

**Shrimati Renuka Ray** (West Bengal: General): Mr. President, Sir, I rise to support Clause 19 and in particular Section (2) of this Clause which provides for territorial representation without reservation of seats. We are particularly opposed to the reservation of seats for women. Ever since the start of the Womens' Movement in this country, women have been fundamentally opposed to special privileges and reservations (*hear, hear*). Through the centuries of our decadence, subjection and degradation, the position of women too has gone down until she has gradually lost all her rights both in law and in society. Nonetheless, with the first stirrings of consciousness amongst women, there never arose any narrow suffragist movement that has been so common in so many so-called enlightened nations. Women in this country have striven for their rights, for equality of status, for justice and fairplay and most of all to be able to take their part in responsible work in the service of their country. The social backwardness of women has been sought to be exploited in the same manner as backwardness of so many sections in this country by those who wanted to deny the country its freedom.

Before the 1935 Act came in, the representatives of India's women made it very clear that they were against the reservation of seats or any special privileges for women. They made this clear through the All India Women's Conference. Our representatives, the three women who gave evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee, made it clear in unequivocal terms — (I may say that Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was one of the three women) — that we did not want reservation, but in spite of our protests, and in direct contravention to our desires, reservation of seats was brought into the 1935 Act. This Act has been so great a factor in bringing dissensions in our fold and has at last divided the country. But where the heart is strong, where there is sound judgment, no machinations can divide and the women did not allow themselves to be caught in the trap. It would be wrong to say that all the credit for our attitude goes to women. From the very start of our national awakening in this country, enlightened men have encouraged women to come forward as equal partners in the struggle for freedom and to do service for national regeneration in the different walks of life. When Mahatma Gandhi gave his call so specifically to the women of this country to take part in the national movement, all the social barriers of centuries broke down. There are no words to convey the gratitude of the women of this country to this great man — who has today brought the country to the very threshold of freedom (*hear, hear*). So, it is not only the inherent qualities of women but more particularly I should say the qualities of our men that is responsible for the fact that in our country, there has never been any strife between men and women.

When the Hindu Law Reform Bills were put in the Central Assembly, women were naturally anxious that these Bills which conceded certain rights to them should be adopted, but we found an opposition which was not so great in numerical strength but which was very formidable because of the fact that it was from a reactionary group who were the erstwhile supporters of the then Government and who were also betraying the country at every turn. The alien Government could not afford to displease them, and unless we too were willing to barter away our souls and our birthright, we could not fight that opposition.

Sir, what we have upheld so long has come to pass today. We always held that when the men who have fought and struggled for their country's freedom came to power, the rights and liberties of women too would be guaranteed. We already see the evidence of this today. No reservation of seats was required to induce the men who are today in power to select a woman as Ambassador, the second in the history of any nation. Vijayalakshmi Pandit has not been selected because she is a woman nor was sex made a bar to the appointment. It is her proven worth that has been responsible for her appointment to the high office of ambassador to a land which is admittedly one of the greatest forces in the world today. This has vindicated our position and women are indeed proud of this. I am confident that it will not be only women of exceptional ability who in future will be called upon to occupy positions of responsibility, but all women who are equally capable, equally able as men will be considered irrespective of sex.

In the legislatures of India, we have some women, but there are few women who have come from general constituencies. I think that the psychological factor comes into play when there is reservation of seats for women. When there is reservation of seats for women, the question of their consideration for general seats, however competent they may be, does not usually arise. We feel that women will get more chances in the future to come forward and work in the free India, if the consideration is of ability alone.

With these words, Sir, I should like to support this Clause which has done away once and for all with reservation of seats for women, which we consider to be an impediment to our growth and an insult to our very intelligence and capacity.