

Lack of Gender Solidarity

Systematic Downgrading of Women Politicians

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Women's organisations and women parliamentarians have spent a great deal of energy during the last decade fighting to secure a 33 percent reservation of seats for women in Parliament and state legislatures. Fighting for a larger presence is no doubt important. It is a happy development that women MPs were able to build an inter-party alliance on this issue. However, it is no less important to ensure that women who succeed in finding a place for themselves in politics are treated with respect and not sidelined, that they do not face discrimination as women in the allocation of ministries, and that their merit is given due recognition.

It is curious that women's organisations as well as women parliamentarians have rarely come to the defence and support of women politicians when they are subjected to ridicule and humiliation simply on the basis of the bias against women in politics. The absence of such gender-based solidarity among women politicians is an important reason why party bosses find it easy to snub women and keep them on the fringes of politics. Mutual rivalries between male politicians are no less deadly, but one of the reasons why men outdo women in grabbing power positions is that they know when and how to close ranks, to lobby

for each other and form interest groups. Unfortunately, at least in India, women politicians do their best to pull each other down rather than lend support to each other.

Lack of Mutual Support

By and large, women are allotted much less significant portfolios and kept in junior positions and minor ministries because, while each may lobby for herself, they rarely lobby for each other as a group. Therefore, as a group, women remain weak and insignificant. While women's organisations have begun putting pressure on political parties to give tickets to women candidates, they have never campaigned to have women gain positions controlling key portfolios. There are several examples from the recent past where gender-based solidarity was called for but failed to materialise.



Take the case of CPM's Gowri Amma who is among the most unjustly treated woman politicians. She had emerged as one of the most popular mass leaders of Kerala and was considered a prime candidate for the chief minister's post. And yet when she was insulted, sidelined and finally thrown out of the CPM on flimsy grounds, neither the women leaders nor the women's organisations in Kerala registered anything resembling a protest. Similarly, when Najma Heptullah was bestowed the rare honour of being elected as the chairperson of the International Inter-Parliamentary Union, she was felicitated by politicians of rival parties, but women from her own Congress Party maintained a studied silence as though her election was an embarrassment they had to hide. It is

well known that while her achievements are never celebrated by her female colleagues, some of them do work hard to sabotage her chances of holding key positions in the Congress Party. She was expected to be a serious candidate for the vice-president's post this year. But there was no enthusiasm among Congresswomen to strengthen her claim.

For many years Mamta Banerjee was persecuted by her own party bosses because she has been successful in building a solid mass base for herself on her

own strength. I do not remember any women Congress leaders of any stature ever fighting alongside her for her due place in the Congress Party when she was a member. Even when she broke away in frustration, some of the important male leaders joined in a common cause with her, but not Congresswomen. Jayalalitha received even worse treatment within the AIADMK after the death of her mentor, until she effectively challenged the Party leaders electorally. But even when she was physically attacked and her saree torn away in the state assembly, women politicians did not think it important to protest against this Draupadi type of humiliation. One does not have to support Jayalalitha's politics to protest against attempts to disrobe her publicly.

The media have consistently derided Uma Bharati as a "sexy *sanyasin*" and taken much more interest in her real or imagined love affairs than in her politics. Yet, women politicians in the BJP have never protested against the frivolous coverage she gets in the media and the shoddy treatment she has to endure. In fact, her own Party women contribute to a good deal of gossip about her instead of protesting her denigration. Even a consistent opponent of the BJP like Mani Shankar Aiyar says that she is among the most effective parliamentarians. Information on this aspect of her career rarely reaches the public. She is among the few BJP leaders with a mass appeal and plays a key role in BJP's electoral campaigns. And yet when it comes to portfolio distribution, she is given a very minor portfolio as Minister of State for Sports. Why have women leaders of the BJP never cared to lobby to get her a more substantial portfolio?



Maneka's Track Record

Yet another example of the sad absence of meaningful solidarity among women politicians is the total silence of women's organisations and women MPs of the NDA alliance at the unceremonious sacking of Maneka Gandhi, first as Minister for Culture and later as Minister for Animal Welfare. Whatever her real or imagined faults, no one can deny that she is one of the few politicians who seriously engages with issues of importance. Even those who differ with her ways of defining issues and solving problems cannot deny that she is extremely task-centred, obsessed with making a difference and producing results, in contrast to most other ministers. She is one of those who sticks to her issue-based agenda whether she is in or out of government. Even when she is a minister, she carries on with her campaigns, changing and bending rules or even brazenly breaking them if she finds that they stand in the way of what she thinks is right. Even though she gets a lot of negative press publicity because of her rough and tough manners, it is significant that she has rarely left an issue half way.

Most of her famed temper tantrums are over the corruption and

inefficiency of her staff. She is well informed and zealous to a fault in whatever issues or tasks she takes up. She has never been involved in any corruption scandal when in office despite being a minister four times. She makes sincere attempts to streamline the functioning of the ministries under her charge as well as to block or reduce major avenues of corruption. She is one of the few women politicians with an independent political base and has often won her elections with record-breaking margins without the support of any party. Not only that, her all-India appeal is such that in most parts of the country her public meetings during election campaigns draw larger crowds than that of most senior politicians and ministers. She was the first woman in India to form a political party of her own. And yet, she has never been given full cabinet status as a minister.

During her brief stint in the Ministry of Welfare, she introduced numerous innovative schemes. Within a few weeks she sorted out the long pending task of detailed listing of Backward Castes and Communities who qualify for welfare measures. During her period in office more than 50,000 disabled people got artificial limbs, medical care and wheelchairs through special camps; she helped revive the factory for the manufacture of the famous Jaipur foot by giving them a grant to restart the closed factory; started six state-of-the-art disability hospitals-the first one in Srinagar where this service was sorely needed because of frequency of injuries due to violence by terrorists and security forces; passed a new secular Adoption Act which includes Muslims among those eligible to adopt children and also provides for foster parenting; gave a major push towards enhancing the number of

adoptions in India and created a separate division to streamline the interface of NGOs with the Ministry.

And yet, she was unceremoniously removed from that portfolio and shunted to the Ministry of Culture. And who replaced her? A man who topped the list of the “Ten Worst Ministers” in an opinion poll conducted by *India Today*. While she was still given only a Minister of State rank, he was given Cabinet Minister rank when he took over her former Ministry. As though to rub in the insult, during her tenure as Minister of Social Justice, the head of the Scheduled Caste/Tribe Commission was given cabinet rank, even though his office was actually an adjunct of Maneka Gandhi’s Ministry.

It is noteworthy that Maneka Gandhi did not ask for, nor was she keen to take charge of Ministry of Culture. It was forced upon her as a demotion. After she agreed to this arrangement, that too was snatched away in the most peremptory manner within weeks of her taking charge and she was dumped in the most peripheral office: Minister of State for Statistics. However, she insisted on and got a new office created for her - Ministry of Animal Welfare. She got it because there were hardly any takers for this job. However, Maneka managed to use the Animal Welfare Ministry to stir several powerful establishments, including the medical research labs, just the way she had the entire industrial establishment up in arms when she was Minister for Environment.

She remains the quintessential activist whether she is in or out of power. Her indefatigable activism has produced an incredibly long list of victories which have led to enduring changes in the neglected field of animal rights. It is another matter that her

headstrong commitment to these causes has won her many enemies and caused her political career serious setbacks.

Her recent dismissal from the Vajpayee cabinet is clearly in response to the pressure from the pharmaceutical companies and scientific establishments found guilty of gross malpractice in the name of medical research on animals. Also, now there are many more takers for the new Ministry of Animal Welfare she had created because she has introduced so many new legislations and checks against the abuse of animals that politicians now see it as a lucrative post. They can arm-twist various industries and traders dealing with animals and animal products because there is enough scope for extortion within this innocuous sounding ministry as well. Therein lies the tragedy of governance in India as well as the inherent limitations of using stringent legislation as an instrument of reform in the absence of an accountable machinery of governance.

Every time Maneka is dropped downgraded or shunted, the media tends to justify it on grounds of her sharp tongue and rough manners. But the corrupt and criminal among our ministers never get treated so

shabbily. Neither has any male politician been given such short shrift, especially if they have an independent political base as well as a good performance record in office.

Need for Solidarity

While Maneka Gandhi herself has consistently refrained from projecting her case as one of gender discrimination, it is amply clear that the snubs administered to her are to a significant extent due to her being a woman. And yet, no woman politician from within the NDA coalition has said a word to protest her repeated ousts. Even more surprising is the fact that women’s organisations have failed to register even a nominal protest in her defence.

One does not have to support or endorse the past or present actions of the women concerned in order to protest against the insulting behaviour meted out to them or systematic attempts to deny them the share of power and authority due them. Reservations for women by themselves will not lead to their empowerment if they stay divided against each other within each party and if there is no organised constituency of women ready to defend women politicians against gender-based slander and humiliation. □

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