

[Shri T. Gopal Krishna]

land in Narsapur for construction of Staff Quarters. But it seems there is no progress in this regard. The delay in execution of the above two demands resulted in strike of staff working there. I, therefore, request the Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas to take steps for immediate negotiations with the employees of the ONGC working in Andhra Pradesh for acceding to their demands at an early date.

15.32 hrs.

MOTION OF THANKS ON THE
PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS—*Contd.*

[English]

MR. CHAIRMAN : Now, we shall take up the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address. Time allotted for it is nine hours. The balance time at the disposal is five hours and twenty-nine minutes. Sharimati Geeta Mukherjee.

SHRIMATI GEETA MUKHERJEE (Panskura) : Thank you Sir for calling me. I rise to support the Motion of Thanks on Rashtrapathi's Address. The Address has listed some achievements, internal and external within seven months of the tenure of the United Front Government.

For example, among the internal achievements, some of the most important are holding peaceful elections in Kashmir, and imparting a measure of dynamism to the Inter-State Council and related measures which would help in giving more powers and share of resources to the States. Both were long overdue.

Externally, Treaty with Bangladesh for sharing of Ganga waters, considerable improvement in our relations with our neighbours, including People's Republic of China are some such positive examples.

We know there are several pending internal issues which require urgent attention and vigorous action like for example steep rise in the prices of essential commodities which need to be tackled urgently.

Similarly, the matter of reopening the numerous closed industries and rehabilitation of the sick public sector units are issues which have to be urgently tackled. All these affect the vast masses.

Of course, we, the Left Parties, understand that there are serious problems and several economic compulsions which follow from the past realities created by the earlier regime. We also understand that the Common Minimum Programme cannot be fully implemented in a matter of months.

But we feel that the electorates which brought about this important political change in our country through the last General Election, which installed the United Front Government have certain expectations from it and are carefully watching the direction the United Front Government follow. When the Left Parties criticise certain measures or policy directions of the Government, we hope that our non-Left friends in the United Front will understand that this is an expression of our concern about some of these urgent issues in the interest of the common people and not in any partisan interest of ours.

Hon. Rashtrapatiji's Address contained many important subjects. Speakers of different political parties are dealing with those subjects. The second speaker from CPI will also deal with some of those subjects, but in my speech, today, I want to concentrate on one issue only, that is, on the constitution Eighty-First (Amendment) Bill 1996 providing one-third reservation of seats for women in Lok Sabha and in Legislative Assemblies. I hope my colleagues will not mind to that.

Of course, in Rashtrapatiji's Address, there are only two places where this Bill has been mentioned. One is in the list of pending Bills and the other reference is in Paragraph 29. Here, I would like to quote that paragraph:

"We are also keen to promote gender equality and removal of discrimination against women. As you know, the Government has already introduced a Bill for Reservation of Seats for Women in Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies to ensure their better participation in policy making."

But is there any commitment to pass the Bill in this Session itself? There is no such commitment.

As far as the description of the Bill is concerned, there also the word 'one-third' is missing before the word 'reservation'. Because of this, I believe, not only myself but all the women and men MPs, who want this Bill to be passed, will feel disheartened. Moreover, the women of our country who are eagerly waiting for the passage of this historic Bill will not only be deeply disheartened but may seriously doubt the pious wish expressed in the sentence and I quote:

"We are also keen to promote gender equality and removal of discrimination against women."

I implore the Government to take note of it and to answer the questions which I am going to ask now. Is the Government stepping back from its promise made in its Common Minimum Programme? I would like to remind the Government and would once again like to quote from its Common Minimum Programme:

"That one-third of the elected representatives in

Parliament and State Legislatures will be reserved for Women."

Have you forgotten the promise made by all the major political parties? I have the manifestoes of all the major political parties wherein they have promised the same. I will not take the time by reading all of them, but I just would like to draw your attention to the fact that I went through all the manifestoes and found that some kind of a promise has been made in them.

Therefore, I am asking them whether they are stepping back from their Common Minimum Programme. At the moment, this Government is committed to the Common Minimum Programme. I hope, the Government will not forget that. I would like to know why this hesitation is there to implement it. What is the fear?

Some Members are saying that unless the reservation is given to OBC women also within this reservation quota for women, they will not let the Bill be passed.

Sir, I am surprised. With all sympathy for my OBC sisters, may I ask those gentlemen, who are speaking like that, why could they not bring earlier a Private Member's Bill or even a Resolution for providing reservation for OBCs if they are so concerned? Moreover, is it not a fact that among the one-third reserved seats for women, there are bound to be a number of seats which will be OBC dominated? If so, why do they not put up some OBC women candidates there and thereby allowing the OBC women to have a mileage? Further, the Joint Committee has recommended to the Government to consider the question of OBC reservation as and when they think fit. If such a constitutional amendment is brought and the Parliament in its wisdom would pass that Bill, then automatically OBC women will come within the purview of one-third reservation as is the case today with SC and ST women. Then, why do you hold up this Bill on such an excuse?

Some Members of Parliament are asking wherefrom so many able women will come who are fit to be Members of Legislative Assemblies and Lok Sabha? May I say with all humility that this is an assessment of women from the point of view of our patriarchal society or the personal views of some hi-men. Excuse me.

Think back to 1952—the first general elections. The percentage of women elected to the First Lok Sabha was only 4.4. Are we to believe that among the stalwart freedom fighters of our country there was such a dearth of capable women that they could not put up more candidates and get them in Parliament? Has the situation changed substantially since then? In 1996 the percentage was 7.2. The highest percentage ever reached in Lok Sabha was

8.1 per cent in 1985. Who can deny that over the past fifty years of Independence, despite many difficulties and denial of equal opportunities, our women have made a mark in new and varied fields of life? Many of them have distinguished themselves as teachers, as doctors, as engineers, as officers in different disciplines and most important as social and political workers. Lakhs of common women have participated in the struggle of all sections of our people for winning their own sectoral demands, for improving the quality of life of their families and society, for defending our national unity and for widening the content of our democracy. What better political education can there be for potential candidates to decision-making bodies at all levels?

Another question raised is, if one-third seats are given to women, there will be dearth of able MPs and MLAs and the standard of performance of the legislative bodies would go down. I would respectfully suggest that the hon. Speaker might consider taking an opinion poll of those who are watching the live TV broadcast of Parliament Sessions. It would be interesting to see what the voters think about the standard of performance of the present House where 92.8 per cent are men MPs and only 7.2 per cent are women.

I take the liberty of quoting here the opening paragraph of a document presented by our Government to the participants of the Inter-Parliamentary Specialised Conference held here in Delhi this month.

In fact, it is a statement by no less a person than Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of our Nation. He wrote:

"Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom of liberty as he. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have."

If I have quoted Gandhiji the intention is not to insult any male colleague here but do draw the attention to what he calls the "vicious custom" i.e. that mental attitude of the patriarchal society which gives rise to such a question as referred to earlier. Shall we not try, we men and women together, to fight that vicious custom?

I think the main hurdle in the way of the passage of this Bill is the fear of some men that they will be deprived of their seats and consequently their leadership. It is true that some men MPs will be deprived of their seats for some time as the 7.2 per cent seats held by women now will increase to 33 per cent. But in any case, the seats reserved

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for women would rotate and moreover the reservation is supposed to be reviewed after 15 years according to the Joint Committee's recommendation. For capable long-standing established political leaders, there should be no problem in contesting and winning from another constituency nearby. In any case, none of us have come to the politics with the idea that we shall be life-long occupants of our seats as MPs and MLAs.

The necessity of giving reservation has arisen from the fact that despite being 50 per cent of the voters, the representation of women in the decision-making bodies remained insignificant. Has it not also deprived the whole society by not utilizing the talents of women in the highest decision-making fora? Does it not impoverish our democracy to considerable extent?

I again implore my male colleagues here to establish real partnership between men and women in the highest decision-making fora in order to hit out unitedly against the age old discrimination against women and thereby let us help in the establishment of a joint leadership of men and women which can enrich our democracy and advance our society.

We, the women of India, remember with special gratitude the men social reformers who fought valiantly for the improvement of the lot of women in the face of social ostracism and ridicule. Who can forget Raja Rammohan Roy, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Subramania Bharati, Jyotiba Phule and so many other illustrious men who will go down in history as some of the greatest benefactors to our society?

My dear male colleagues of this House, please consider the impact.

SHRI SHARAD PAWAR (Baramati) : Why do you not address the whole House?

SHRIMATI GEETA MUKHERJEE : All right, men and women of the whole House, please consider the impact. I know that women are all for it. That is why I addressed like that.

Please consider the impact we can make if in this very Session, we can pass this Bill. If we can do that, it will go down in the history of Indian Parliament as one of the most distinguished Sessions and a memorable contribution in our country's progress towards a fuller and more universal democracy and also advanced society.

So, I implore that we should all join in creating that glory by lending everybody's support and voting for the Bill. Please remember that the women who are 50 per cent of the voters will be watching with anxiety and eagerness what we do about this Bill in this Session and will remember

you with respect and gratitude if this bill gets passed in this very Session.

Therefore, let all of us march together towards that fuller democracy where men and women can together build the nation. So, let this Bill be passed in this very Session !

15.50 hrs.

STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER

Fire at Baripada, Orissa

[English]

THE PRIME MINISTER (SHRI H.D. DEVE GOWDA) : Sir, with your kind permission I would like to make the following statement about my visit yesterday to the Orissa State.

I would like to inform the hon. Members about my visit along with Shri Sharad Pawar, the Leader of Congress (I), Shri Karia Munda of the BJP, Shri Biju Patnaik, Shri Anchal Das, Shri Sriballav Panigrahi, Shri Srikant Jena, Kumari Sushila Tiriya, all MPs from various parties. We paid a visit to Baripada yesterday February 24, 1997 the site of the ghastly tragedy by fire which broke out on February 23, 1997.

The facts about the incident are as follows:

About 10,000 devotees had assembled at Madhuban in the Baripada Municipality of Mayurbhanj District, for a religious gathering which began on February 21, 1997 and was to conclude on February 23. On February 23, 1997 a devastating fire suddenly broke out at the site at 3.15 in the afternoon. It has been informed by the State Government that the fire brigade was immediately pressed into service, and while the women's camp site could be protected, the fire spread through the men's camp site and 149 persons died on the spot. Another 175 persons were injured and were admitted to the local hospital and to nursing homes. Of the injured persons, 28 have succumbed to their injuries.

Immediately after the accident, the local administration deployed 43 doctors to attend to the injured. Local voluntary organisations, businessmen and political workers also joined the rescue efforts. A team of medical experts and para-medical staff from the Medical College, Cuttack, has also reached Baripada.

The process of identification of the deceased is on and their relatives and acquaintances are coming for identification.