/rejecting. Though major political parties have supported the Bill, the House has been 'held to ransom' by the disruptive activities of much smaller parties from certain states that strongly articulate their politics in terms of caste. These parties demand for 'quota within quota' for Muslim women, Other Backward Caste women, and the like - though no constitutional provisions exist for these measures at present.

Coinciding with the centenary celebrations of International Women's Day, on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the Bill was taken up for consideration following its successful introduction in May 2008 in the Rajya Sabha (where, unlike the Lok Sabha, the Bill does not lapse with the dissolution of the government). Disrupting MPs forced several adjournments in both Houses, with Rajya Sabha MPs shouting in the well of the House and tearing up papers and grabbing microphones on the desk of the Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha, who is also the Vice President of India. Their attempts were interpreted as an attack on the Vice President himself and were strongly condemned by other MPs and the press, terming it as the 'House of Shame'.

On the following day, seven MPs lay down in the floor of the Rajya Sabha and refused to move, even through adjournments. In an unprecedented fashion, the ruling party moved for their suspension from the House. Marshalls were called in to protect the presiding officer and physically remove the disrupting MPs, and one of them attempted to stall proceedings further by smashing a glass on the floor. Thereafter, the Chairperson called for a voice vote on taking the Bill into consideration, which procedurally bypassed debate on the Bill. However, at the behest of opposition parties who supported the Bill but threatened to boycott the vote if debate did

not take place, MPs were permitted to hold discussion on the Bill. After approximately three hours debating the Bill, 186 members voted in favour with one against.

Outside the walls of Parliament, political drama continued as the Government was repeatedly criticized by its allies for poor 'floor management', a disregard for informing their allies, and for 'bulldozing' the democratic process. For instance, MPs of their largest ally in the Lok Sabha, the Trinamool Congress, walked out of the Rajya Sabha in protest. On the previous day, Lalu Prasad Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Party (a key opponent of the Bill) visited President Pratibha Patil to seek her 'intervention' as all the major parties were united on the Bill. Hundreds of women protestors sought to enter Parliament, calling for the immediate passage of the Bill.

The Bill must now be passed by Lower House, and at least half of the State Legislatures. Two of the ruling party's (Indian National Congress) key allies, namely, the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (whose members mainly participated in the disruptions) have declared withdrawal of their support for the government. This withdrawal poses difficulties for the passing of this bill in the Lok Sabha, and for the passing of the Finance Bill (Budget), which if not passed is effectively a vote of no confidence in the government. On a related note, the government may also face difficulties passing bills in general in the Upper House as they do not possess the majority of seats - in fact, the Bill's passage was facilitated through a rare cross-party consensus. Of added interests is the media's framing of the Bill as a considerable political risk pushed through by the President of the Congress Party, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, marking her further evolution as a political leader.



MPs Brinda Karat (centre) of the Communist Party of India and Sushma Swaraj (Bharatiya Janata Party) celebrating outside the Indian Parliament after the Bill's passing in the Rajya Sabha.  
Associated Press ([click for source URL](#))

This account is but a narrow slice of proceedings, yet it delivers a narrative of events that lend themselves readily to performance-oriented analysis of political disruption and political legitimacy that has characterized our team's research so far. For press coverage and videos, we recommend you go to NDTV.com.

Compiled by Bairavee Balasubramaniam  
India Team, GCRP