

Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas

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Given that the marginalisation of women is integrally linked to the marginalisation of all decent people from our party politics, we need wide-spectrum electoral reforms that will curb the role of muscle and money power in politics and democratise decision-making in the political parties and a sensible proportional representation system which facilitates representation of various marginalised groups without mechanical reservation quotas.

WOMEN who have lobbied for the last few years for a constitutional amendment reserving a 33 per cent quota for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies responded angrily when the bill didn't go through on the same day that it was presented and the matter was referred to a select committee of parliament. They interpreted the demand for a more thorough discussion on the proposal as an attempt to sabotage it, as proof that our men are still steeped in patriarchal anti-women values. While there is no doubt that some male politicians are feeling perturbed at the prospect of having to suddenly yield so much ground to women, what transpired on the last two days of the monsoon session of Lok Sabha gives little cause for pessimism. It is a characteristic case of looking at a glass as half-full or half-empty.

It is noteworthy that the move to reserve one-third of seats for women has the formal endorsement of virtually every major political party in the country. The BJP, the Congress, the Janata Dal and the CPI(M) have each promised 33 per cent reservation for women in their election manifestos for 1996. Even though many of these parties' members are unhappy at being cornered into actually implementing their poll promise, they dare not oppose the move openly. During the parliamentary debate, very few male politicians opposed the principle of reservations for women and the few who did so were put down by their own male colleagues for their indiscretion. A few MPs pointed to technical flaws and limitations of the bill. Not all of these objections were frivolous, although some indeed were trying to delay or sabotage it. Women members took the offensive and wanted the bill passed the same day without any debate since this was the last day of the session.

The very same people who went berserk over the move to reserve 27 per cent of government jobs and seats in educational institutions for members of other backward castes (OBCs) have accepted the 33 per cent reservation for women (not just in legislatures

but also in government jobs) with apparent grace and enthusiasm. This is because our country has a well-entrenched tradition whereby any party, politician or public figure who tries to bad mouth women in public or oppose moves in favour of women's equality is strongly disapproved of. During the last Maharashtra assembly elections, Bal Thackeray made some disparaging comments about women. It produced such a widespread negative reaction that many attribute Shiv Sena's subsequent poor showing at the polls to this big indiscretion. Therefore, no politician likes to be seen opposing measures that claim to work for women's 'empowerment', no matter how opposed he personally may be to a particular measure. Hence, compared to many other parts of the world, it is relatively easy to get legislation favouring women passed in India. No party from the right or the left has ever opposed pro-women laws. The right to maternity benefit, right to equal pay for equal work, right to abortion, all of which took decades of struggle by the women's movement in the west came to be enacted in India without a fight. The law to reserve one-third seats in all panchayats and zilla parishads has already been put into effect in all the states of India without evoking any hostility or opposition from male politicians or society at large.

However, the very politicians who pay lip service to women's causes on public platforms and help enact laws favouring women actually help sideline women in their own parties.

Congress (I), for instance, had committed to give 15 per cent of election tickets to women way back in 1957 but never implemented that resolve. Even after all the major parties had promised 33 per cent reservation for women in legislatures, they all reverted back to tokenism when it actually came to giving party tickets for the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. The Congress (I) fielded only 49 women out of a total of 530 candidates. The BJP gave tickets to 23 women

out of a total of 477 candidates that it fielded. The CPI(M) gave five seats to women out of 77, while the CPI fielded four women out of 43 candidates. The Janata Dal fielded 11 women out of 220 candidates. Of the 477 women candidates for the 1996 elections, about two-thirds stood as independents and one-third were put up by various political parties, the total being 3.3 per cent (477 out of 14,274).

The oddest thing about the marginalisation of women in Indian politics is that it is happening despite widespread social opinion in favour of women's active political participation. The recent countrywide opinion survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies for *India Today* provides the most encouraging and definitive endorsement that there is no real gender divide in India on this issue. Seventy-five per cent of men and 79 per cent of women favour active participation of women in politics and 75 per cent of men and an equal percentage of women favour reservations for women in legislatures 'The Maturing of a Democracy' (*India Today*, August 31, 1996). Our leaders, however, have so far only obstructed women's involvement in politics. In this area, the electorate is far ahead of its political 'leaders', as in most other respects.

By and large, Indian men do not seem to feel threatened by women reaching positions of power, including those who may not allow their own wives or daughters the opportunity of doing so. In our country women such as Kiran Bedi or Indira Gandhi who are perceived as stronger than men get to be venerated like virtual goddesses. They are almost never subjected to ridicule and hostility that are often displayed towards such women in western countries. Contrast the way in which the first woman prime minister of France got treated with the kind of love and respect Indira Gandhi undeservingly got in this country.

PREMATURE FOR WHOM?

The sentiment in favour of women being active in politics is nothing new. Women's right to equal political participation, including their right to vote, was accepted very gracefully in India much earlier than most western societies conceded to this demand. Indian women did not even have to fight for this right, unlike their western counterparts.

The story of how women came to be first represented in legislatures in the 1920s is in itself quite instructive. In response to the Indian agitation for representative government, the British government set up

a committee headed by Montague and Chelmsford in 1919 to work out a proposal for constitutional reforms towards the inclusion of some Indians in government. Many groups presented their case for representation before the committee. Among the many delegations that met this committee, Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins led a small delegation of women to demand that women be granted the same rights of representation in legislatures as men. The British government predictably thought this demand was quite preposterous because women in most western countries had still not been given the right to vote, despite a protracted struggle. The Southborough Committee stated that "the extension of the vote to women would be premature in a society which continued to enforce purdah and prohibitions against female education".¹ However, instead of taking on themselves the onus of rejecting the demand outright the British government simply skirted the issue by leaving it up to each of the individual provincial legislatures that they had just set up in India to grant or to refuse the franchise to women. Their assumption was that since Indians were so 'backward', they would never accept the idea of equal political rights for women. But despite the fact that at this time there was no mass-based women's suffrage movement in India, each of the Indian provincial legislatures voted to make it possible within a short span of time for women to be represented at par with men without much fuss.

The testimony of Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist who played a major role in women's organisations in India as well as in Britain, brings out the contrast between the western and Indian response to women's political rights very clearly:

Perhaps only women like myself who had suffered from the cruelties, the injustices of men politicians, the man-controlled press, the man in the street, in England and Ireland while we waged our militant campaign for eight years there after all peaceful and constitutional means had been tried for fifty previous years, could fully appreciate the wisdom, nobility and the passing of fundamental tests in self-government of these Indian legislators...Between the Madras Legislative Council in 1921 and Bihar Council in 1929 all the legislative areas of India had conferred the symbol and instrument of equal citizenship with men on women who possessed equal qualifications - a certain amount of literacy, property, age, payment of taxes, length of residence.²

This is because the British were only prepared for limited suffrage for those who possessed a certain amount of property and education. They were not willing to consider universal adult suffrage. When a meeting of representative women's organisations in 1930 drafted a memorandum demanding

immediate acceptance of adult franchise without gender discrimination, it was turned down by the British government. The same demand received a totally different response from the Indian leaders. The very next year, in 1931 the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress took the historic decision committing itself to the political equality of women, regardless of their status and qualifications. This proposal met with virtually no opposition.

Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role in creating a favourable atmosphere for women's participation in the freedom struggle by insisting that the struggle for women's equality was an integral part of the movement for swaraj. His choice of non-violent satyagraha as the mode of struggle also allowed women to play a far more active and creative role than is possible in more masculine-oriented movements based on violence. This galvanised huge numbers of women into action. He worked consciously to feminise the freedom movement. "My contribution to the great problem [of women's role in society] lies in my presenting for acceptance of truth and ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this, woman will be the unquestioned leader, and having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex."³ The programmes of action undertaken as part of non-violent satyagraha were such that women would not feel limited or unequal to men, as they inevitably do when sheer muscle power or capacity for inflicting violence are to determine the outcome of a struggle. Thus women were not to compete with men in imbibing negative qualities such as propensity towards the use of force but by their presence in the movement humanise it and save it from destructive tendencies. It is significant that all of Bapu's symbols of struggle and protest were from the feminine realm. Spinning, for instance, has traditionally been a woman's activity. By exhorting men to spin he tried to inculcate feminine virtues in them. Similarly, picketing liquor shops related to the evil effect of liquor on women and the household. By picking on salt as a symbol of a countrywide satyagraha, he brought the movement into every home and kitchen. There are numerous testimonies acknowledging the energy and dynamism women brought into the movement. To quote Nehru:

Our women came to the forefront and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them which took not only the British government but their own menfolk by surprise. There were these women, women of the upper and middle class, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working class women, rich women - pouring out in their tens of thousands in

defiance of government orders and police lathis. It was not only the display of courage and daring but what was even more surprising was the organisational power they showed.⁴

Annie Besant became Congress Party president as early as 1919. Sarojini Naidu was Gandhi's choice for president of the Congress Party as early in 1925. Starting with that kind of a high profile role, women's participation in politics enhanced dramatically in the 1930s and 1940s. However, the decades following independence witnessed a remarkable decline in women's involvement in politics. This began in the heyday of Nehru's era, even though most women leaders believed him to be an outstanding champion of women's rights.

For instance, in the 1952 elections the Congress Party had only 14 women members elected to parliament. In the first Lok Sabha women constituted no more than 4.4 per cent of the total strength. This was at a time when there were thousands of outstanding women all over the country with the experience of the freedom movement behind them. Their long years of involvement in social and political work, running educational institutions, and so on, would have given them the requisite training and experience to be effective parliamentarians. But they were systematically ignored and bypassed. Even within the Congress Party women found very little room in decision-making bodies. The women's front of the party also began to decline in importance especially after the passing of 'reformed' Hindu laws in the mid-1950s. Today very few people outside the Congress Party are aware that there is a body called the Mahila Congress.

Thus while societies which have less of a tradition of public acceptance of women's political mobilisation have witnessed an increasing participation of women in politics, India's history has taken a surprising turn. In the five decades after Independence women have become marginalised in politics as compared to the earlier decades. During the 1930s and 1940s there were more women leaders at all levels in the Congress Party alone than are found today in all the parties put together.

This decline is especially worrisome because it is not in consonance with trends in other areas of life. During the same period, women have made their presence felt in every other field, including those considered male citadels. We have a rising percentage of women lawyers, doctors, architects, entrepreneurs, engineers, high-placed bureaucrats, diplomats, and so on, but the percentage of women in parliament and state legislatures has remained extremely low. The highest ever representation of women in parliament was 7.9 per cent in 1984. That this is not due to aversion of Indian women for politics becomes obvious when we

consider the number of outstanding women activists that have emerged in the realm of transformative politics in recent years, while political parties are failing to attract and absorb the younger generation of women. Numerous young women have gravitated towards working in voluntary organisations, in NGOs in both rural and urban areas. Some are even leading radical movements, challenging established power structures, doing literacy and health work for disadvantaged communities, working in peasant movements, among the landless poor, among tribals. Yet very few of these women wish to or succeed in entering electoral politics.

Why has our democracy failed to include women in its purview even while the representation and involvement of various other disadvantaged groups, such as the scheduled and backward castes, has grown substantially? Why were a whole generation of women leaders who were active at the forefront of our freedom struggle denied a substantial presence in parliament and state assemblies, especially considering that the social opinion in India has been in favour of women's participation?

This, in part, seems to be due to the Gandhian legacy. While he wanted a vanguard role for women in the freedom movement, the Mahatma did not encourage women to compete for power but wanted them to enter public life as selfless, devoted social workers to undertake the crucial task of social reconstruction. He wanted women to cleanse politics, to feminise it by bringing in the spirit of selfless sacrifice rather than compete with men in power-grabbing and thus prove their moral superiority even in the realm of politics. In Gandhi's view, "Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and her advent to public life should, therefore, result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property".⁵ It was given to women "to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar".⁶ Just as he himself scrupulously kept away from occupying any position of power after Independence, he assumed women would prefer to serve society in a selfless spirit than go for power grabbing because that would be reversion to barbarity. He was confident he knew women's aspirations and temperament and so decided their role on their behalf. "And you sisters, what would you do by going to parliament? Do you aspire after collectorships, commissionerships or even the viceroyalty? I know that you would not care to, for the viceroy has got to order executions and hangings, a thing that you would heartily detest."⁷ It was not an accident that after Independence many women worked for organisations like Sewa Dal while withdrawing themselves from active involvement

in the Congress Party. However, even those who remained in the party (or in the women's front of the Congress) began to be systematically sidelined as the party was taken over by power-hungry politicians who actually behaved like gangsters.

HOW WOMEN GET MARGINALISED

The process of turning the Congress Party into an instrument of authoritarian rule started during the heyday of the Nehru era. For all his democratic pretensions, Nehru did not let power devolve on to the local institutions of governance. As a thoroughbred brown sahib, Nehru was afraid of the kind of ferment that Mahatma Gandhi had created among ordinary people of India, including those in remote villages. This had the potential to create an alternative form of people-centred politics. Nehru felt threatened that if such forces grew strong they would undermine the very authority and power of the state. Though he continued to use the rhetoric of social transformation, Nehru worked hard to ensure the continuity of the colonial state by keeping the colonial educational system intact as well as allowing the bureaucracy to maintain its stranglehold over society. The constructive programmes of the Congress Party that evolved under Gandhi's leadership were transformed into the 'community development' programmes run and controlled by bureaucrats. This way the Nehru government severed the mass contact of Congress workers with their respective communities and thereby killed the Congress Party. The marginalisation of women was part of this process of destruction of the Congress as a party of local leaders with grass roots support and areas of influence. Instead it became a party of power brokers within a colonial mode of governance.

In this scheme the sarkari panchayats had no real functions or powers. They were put under the supervision and control of bureaucrats who had the power to dismiss panchayats and sarpanches who did not fall in line with the vested interests of the bureaucracy. The panchayats had neither the authority to levy taxes nor to take decisions regarding village development programmes or appointing village functionaries. Hence they remained totally dependent on the goodwill of the sarkar. Panchayat office-bearers could survive only through servility and sycophancy. The sarkari 'gram sewak' often became the boss because he had direct links with officialdom. Thus government-controlled panchayats became an important instrument of manipulation of society rather than forums for local decision-making. The panchayats were used as tools for the party to mobilise votes for their candidates at election time and to thwart all local political initiative. Under this system the bureaucracy

acquired even greater control than it had during colonial rule; elected representatives had to appear before it as grovelling supplicants. Only those survived who entered into a loot and plunder nexus with bureaucrats. Thus, the Nehru era set into motion widespread depoliticisation of our society by snatching away all power and initiative from local communities and providing bureaucrats and party politicians with several vicious levers of control and manipulation.

As Indira Gandhi and her sons came to power, the Congress Party degenerated dramatically and saw a further decline in women's political participation. Even though women across the country related to Indira Gandhi as a symbol of inspiration and saw her as Durga incarnate, she did not care to channel that enthusiasm into facilitating the entry of more women into politics. She wrecked her own party's organisation by preventing party elections from taking place and introducing the practice of nominations by the 'High Command' to party posts as well as distribution of party tickets for elections. At the same time she systematically went about subverting fledgling institutions of democracy at various levels. She obstructed panchayat and zilla parishad elections wherever the Congress was not sure of being able to maintain its stranglehold and subjected various states to president's rule whenever her control over regional politicians was challenged. She also introduced the unhealthy practice of the prime minister nominating chief ministers to Congress-ruled states so that she could use them as puppets rather than letting them be elected by regional legislators. Her authoritarian brand of politics led to an enormous concentration of unaccountable power at the centre, especially in her own office. The centre controlled (still does) the financial levers which made the chief ministers of even non-Congress ruled states dependent on the Delhi darbar's goodwill. With decision-making bodies getting more and more remote from people's lives due to over-centralisation of power, the few women who were active in the party were further marginalised. Getting a party ticket was no longer easy for credible, dedicated self-respecting women political workers in villages, districts, or cities. It became necessary to be close to power-brokers with influence in the Delhi darbar in order to qualify for any post in the party or an opportunity to enter electoral politics. Since these power-brokers came to be despised and mistrusted by all self-respecting, decent politically active people, it is not surprising that most women turned away from politics. A woman would be seriously jeopardising her reputation by being closely associated with the likes of Jagdish Tytler, H K L

Bhagat, Sajjan Kumar, Dumpy Ahmed, Satish Sharma and their various regional 'avatars' who grew all-important after the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty's advent to power.

Indira Gandhi also initiated a new era of corruption in contesting elections; exorbitant spending and violence soon became the norm. Before her regime, the party provided funds and other support to their candidates after selecting them on the strength of their work in the constituency. From the 1970s onward, candidates virtually began to buy party tickets by offering large sums of money to central leaders in charge of selection. Indira Gandhi went about destroying all party leaders who had an independent political base and instead went out of her way to patronise people who would be dependent and servile to her. This way, she appeared to be the charismatic leader who alone could bring victory to the Congress. She seemed particularly averse to sharing the limelight with other women politicians, especially those who had cultivated an independent political existence. Therefore, many women stalwarts like Tarkeshwari Sinha and Nandini Satpathi as well as women of Indira Gandhi's own family (barring the corrupt and sycophantish Sheila Kaul variety) were deliberately eclipsed during Indira Gandhi's regime. Thus India's celebrated woman prime minister played a leading role in pushing women out of the political arena by making the world of politics so unsavoury that few self-respecting women or even men would dare venture into it. Not surprisingly the few women who survived were either as tough and corrupt as the worst of the male politicians or were wives and other female relatives of powerful male politicians who provided the necessary protection. Hence the phenomenon of 'biwi-beti' brigades making their appearance during election time while during normal times the Congress Party lost its claim to having the largest contingent of active women workers. Today the BJP attracts far more women workers than the Congress but the BJP and other parties also use their women's fronts as mere auxiliaries mobilised into action for demonstrations, mass protests and campaign work during elections.

When Rajiv Gandhi came to power in 1984, he tried to project a pro-woman image for his party. He fielded a slightly larger number of women candidates (40 out of 492). In the sympathy wave that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Congress Party won by a landslide benefiting even the new-comers among women and 37 of the 40 Congress(I) women candidates were elected to the eighth Lok Sabha. There were 44 women MPs during Rajiv's first tenure as prime minister, the highest ever in Lok Sabha. Yet they constituted no more than 7.9 per cent of the total. However, barring a few exceptions, he attracted mostly

glamorous socialite types of women into the party (counterpart to his Doon School brigade) because by then the Congress Party had lost the ability to attract a new generation of dedicated women (or men) workers into the party.

The number of women MPs dropped slightly to 39 and 36 in the next two elections. As a counter measure 'The National Perspective Plan' (NPP) prepared during Rajiv Gandhi's prime ministership advocated 30 per cent reservation for women, but suggested that the reserved seats in all elected bodies – from gram panchayat to Parliament – be filled through co-option. This was firmly rejected by women's organisations since it was evident that the Congress wanted to use women's reservations to subvert the democratic process and co-opt its own members.

Even though I focus mostly on the Congress Party's instrumental role in the decline in women's participation in politics, the blame should be equally shouldered by other parties – whether of the left or right – because the Congress culture is emulated by virtually all of them. In fact, the track record of non-Congress parties is no better as far as women's participation is concerned. A majority of women contest from the Congress Party even while the overall percentage of party tickets given to women remains shamefully low. In recent years, the BJP seems to be overtaking the Congress Party in fielding relatively larger number of women and giving them a certain visibility. It is the only party with a woman (Sushma Swaraj) as its general secretary and chief spokesperson. The first Lok Sabha had 14 Congress women MPs out of a total of 23; in the second Lok Sabha it had 21 out of 27 women MPs, with CPI and Jan Sangh claiming two each. The third Lok Sabha had 28 Congress women MPs and four from Swatantra Party. The ninth Lok Sabha had 19 Congress women MPs against four from BJP, six of the CPI and none from CPI(M) or JD. The 10th Lok Sabha again had 22 out of 37 women MPs from the Congress; 10 from the BJP; two from the JD, one each from the CPI, CPI(M) and SSP. The present Lok Sabha has 14 Congress women MPs, 12 from the BJP, 3 from JD, one from CPI, none from CPI(M) and 2 from SP.

It is ironic that the move to implement 33 per cent reservation for women in legislatures has been now initiated by the JD-led United Front government. The track record of the JD and various parties which constitute the UF is worse than that of the Congress in making space for women in politics. For instance, in the last election, only three women were elected to parliament on the JD ticket.

The other influential ally in the UF government, the Samajwadi Party, does no better. For instance, of the 64 seats it contested from Uttar Pradesh, it gave tickets to only

three women candidates in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. Nor have the CPI and the CPI(M) thrown up more than one or two women parliamentarians in the last two to three decades. Despite N T Rama Rao's success in appealing to women voters, the Telegu Desam Party (TDP) has also promoted very few women politicians. The present state assembly in Andhra Pradesh has only nine women members out of 294. At the height of NTR's popularity with women, the figures were 12 for 1983-1985 and 10 for the 1985-90 Vidhan Sabha (that is it hovered around 3 per cent). So with the parties like the DMK, AIADMK, Asom Gana Parishad and the Akalis in Punjab. Not surprisingly, today the UF government has only one lacklustre, junior level woman minister, Kanti Singh, in the cabinet. She is not even a member of parliament but was made minister of state only because she is backed by Laloo Prasad Yadav, the influential chief minister of Bihar. Even more significantly, none of these parties have allowed women to acquire influence in the party's decision-making processes and power centres. Would it not have been more logical for these leaders to have started correcting this exclusion of women at the party level first?

The JD for all its pro-women rhetoric does not have a single woman in its 15-member Political Affairs Committee, while its National Executive includes 11 women out of a total of 75. Similarly, no woman is included in the 17-member United Front Steering Committee. The Congress(I) Working Committee has two women and 18 men. The BJP has 10 women out of 147 total members in its National Executive Committee. CPI(M) has five women out of 72 in its Central Committee but not a single woman among the 15 men who make up the higher level Politburo. The nine-member CPI Secretariat does not include a single woman and its 31-member National Executive has only three women. There are only seven women in its 125-member National Council. Most important of all women are not an effective presence. Given that they only have token representation, they have hardly been able to influence party programmes or decisions.

All the parties of the UF claim to be vehicles of social equity. Yet these parties are unable to involve women in their crusades for social justice. This is not surprising because most of the backward castes and communities which constitute the political and social base of the JD and its allies have come to acquire a culture of crippling restrictions for women including the practices of purdah, seclusion and female infanticide. Women of backward castes are not allowed a presence in political spaces at the village level and their status is among the lowest in the country.

This gets reflected in the absence of women in various parties that draw sustenance from these castes; hardly any notable women political figures have emerged from among the various backward castes. In the JD, the few notable women leaders like Mrinal Gore and Pramila Dandavate come from the erstwhile Socialist Party and are from the brahmin castes, which limits their mass appeal among the backward castes. Low female participation is even more true of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes parties. For example, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha – a party of tribals from Chhotanagpur area – has not allowed even one woman leader of any note to emerge from its ranks since its inception. Many would cite Mayawati of the Bahujun Samaj Party (BSP) as an example of a successful female politician from the scheduled castes. But she is clearly an exception to the rule; there are no other noteworthy women in the BSP. In the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the BSP with her at the helm of affairs in Uttar Pradesh did not field a single woman candidate from Uttar Pradesh, its stronghold area. Like Indira Gandhi, Mayawati seems rather averse to letting other women share the limelight with her. Even for herself, it was not her political genius but her personal proximity and equation with BSP supremo Kanshi Ram which seems to have played the most important role in catapulting her to power within her party. Similarly, Baba Saheb Ambedkar's dalit-based party, the Republican Party of India (RPI), has not thrown up a single important woman leader in its entire history. One lone brahmin woman, Neelam Gorhe, used to be a known figure in the party but left to join the Congress some years ago because she found the RPI inhospitable to her as a woman. Up until now, women politicians in India have emerged largely from among urban castes, especially among brahmins of all regions, khatri of Punjab, bhadrals of Bengal, and kayasthas of North India because these castes had initiated powerful movements for internal social reform from the 19th century onward, especially with regard to women's right and status within these communities. That is why these castes witnessed a substantial increase in women's education, employment and participation in literary, cultural and even political affairs.

Much of the energy of the 19th century upper caste social reform movements got channelled into and merged with the Congress Party during the Independence struggle, especially after Mahatma Gandhi assumed leadership. Therefore, it is from among upper castes that most of our outstanding women politicians and public figures have emerged. Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Mehta, Sarladevi Chaudhrani, Sucheta Kriplani, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya,

Vijaylakshmi Pandit and Tarkeshwari Sinha – all came to exercise a great deal of influence in public life and symbolised the spirit of breaking through. However, no such comparable internal social reform focusing on the status of women in these communities has been undertaken among backward and dalit castes which have developed a tradition of excluding women from the decision-making processes within the community. Hence the absence of women from these groups in our social and political life. This is not due to any inherent lack in these communities but largely because their leaders have by and large tended to concentrate their efforts on the economic and political dimensions of upward mobility for these caste groups seeking social justice *vis-a-vis* upper castes but neglecting the gender dimensions of social equity. In the few instances where attempts at social reform have been undertaken, the response has usually been enthusiastic even among men as the success of leaders like late Shankar Guha Niyogi in Madhya Pradesh, Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra, and Pandurang Shastri Athavle of Swadhyaya movement in Gujarat demonstrates. These castes and communities have responded with enthusiasm whenever serious and sensitive attempts have been made by their leaders to redress the power imbalance between men and women. I witnessed the most touching confirmation of this during my association with the Maharashtra-based farmers' movement, the Shetkari Sangathana.

The social base of the Sangathana is primarily among small and medium farmers belonging to varied backward castes. This organisation played a significant and leading role during the 1980s and early 1990s to bring about radical social reform including large-scale participation of women in the farmers' movement and to improve their status in family and society. As an offshoot of that effort, the Sangathana gave a call for electing all-women panels in village panchayats in 1989 followed by their putting up mainly women candidates in the zilla parishad elections. In a characteristic Gandhian way, the leadership projected this as part of their campaign to cleanse politics and reduce the role of goondas in villages. The most astounding and significant aspect of Shetkari Sangathana's experience was that there was great enthusiasm among most of the male cadres and supporters of the Sangathana for this unprecedented move. The male cadres of the Sangathana campaigned with even greater enthusiasm than the women to make a success of this effort even though, in effect, it meant men were being asked to hand over the positions of local power and influence to women. In a number of Sangathana stronghold villages, all-women panchayats were elected with

much fanfare and celebration by men.⁴ Even though in both the panchayat and zilla parishad elections, the Sangathana was unable to get many women elected because money and muscle power play a crucial role in determining the outcome of those elections (thanks to the Congress-Shiv Sena combine's goonda politics in Maharashtra), within their own organisation and following, the idea received graceful endorsement rather than provoke resentment.

However, such efforts have been confined to a few select groups and organisations outside the purview of mainstream backward and scheduled caste politics. To realistically prepare ground for women to emerge from among the backward castes, backward caste leaders and parties will have to initiate widespread social reform movements within their respective communities.

STARTING FROM WITHIN

Parties who are sincerely interested in seeing women take an active part in politics ought to begin by activating their women's fronts at all levels, and by recruiting more women at the decision-making levels in their respective parties. So far they have shown no inclination or preparation to do so.

Similarly, women's organisations who have been the prime lobby for more seats for women in parliament, legislative assemblies, etc, have to work to ensure that women join various political parties in large numbers and develop their own constituencies by building alliances with other sections of society rather than waiting for reservations to give them automatic entry. In recent years a number of women have emerged in the public arena at the state, district and national level through their work with NGOs. Many of them consider party politics as a contemptible game and therefore keep a deliberate distance from it but a large number have actively lobbied to get a reservation quota for women. However, there are only a handful among our NGO activists who have the capability to take on the challenge of electoral politics. The very nature of our NGO sector estranges it from electoral politics. Since most NGO's, survival depends on international aid agencies, most of them have no real roots in our society. They are more visible in the international conference network than in their own neighbourhoods, cities, or communities – all essential prerequisites for electoral politics. In addition, their dependence on the government bureaucracy rules out active involvement in electoral politics, especially if it goes against the ruling party. Many of those who have worked for years on women's issues, cannot claim to have succeeded in creating even a solid electoral constituency among women, not to mention larger

segments of our population and could not win a corporation election, leave alone a parliamentary one.

It could well be due to lack of political experience in mainstream politics that women lobbyists from the NGO sector have opted for this rather mechanical and constricting approach to enhancing women's participation in legislatures. The proposed Reservation Bill has some serious flaws.

The reservations proposed are along the following lines:

(a) one-third of seats will be reserved for women in Lok Sabha and state legislatures.

(b) These reservations are for an indefinite period, unlike reservations for SCs and STs which lapse unless extended after every 10 years.

(c) The reserved constituencies are to be determined through a draw of lots. For SCs and STs, constituencies are reserved on the basis of population proportion. Constituencies with a high SC/ST population are selected for a period of time and are supposed to be delimited after some years. But since the population of women is evenly spread throughout the country, this formula cannot be applied for them. The draw of lots system will mean every time a new set of constituencies will be declared as reserved for women.

(d) There is also a provision for parallel reservations for SCs and STs, which is to say women belonging to SCs and STs will be getting one-third of seats reserved for people of that category – i.e., reservations within reservations.

THE MAGIC NUMBER

There are several problems inherent in this particular scheme. To begin with, why a 33 per cent quota? What is the significance of this number? Why not 13 or 43 per cent or even 73 per cent? The reservation quota for all other groups such as the scheduled castes and tribes has been determined on the basis of their numerical strength in the overall population. Not so for women. In India the proportion of women as compared to men is a little less than 50 per cent. So why not 49 per cent reservation for women? Does the magical figure of 33 per cent represent some near-future scenario of our declining sex ratio? Are our policy-makers anticipating the advent of all kinds of new technologies to bring down the already low sex ratio to one-third of the population?

This is not at all to suggest that 33 per cent is a small figure, especially when offered on a silver platter, as is happening in our case. Even in Sweden, a country considered the most advanced democracy with the highest percentage of women in positions of political power anywhere in the world, women occupied 40 per cent of elected

parliamentary seats in 1994. This after nearly a century of effort and struggle. The figures for other 'leading' democracies are pretty dismal. According to a 1988 survey, in 1987 women occupied 6.3 per cent of seats in the UK, 5.3 per cent in the US, 6.4 per cent in France and 9.9 per cent in Canada. Since then there has only been a 2 per cent increase in women's representation. Only China shows a comparably high figure of 21.2 per cent for the same year, with India having 7.9 per cent. Thus by reserving one-third seats in legislatures, India will be sending 180 women to the Lok Sabha, thus ensuring a quantum leap.

However, accepting 33 per cent permanent reservation for women is like demanding that some seats be reserved in every bus for women or the equivalent of a 'zanana dabba' (ladies compartment) in every train. Men then come to expect women to remain confined to the ladies section and get very upset if women occupy seats not reserved for them. Delhi buses earmark roughly six to eight seats for women. If a woman goes and sits in an unreserved seat she is likely to be insolently told by some man or the other to get up and move to a ladies seat. In other words, they assume that all the rest of the seats in the bus are reserved for men.

The reservation of seats in state legislatures and parliament will produce a similar situation. Even though there will be no bar on women standing from general constituencies, it is highly unlikely that women will be given tickets from outside the reserved constituencies. This has happened with SCs and STs who have been permanently ghettoised to reserved constituencies. At the panchayat and zilla parishad level, in most states women are not being allowed to contest from general constituencies which are assumed to be reserved for men. Only in Karnataka and West Bengal have women managed to go beyond 33 per cent. For our legislatures, it will be much harder for women to secure tickets beyond the stipulated quota because of the far more intense competition for these seats. Therefore, their representation is likely to be frozen permanently at 33 per cent unless the constitution is amended again to enhance the quota or withdraw these reservations.

The present scheme of reservation will ensure that women will enter the electoral battle only against other women and never get an opportunity to contest against men, a sure way to perpetually ghettoise women's politics. As it is, women in India have deeply imbibed the notion that 'women are women's worst enemies' because of the way women are pitched against each other in the family structure. Their dependence on men estranges them from other women because men mediate women's relations with the outside world.

Therefore, political solidarity among women is hard to build. If even in electoral politics women are constantly pitched only against other women, there will be far less possibility of their working together as a concerted lobby cutting across party lines, at least on some crucial women-related issues. It will strengthen the tendency to view other women as permanent rivals rather than possible allies.

The draw of lots system of gender-based reservations will mean that every time a new set of constituencies will be declared as reserved for women. There would be no way to predict whose turn will come next. In any functioning democracy, politicians are expected to develop and nurse a constituency. However, an unpredictable and rotating reservation policy has resulted in killing women's incentive to building their own constituencies even at the zilla parishad level, because they have no way of knowing which ones will be declared as reserved constituencies next. A similar set up for legislatures will result in women candidates becoming even more dependent on their respective parties, rather than working among their own constituencies to help them win elections. Even after being elected by the support of a particular area, there will be no incentive to responsibly serve that constituency because if in the next draw of lots that constituency is de-reserved these women will have to shift elsewhere for the next election. This will lead to less responsible politics in general as also among women. For instance, a man may have worked hard in his constituency after being elected. But he will not be sure of being able to stand from the same if the draw of lots system is to decide that constituency is to be earmarked for women. This will inevitably produce a backlash from men and damage the legitimacy of women's participation in politics as is beginning to happen at the zilla parishad level.

The parallel reservation quota announced by the government whereby women belonging to SCs and STs will be getting one-third of the seats reserved for people of that category will mean that the women from the backward castes will not be covered by this. Within the backward caste-based parties, the few upper caste women that exist will be the automatic beneficiaries of reservation. But chances are that we will be saddled with more 'biwi-beti' brigades because OBC leaders are likely to resort to fielding their mothers or sisters or wives to ensure that the women's quota stays within their caste control and women legislators do not pose any challenge to their power. The current scheme of reservations makes this easy and may further encourage formation of caste-blocks in a party, making *en bloc* defections easier than today.

At the panchayat level, 'biwi' brigades can still serve the useful purpose of getting men used to including women in village debate and decision-making, even if the women are totally lacking in political experience and are used as puppets. The tasks expected of a panchayat or corporation member are relatively simple, often concerned with organising civic amenities in the locality with which most villagers have close familiarity. Therefore, someone who may initially enter village politics as someone's wife does not necessarily require much time to become a fully functioning panchayat leader, provided some of her family restrictions are removed. But the presence of such proxy figures in parliament and state assemblies is not only counterproductive, but actually harmful. Political socialisation of such women legislators, required for being an effective member of state assemblies and parliament, cannot take place smoothly when women members remain filially attached and politically dependent on the male party leaders. Reproduction of kinship-groups within existing caste-groups in the parties in parliament and state legislatures is likely to further contribute to the breakdown of our party system and representative democracy.

There is nothing inherently wrong in women using family connections in politics to gain an advantage just as men do and as happens in other professions. In Chandrika Kumaratunge of Sri Lanka and Aung San Suu Kui, we have two very outstanding examples of women who got a tremendous initial advantage due to their family name but then emerged out of their parental shadow and outshone their respective fathers in politics both in terms of vision as well as quality of political leadership. However, it could also be due to the fact that both of them had already lost their respective fathers before they plunged into politics. But most women do not manage to break the umbilical cord with the men of their family because their well-being in the family depends on the goodwill of men. Thus women who came on the strength of paternal connections tend to be used as proxies – a position which even the most untalented of men do not allow themselves to be forced among them.

Many argue that if such useless men, members of mafia and criminal groups, can be selected to represent us in parliament and state assemblies, why do we put such high demands on women and expect them to mould themselves on the Aung San Suu Kui model?

At the risk of sounding elitist, I would say it is time we began taking our legislatures seriously or they will never function effectively. Parliament ought to be a forum for the most seasoned, thoughtful and well-informed individuals among us. It is supposed

to perform the awesome responsibility of legislating and policy-making at the macro level for nearly a billion people. It is no place for political novices to learn their first lessons in parliamentary democracy. Our parliament and state assemblies are being treated like a chaotic bazaar contributing seriously to misgovernance. Most of those who get elected are simply ill-equipped for the required political task of forcing new equations among various perspectives and interests. Consequently our entire population becomes saddled with idiotic laws because many of our legislators don't have the elementary skills for hammering out sensible, implementable legislation.

Whenever serious laws are being debated and passed, both the treasury and opposition benches tend to get emptied out. Our legislators are more adept at coming to blows and staging walk-outs than actually debating issues of importance. We should try to bring about a qualitative change with women's participation in these fora, rather than bring it down further with women simply joining as puppets in this unholy enterprise.

Any polity in which violence and crime dominate, women as a group become automatically marginalised – partly out of choice but largely due to the fact that barring exceptions, women cannot effectively compete with men in gangsterism. Sooner or later they lose out and just as well. Where connections to powerful patriarchs is an important requirement for women in politics and where thugs dominate politics, only women like Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi and Jayalalitha can survive to demonstrate that at least some women can be as ruthless, corrupt and vicious as the worst of male politicians.

CORRECTIVE MEASURES

All this is not to deny that the peripheralisation of women in the politics of our country is a very bad sign. There is an urgent need for corrective measures to enhance women's participation in politics.

If we look around the world we find that women have found a respectable and enduring political foothold only in those societies which have genuinely functioning democracies. In such countries, political parties function with a measure of political and financial accountability. Society is organised around just and humane norms instead of valorising aggression. Of all the countries in the world, the Scandinavian countries seem to have evolved into well-functioning democracies. It is no coincidence that women have made enduring and substantial gains in these societies. In 1994, the proportion of women in the Swedish parliament had already reached 40 per cent and is nearly half in the local institutions of governance such as the Country Councils.

Swedish women constitute 43 per cent of all parliamentary committee members. In the more macho and violent US, women constitute a bare 8 per cent of the US Senate, despite a vibrant women's movement in that country.

Given that the marginalisation of women is integrally linked to the marginalisation of all decent people from our party politics, we need broad-based electoral reforms to make our parties function in an accountable and transparent way. The proposed reservations might bring about a quantitative increase in women's representation, the quality of their participation will not improve if the overall polity remains as filthy as it has become. For that we need wide-spectrum electoral reforms that will curb the role of muscle and money power in politics and democratise decision-making in the party by ensuring regular and fair elections at all levels, make it easy for people to fight elections without seeking patronage of political dons, work out a sensible proportional representation system which facilitates representation of various marginalised groups without mechanical reservation quotas.

The following proposal put forward by Shetkari Sangathana of Maharashtra in its Aurangabad Conference of 1993 (after carrying out a review of the fall-out of one-third reservation quota at the panchayat and zilla parishad level) seems to be more promising than the mechanical rotating quota system being currently proposed.

The proposal involves the creation of multi-seat constituencies with one-third quota reserved for women. For instance, three constituencies could be clubbed together to make one – and each clubbed constituency can be represented by three people, one of whom must be a woman. This could be done either through a proportional representation system or even maintaining our current 'first past-the-post system'. The first two seats would go to whichever candidates poll the highest number of votes – whether they are male or female. The third seat would go to the woman who polls the highest number of votes among the women candidates. This same principle could also be extended into a 50 per cent reservation for women in which each constituency is represented by one man and one woman.

There are several advantages of this system: (a) Representation of women would not be frozen at a 33 per cent limit. Every constituency will be represented by at least one woman but it would not be limited to one if women candidates manage to win general seats as well.

(b) All the voters in every constituency would get a chance to vote for a woman candidate, if they so desire, as opposed to the presently proposed quota system in which voters of only one-third of all constituencies

will get an opportunity to elect women candidates. There could also be a provision for cumulative voting so that if a voter chooses, she/he could give all three votes to one candidate

(c) The tendency to ignore one's constituency (due to the uncertainty that comes with rotating reserved constituencies) would be eliminated. Women would be able to opt for the constituency where they have built support, rather than be shunted around from one constituency to the other.

(d) Men would not feel forced out of their reserved constituencies, but simply be asked to share space with women. All candidates, regardless of sex, would have an opportunity to win the first two seats if they are able to garner enough votes.

(e) Women will not be fighting only against other women, but would compete with men as well. They would also get an opportunity to team up with two other colleagues to cover their joint constituency on behalf of their party, so they would not be confined to the *zenana dabba*.

(f) In multi-seat constituencies, voters will have the choice to elect leaders from more than one party. If the three winning candidates are from different parties, they are likely to act as a check on their colleagues and compete with each other in 'serving the constituency'.

It may well be argued that clubbing three constituencies together will make them unduly large and unwieldy. But then three people are required to campaign and serve it jointly. Perhaps it would help to promote a little more of team spirit in our politicians than currently exists.

If, in addition, we could put an end to the control over party tickets by the 'High Commands', we would have the possibility of better quality people emerging within party politics. To do this, we would have to ensure by law that inner party elections are held regularly in every party. Candidates for legislature as well as at the panchayat and zilla parishad levels should be selected through primary elections at the appropriate levels by party members. If a party does not wish to field women candidates, it could choose to put up only two candidates. It would not have to draw a total blank in a constituency simply because it did not have eligible women or it did not want to put up women candidates.

These changes ought to be simultaneously accompanied by other electoral reforms which bring about financial transparency, effective and meaningful control over election expenditure, and well-defined rules that allow for public monitoring. However, the real cleansing of our politics will take place only when being in a position of power in the government (whether as a politician or a bureaucrat) does not provide a licence to loot people and the public exchequer as

is presently the case. The licence-permit raj has to be thoroughly dismantled before democracy can work in this country and we can begin to live as free citizens.

Notes

[I am grateful to my colleague D L Sheth for his useful comments and valuable suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. My special thanks to Paige for her feedback and help in finalising this article.]

- 1 *Report of the Committee for the Status of Women*, pp 284-85.
- 2 Margaret Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, Kitabistan Series, Allahabad, 1937, pp 32-33.
- 3 *Harijan*, February 24, 1940, CW Vol LXXI,

- p 208.
- 4 Jawahar Lal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p 27.
 - 5 *Young India*, October 17, 1929.
 - 6 *Harijan*, February 24, 1940.
 - 7 D G Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. III, p 61, Publications Division.
 - 8 The functioning of each of these panchayats needs to be studied in detail to assess the differences, if any, they made in the political and social atmosphere of the village. I personally was able to look at just one of them in Vitner village, but for only a short period of time - nearly six to eight months after it was elected. The atmosphere in the village was one of euphoria and enthusiasm, especially among men. The Sangathana was unable to sustain this campaign as other priorities took over.

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