

The law to reserve one-third of the total number of seats for women was implemented at the *panchayat* and *zilla parishad* level in all the states of India without any opposition from any political quarter whatsoever. Ramakrishna Hegde's government in Karnataka started this process in 1983 before the central legislation mandating representation for women was passed. It provided for 25 percent reservation for women at village *panchayat* levels. This was before any powerful women's lobby emerged in Karnataka to press for this move and before there was any popular groundswell of opinion in favour of women's reservation. In the mid 1980s, the Shetkari Sangathana of Maharashtra, led by Sharad Joshi, pioneered the move to field all-women panels for *panchayat* elections in that state and subsequently focused on getting women elected to *zilla parishads* in as many constituencies as possible, with men of the Sangathana playing a supportive role. However, the Bill introduced in the Parliament in September 1996 to reserve one-third of the seats in Parliament and state legislatures has evoked a good deal of resistance and opposition. This despite the fact that all our major national parties — the Congress, the BJP, the Janata Dal, and even the two Communist parties have committed themselves to reserving 33 percent of the seats in legislatures for women by including this promise in their respective election manifestos.

The Common Minimum Programme (CMP) agreed upon by the various parties constituting the present UF government starts its section entitled "Social Justice" with the declaration that "one-third of the elected membership in Parliament and state legislatures will be reserved for women. Legislation, including an amendment to the Constitution, if necessary, will

Women's Marginal Role in Politics

Madhu Kishwar

be introduced to reserve one-third of all posts in government for women. . . . All laws will be reviewed to remove provisions which discriminate against women." Though they dare not openly backtrack from their promise, it is evident that they did not expect to be called to account so soon and so earnestly. News reports indicate that the greatest opposition to this bill is coming from the United Front MPs. Some of them have openly declared their intention to even defy the party whip (if one is issued) and vote against the bill.

Compare the present day controversy over the issue of women's representation in legislatures to the

atmosphere that prevailed in the 1920s. 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 aiming at 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



Men dominate the election day scene — Meerut elections, October 1996

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



Women come out enthusiastically as voters; few participate as campaigners

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 and women who possessed equal qualifications — a certain amount of literacy, property, age, payment of taxes, length of residence.”²

Laws claiming to protect women’s rights have seldom evoked the same amount of hostility or opposition in India that they provoke in many other countries of the world and get to be easily endorsed by the entire political spectrum.

These limitations were included solely 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.

Laws claiming to protect women’s rights have seldom evoked the same amount of hostility or opposition in India that they provoke in many other countries of the world and get to be easily endorsed by the entire political spectrum. In fact, in India there is very little difference between parties of the right or left on women’s issues. For instance, the BJP’s current manifesto sounds even more progressive than the left parties on women’s issues.

It took women in Europe a century-long struggle to win the right to vote. By contrast, the right to vote and other

1. *Report on the Committee for the Status of Women*, pp. 284-285.

2. Margaret Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, Kitabistan Series, Allahabad, 1937, pp. 32-33.

legal rights came without a fuss or fight in India. The right to abortion, right to equal employment and educational opportunities, equal remuneration for equal work, protection against domestic violence — all came to be passed as laws in India without any hostility or resistance. However, since our government neither has the political will nor the appropriate machinery to implement any of its laws (not just those relating to women but even traffic laws) little of our progressive legislation makes an impact on citizens' lives.

People's Response

Our country has had a well-entrenched tradition whereby a party, politician or public figure bad-mouthing women in public or opposing moves for women's empowerment are strongly disapproved of and usually rejected. As far as I can remember, among our male politicians, only Bal Thackeray of the Shiv Sena had the stupidity to make some brazenly anti-women statements some years ago. In the assembly elections that followed, his party suffered a major setback in Maharashtra, which was attributed to his indiscreet anti-women remarks, among other things. Because of this, very few politicians dare attack women from public platforms except when they are in direct electoral competition with a woman.

This is not just due to the pressure on our politicians to be "politically correct" on women's issues. Indira Gandhi as the first woman Prime Minister of India was rarely attacked on account of her gender. If anything, she was able to use her gender to her advantage projecting herself as Mother India and Durga incarnate rolled into one. There was no fuss made over her assuming the highest political office in the land. By contrast, many of the supposed advanced



“You two stay by my side!” All three election commissioners after the meeting at the Election Commission office

democracies of the West are still not ready for women in such high offices. The first woman prime Minister of France was constantly derided and attacked for being a woman till she simply resigned from the job.

There is indeed a widespread social opinion in favour of women's active political participation. The recent countrywide post-election opinion survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies for

Table 1: Percent of Parliamentary Seats in the Lower House Occupied by Women in Selected Countries, 1994

Australia	9	Mexico	8
Austria	21	Netherlands	31
Bangladesh	10*	New Zealand	21
Belgium	9	Norway	39
Chile	8	Poland	13
Czech Republic	10	Russian Federation	10
Denmark	33	Sweden	34
Finland	39	Thailand	4
France	6	Turkey	2
Germany	21	UK	9
India	7†	USA	
Japan	3	Senate	9
		House of Representatives	11

* 30 seats are reserved for women, chosen by the elected MPs.

† The 1996 figure has dropped to 6.4 percent.

Source: *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics*. United Nations, New York, 1995. Table 14, pp. 171-175.

Table 2: Representation of Women and Men in State Legislatures

States/UTs	Year	Total	Women	Year	Total	Women
Andhra Pradesh	1957	252	11	1994	294	9
Karnataka	1957	179	18	1994	224	7
Kerala	1957	127	6	1991	140	8
Madhya Pradesh	1957	218	26	1993	320	12
Punjab	1957	101	5	1992	117	6
Rajasthan	1957	136	9	1994	200	9
Tripura	1957	30	0	1992	60	2
Uttar Pradesh	1957	341	24	1993	425	12
West Bengal	1957	195	11	1991	294	18
Delhi	1972	56	3	1993	70	3

Source: *A Status Report on Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj*. Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi 1995.

India Today provides the most encouraging and definitive endorsement that there is no real divide between men and women in India on this issue. 75 percent of men and 79 percent of women favour active participation of women in politics and 75 percent of men and an equal number of women favour reservations for women in legislatures.

On the eve of assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, I interviewed scores of men and women in Meerut constituency to gauge people's response on a range of political issues, including reservations for women. Barring one Sikh couple, everyone I interviewed expressed strong feelings in favour of reservations for women. This included men and women from supposedly conservative Muslim families, illiterate working-class Hindus and Muslims, and representatives of the Balmiki and Jatav (sweeper) communities, apart from the middle and upper classes. Men and women alike said that the inclusion of women was

3. *A Status Report on Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj*, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1995.

both necessary and desirable and would be beneficial not just for women but for politics as a whole.

Despite all this, women have been politically marginalised in our country and most of them live extremely restricted lives. They are not allowed to have much of a voice even within their own community's decision making processes, leave alone having a meaningful say in national politics. In addition, today we are witnessing a serious backlash. Not just politicians but even many intellectuals are angrily rejecting the idea of reservations for women and calling it a retrogressive move.

Peripheral Role of Women

Most countries in the world have failed to give due space and representation to women in political institutions. Even in societies where women exercise relatively more freedom in day-to-day living, they remain politically marginalised.

As can be seen in Table 1, women have done extremely well in the Scandinavian countries — Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland, where they are moving in the direction of near

equal participation. In these societies women have begun to seriously alter the very nature of politics and have made enduring and substantial gains for themselves in every field. In India, the problem is more serious because while in many other countries women are inching forward bit by bit, in India the participation of women in politics is actually declining. There were many more outstanding women leaders and workers in the Congress Party at all levels during the freedom movement than are present today in all the parties put together. Table 2 shows women's declining representation in the legislatures of a few select states and Table 3 shows the stagnant representation of women in the Lok Sabha since Independence.

Puzzling Contradictions

One of the most puzzling features of low political representation of

Table 3: Women's Representation in the Lok Sabha (Lower House)

Term of Lok Sabha	Total Seats	No. of Women Members	Percentage
1952-57	489	14	2.8
1957-62	494	18	3.6
1962-67	494	30	6.0
1967-71	520	31	6.0
1971-77	520	20	3.8
1977-80	542	19	3.5
1980-84*	529	28	5.3
1984-89	542	42	7.7
1989-91†	523	23	4.4
1991-96†	536	39	7.2
1996	543	35	6.4

* Elections were not held in 12 constituencies in Assam and in Meghalaya.

† Elections were not held in J&K and Punjab. Figures include women elected from Punjab during the by-elections in 1992.

Source: Election Commission of India.



Cut-outs of P.V. Narasimha Rao put up on the road at Anand Parbat in New Delhi

women in our legislative bodies is that it seems to have no direct correlation with literacy and other seemingly logical indicators. A comparison between the states of Kerala and Rajasthan, whose literacy rates are at opposite ends of the spectrum, demonstrates this clearly. In Kerala, the overall literacy rate is reportedly 90 percent with 86 percent female literacy. By contrast, in Rajasthan, female literacy is a mere 20 percent and only 12 percent of the females are literate in rural areas.³

Kerala has a matrilineal tradition in which women have a much larger measure of autonomy and freedom of movement. Kerala's women also tend to marry at a much later age compared to women in other states. Most women in Rajasthan live far more restricted lives in aggressively patriarchal communities, many of whom still practice

purdah very early or even child marriages. However, all these cultural and educational advantages women have in Kerala have not translated into higher political participation. The percentage of women in the Kerala legislative assembly rose from less than one percent in 1967 to six percent in 1991. In Rajasthan, the representation of women was four percent in 1967 and

The sidelining of women in our polity is part of a larger process in which most honest, decent people have become politically marginalised as our politics and government have become the hotbed of crooks, thugs and even outright criminals.

reached eight percent in 1985-90. Since then it has been going down. Similarly, the state of Manipur, which has a tradition of women playing a dominant role in family and community, again due to a matrilineal heritage, never elected a single woman legislator up to 1990 — when it elected its first. A similar low level of women's representation is true for Nagaland and other North-eastern states, which are known for a less repressive culture for women. By contrast, UP, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, which are known for their low education levels and repressive cultural norms for women, have not only sent a relatively larger proportion of women to the Lok Sabha but have also elected relatively more women MLAs.

Post-Independence Politics

In independent India, politics has proved to be very inhospitable for

women. One important reason is the pervasive gender discrimination which results in making even veteran women politicians feel bypassed and ignored. For new entrants, discrimination makes it very difficult for them to establish a foothold without patronage from powerful men in the party.

However, it is important to recognise that the sidelining of women in our polity goes beyond gender

discrimination. It is part of a larger process in which most honest, decent people have become politically marginalised as our politics and government have become the hotbed of crooks, thugs and even outright criminals. Very few honest men or women have survived in electoral politics and kept their honesty intact.

Today the political scene has come to be dominated by anti-social elements because we have reduced our democracy to the sole ritual of the electorate casting its vote whenever called upon to do so. After they vote, the people have virtually no role in the functioning of civic and other institutions. After Independence, the brown *sahibs* led by Nehru, who inherited power from the *gora sahibs*, allowed the colonial bureaucracy to strengthen its stranglehold over our civic, administrative, and political institutions from the village to the national level. Even today, a young collector in his 20s rules supreme like a colonial master over the district he governs. He can dismiss *panchayats* and *zilla parishads* at will and people have to appear before *sarkari babus* as hapless supplicants for every little



Mayawati

thing. In such an atmosphere, local leaders, including elected representatives, tend to establish a nexus with bureaucrats so that both can join in unrestrained loot and plunder of public resources. No effective monitoring mechanisms exist to restrain our *netas* and *babus* or call them to account when they systematically abuse their authority. Politics has become the quickest and shortest route to getting rich without doing any work other than brokerage. If the rules of the game remain as corrupt as they are now, only those women politicians who are good at emulating the worst of male politicians in the art of power-grabbing and plundering will be able to survive.

Career graphs of Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Rithambara,

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Sheila Kaul, and a host of other prominent women in power politics is a testimony that women become as vicious, corrupt, and authoritarian as the worst of men when they occupy positions of power which demand little or no accountability. Such specimens of the female gender serve neither the cause of women nor that of society. They are as harmful for our democracy as are the Bal Thackerays,

Chandraswamis, H.K.L. Bhagats and Advanis. The presence of this type of woman is neither worth fighting for nor celebrating.

This is not to suggest that I am in favour of leaving the political arena to the male crooks who dominate our Parliament and state legislatures today. Far from it. But I would like to see women enter politics with a vision for restoring the health of our dysfunctional political system, to make our politics truly representative and overhaul our institutions of governance — the local corporations, police stations, courts, and various government offices — in such a way that they become actually accountable to ordinary citizens in their everyday functioning.

Extra Load of Morality

Many argue that to expect women to carry an extra load of morality is to make unreasonable demands of them which only strengthens the stereotype of women as self-sacrificing creatures who can be easily sidelined. I confess that I am still stuck to the perhaps somewhat outdated, naive, and romantic vision of Mahatma Gandhi

regarding women entering politics not to compete with men in loot and plunder but with a view to cleanse and purify politics. While it is legitimate for women to demand a share of the pie, it is equally important to ensure the pie is worth eating and that there is enough there for everyone to share. Women's entry into politics will not change anything for the better if the overall character of politics does not improve. If women join politics in greater numbers through the present scheme of reservation this change alone is not going to create a new political culture by itself. While the inadequate representation of women in governance is a serious flaw of our democracy which needs correction, to stop at merely that would be suicidal as it will only lead to making a sizable space for women in the world of organised corruption and crime.

Politics At What Cost?

As things stand today, even those women who have made a mark in electoral politics find it hard to sustain their involvement unless they too become money making racketeers. For the honest, the heavy investment of time and money that is required proves too burdensome to be sustained for more than a short time. A good example from among the many accounts I have heard of the special hurdles women face in politics, is that of Sarojatai Kashikar, who was a member of the Maharashtra assembly between 1991 and 1995. Sarojatai was initially drawn into politics through her husband's close association with the Shetkari Sangathana. Before her exposure to the Sangathana, she was an ordinary housewife whose only connection with political life for years was cooking and serving her husband's colleagues in the movement. Though she was well-educated, she had no interest in or knowledge of the political world.



Campaign posters

However, as the Sangathana leader Sharad Joshi insisted that women must participate actively in the movement, she slowly came to be one of the leading cadres of the Sangathana. In 1991, the Sangathana fielded her as a candidate for the Maharashtra state assembly elections as part of their

campaign to get as many women elected as possible. Though new to electoral politics, she won by a convincing margin and within a short span of time came to be one of the most respected legislators in the state assembly. She took her work seriously, studied the required documents, kept in good contact with her constituency and was respected even by district officials for her honesty and integrity. However, her job as an MLA required that long periods had to be spent away from home attending assembly sessions in Bombay. Since she did not feel safe living alone in the MLA's hostel in Bombay, a young brother-in-law was deputed to accompany and stay with her in Bombay. She told me that even for a middle-aged married woman like herself, to be seen chatting and freely socialising with male political colleagues was likely to be misunderstood and become cause for character assassination. To avoid this, her brother-in-law remained by her side to act as a protective shield.



Saroja Kashikar

In addition, in Sarojatai's case she could also count on her four other male colleagues from the Sangathana who

also became MLAs at the same time as her. Having been trained in the political culture of the Sangathana, her colleagues were not only exceptionally honest and decent but also used to dealing with women as colleagues. These men acted as buffers, yet provided her the necessary communication channel with the world of politicians without her having to directly hobnob with all kinds of unsavory characters. Since they were all close and trusted friends of her husband, interaction with them provided much less scope for misunderstanding. Yet she did find herself handicapped in many respects and had to watch her every step. Hence the dependence on her young and relatively inexperienced brother-in-law.

Sarojaitai's accomplishments would have been nearly impossible without her supportive husband and even more supportive sister-in-law who cheerfully took over the entire load of her domestic responsibility as well as caring for her two growing sons. Fortunately, her two sons were already responsible teenagers and were cooperative, but they missed her during her long absences from home. If her kids had been small, political work would have been even more stressful.

Apart from the substantial sum of money that had to be spent on her election campaign, her husband had to spend a lot of additional money to support her politics because, unlike most other MLAs, she did not make any "extra" money. The amount of money and resources officially provided to each MLA for their salary and political work simply does not cover the actual expenses of nursing a constituency.

Due to all this, Sarojaitai simply refused to stand for the recent parliamentary election though she continues to be active in Sangathana work. They say behind every great man



Uma Bharti

there is usually a great woman. However, behind each politically effective woman, not just a cooperative husband is required, but an extremely supportive and resourceful extended family and in addition a strong movement-based organisation ready to encourage women into public life.

The Inhibiting Factors

A key component of politics is the art of building alliances. In a culture where even formal interaction with men unconnected to one's own family is frowned upon, women are severely handicapped in politics because they cannot cultivate close association with men without jeopardising their position in the family. A woman operating on

The breakdown of institutional politics in favour of gangster politics has made things much tougher for women, especially given the strict regime of restrictions that most women are made to live under.

her own strength in a party filled with corrupt politicians who think nothing of slandering their own women colleagues would find the going very tough, even if she can somehow mobilise other compensatory resources by her own special efforts.

Not too long ago, Uma Bharti of the BJP was driven to a suicide attempt because of the slander campaign unleashed by her own colleagues who saw her independent mass popularity as a threat to their power. They used her supposed personal closeness to one of the BJP's respected male leaders to spread all kinds of vicious rumours about her, both within the party and in the media. The fact that politics is dominated by the most unsavoury kind of men makes most women themselves reluctant to break taboos regarding free intermixing with men. A woman risks her reputation by even being seen with many of them, whereas a man does not have to prove his credentials by such fierce avoidance.

Thus women are handicapped from getting crucial information which men pick up easily from casual gossip with all kinds of people. So much of our politics is carried out in late night sessions, often over booze, where deals are made and strategies planned. Most women politicians, including the corrupt ones, don't dare to be seen participating in such sessions.

The breakdown of institutional politics in favour of gangster politics has made things much tougher for women, especially given the strict regime of restrictions that most women are made to live under. Even though most men in India favour women's political participation, this does not easily translate into relaxing restrictions on the women in their own families. Behavioral change at the family level will require consistent hard work to change cultural norms and

reduce women's domestic responsibilities.

Even in educated middle class neighbourhoods of Delhi, *mohalla* associations are usually run by men. While a few families are willing to relax some restrictions on women and are supportive of their activism, the workload of women and the nature of their domestic responsibilities makes it extremely hard for them to spare the kind of time required for making even a small difference in politics.

When I was studying the functioning of an all-women *panchayat* in a Maharashtra village, one of the leading members described the difficulties of keeping women active and involved, except intermittently: "For every little thing, we have to go and petition the district level officials — whether you want a road repaired or a bus service extended to your village, a water tank built or a phone connection sanctioned — each of these tasks require numerous trips to district headquarters with each trip involving loss of one full work day for a woman. Often meeting officials won't get the work done. You have to organise protests, sit on *dharnas* and what not. Women simply can't spare that kind of time even if their husbands are not objecting to their participation. Men enjoy meeting officials, having *chai-pani* with them, because that is how they build con-

tacts which can be encashed for personal benefit in various ways. But women are always in a hurry to get back. They don't want to hang around gossiping in tea shops, chatting with officials and *netas* — all of which seem to be a necessary part of men's political world."

As long as working in the political realm involves endless petition mongering to uncaring, unaccountable authorities, as long as decision-making remains remote and in the hands of bureaucrats, as long as politics cannot be easily integrated into the everyday life of people without causing severe disturbances in domestic life, men are likely to control and dominate

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Election Control room with computers, fax, televisions and other communication instruments at the Youth Congress office

it. There should be no requirement that a person become a full-time politician and make it a profession (as well as a means of livelihood) if we want meaningful participation by large numbers of women in this country's political life on a consistent, long-term basis, rather than fitful, sporadic involvement in *morchas* and *dharnas*, as happens at present. The more centralised and authoritarian a polity, the lower the involvement of women will be in it.

Additional Disadvantages

By keeping more than three-quarters of India's women illiterate and providing shamelessly poor quality education to the few who manage to reach *sarkari* schools, the government plays a crucial role in discouraging and obstructing women's participation in public affairs. Even for participation at the *panchayat* level, it is no longer possible for an illiterate person to function effectively because the *sarkari panchayats* have been integrated into the vast bureaucratic network, with its reams of forms to fill out and its dust-covered volumes of rules and procedures.

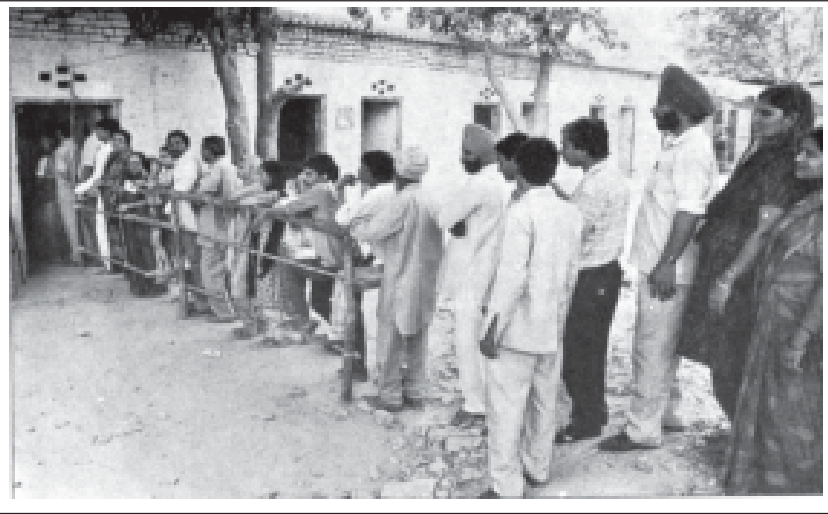
Moreover, the rules are rendered in such opaque Hindi or regional languages that even the literate members of *panchayats* find it difficult to make any sense of them. Wherever the *panchayat* members are incapable of or diffident about han-

dling rules and accounts, the government-appointed *gram sevak* simply takes control of the *panchayats*. Most women, especially those who are uneducated, feel helpless and lost when they are required to deal with the impenetrable maze of the bureaucratic world which defines the parameters of the *panchayat's* role. What appears to be a woman *panchayat* member's incapacity is actually proof of our system's ridiculous procedures and insensitivity to people's requirements.

What goes by the name of politics in our country is an overly time consuming and debased activity. Even for those who are honest and sincere in their work, the nature of our political institutions makes it very difficult to make a real difference. Nothing comes to our citizens without *sifarish* and influence because the government encroaches on too many aspects of our lives in negative ways.

Our MPs and MLAs are constantly mobbed by favour-seekers and petition-mongers. They waste a good part of their time doling out favours to their supporters and people who seek their intervention in getting a water or electricity connection, a telephone or gas cylinder sanctioned, jobs or school admission, out-of-turn railway reservations from the MP quota, and generally mediating with various *sarkari* offices for "getting work done" (*kaam karwana*) since our *babus* don't believe in doing anything unless kicked from above or bribed from below. This includes intervening in cases of harassment by the police, corporation or other government agencies.

In addition, an MP or an MLA is expected to lobby to get funds sanctioned for repair of roads or to get *sarkari* approval for the opening of an engineering or medical college. Even to get a primary health centre opened or a public sector enterprise started in their constituency requires lobbying.



Voters queue up to cast their votes at a polling station in Sadar Constituency

In other words, all those things that ought to happen in the normal course of events require constant string-pulling in India.

The kind of politicians who can thrive in such an atmosphere are not likely to have the time or the skills required of a legislator such as initiating meaningful changes in government policy and making appropriate laws to translate that policy into action. This cultivation of a network of favour-seekers is essentially the only political activity commonly recognised as "political work" and "constituency building". Within this system how can a legislator do any meaningful work in her/his constituency? No matter how hard an MLA may try, she/he is not likely to succeed in getting a primary health centre or primary school of that constituency to function properly. However, very little effort is required for an

MLA to become a part of the corruption network and make money by keeping the malfunctioning system intact. The constant pressure from favour-seekers means that an MP/MLA has no time for a normal family life. Women find this part of politics especially hard to cope with. That is why most of our women legislators tend to be from political families which are conditioned to withstand such a stressful life-style. No ordinary person can put up with so much strain and stay sane.

Staying Power of Women

The staying power of women in politics is also limited due to the fact that while they may get support and even get to be treated as heroines if they win an election, very few women are allowed to remain politically active once they lose an election. According to Sharad Joshi, whose *Shetkari Sangathana* worked hard to bring large number of women into the electoral arena, it is extremely difficult to keep women politically active after they have lost an election because a woman who continues to devote time to politics even after the electoral setback gets to be looked down on as a hopeless addict, like a wayward man hooked on

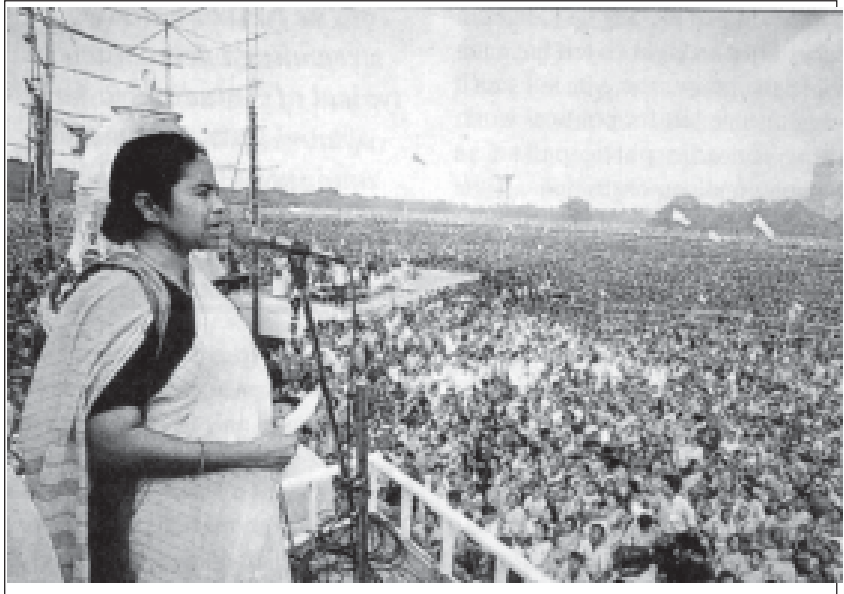
A woman who continues to devote time to politics even after the electoral setback gets to be looked down on as a hopeless addict, like a wayward man hooked on drugs or liquor.

drugs or liquor. Therefore, unlike men, women cannot take defeat in their stride and tend to fade out soon thereafter.

Considering all this, it is perhaps not a coincidence that the few women who have developed an independent political base and are able to compete with men in electoral politics are mostly single or widowed — as for example, Uma Bharti of the BJP, Mamta Banerjee of the Congress Party, and Maneka Gandhi of the Janata Dal. These women are able to give their undivided attention to politics because there is no man to hold them back and, therefore, they are not easily cowed down by scandal or character assassination. These three women have had to wage relentless battles within their respective parties for due recognition because their popularity, mass appeal and their organisational skills which are resented by their male colleagues. Yet these women have mostly emerged triumphant because they are celebrities to their supporters.

While Indian society may not be very kind to ordinary women, it loves to celebrate women who appear and prove themselves to be stronger than men.

In Maneka Gandhi's case, the aura around the Gandhi family name has played an important role in adding to her charisma, while both Uma Bharti and Mamta Banerjee come from very ordinary families and were not groomed by any powerful patriarchs. Women who show extraordinary resilience, courage and the capacity to withstand character assassination get to be treated with special awe and reverence in our country. Despite all the muck-raking regarding Uma Bharti's alleged affairs, her opponents in the party have not been able to eclipse her. She is a popular cult figure among the BJP followers, far more influential in electoral campaigns of the party than even Rajmata Scindia with all her royal



Mamta Banerjee

antecedents. However, none of these women have the clout their popularity should have earned them within their respective parties.

At the same time, it is ironic that none of these three women make a special point of mobilising other women. They would see that as a downgrading of their status if they were projected primarily as leaders of women. The more successful among women politicians do not like to be seen as representing women's interests. It is unfortunate that by and large only those who find it hard to maintain a secure foothold for themselves in elective politics tend to gravitate towards women's issues.

Politics for Ordinary Women

Our democracy will become more

The few women who have developed an independent political base and are able to compete with men in electoral politics are mostly single or widowed.

meaningful when ordinary women can take part in political deliberations without having to make heroic sacrifices and prove themselves stronger than men over and over again.

In the existing circumstances, even talented women cannot stay in politics on their own steam, especially if they are married and have families. Women need the following conducive conditions in order to participate effectively in the public realm:

- a supportive family, preferably one with a political background.
- someone from within the extended family willing to take over a large part of the family responsibility, especially the care of her kids.
- a good amount of surplus money in the family.

Not only in India, but even in the West, very few women can count on all these factors combining together in their favour. The nuclear family and the high divorce rate in the West make it that much harder for women to give much time to sustained political activity, especially since most Western women are simultaneously engaged in employment outside the house. If a

woman's day revolves around dropping off and picking up kids from creches after an eight or ten hour job outside the house, there is not much energy or time left for political work, except sporadic participation in campaigns and demonstrations. If the nature and demands of politics are such that a woman has to choose between her children and politics, most women are likely to avoid politics.

Therefore, it is crucially important for women to have more leisure for them to want to participate in politics. They tend to prefer political work that doesn't take them too far away from home on a regular basis. Thus women can be effective only in decentralised polities where decisions affecting people's lives can be taken locally.

Where Women Succeeded

If we look around the world, we find that women have secured a strong political foothold only in those societies where institutions function according to well-defined democratic norms, where the crime, violence, and overall corruption levels are low, where decision-making is not concentrated in the hands of a few, and where citizens actively participate in local governance without needing to become full-time politicians.

It is no coincidence that the representation of women is highest in the parliaments of the Scandinavian countries. By contrast, in the more macho and aggressive political climate of the USA, women's representation in the Senate is barely nine percent. This is despite the long history of the militant women's movement in the United States. Apart from the above mentioned factors, family life in the Scandinavian countries has changed dramati-

The functional and streamlined democracies typical of Scandinavia have opened up a substantial amount of time for both women and men who are interested in political work.

cally due to changes from above and below, allowing women relatively greater leisure and freedom. According to 1994 statistics, 66 percent of Swedish women in the age group 25-29 were never married or remained single. In the 40-49 age group this figure drops to 16 percent — still high by Indian standards, where marriage is nearly universal. This doesn't count the people who are divorced and separated, but only those who remain single.

In Sweden, according to 1994 data, the average number of children a

woman has in her entire lifetime is 1.9, and according to 1992-93 figures, 28 percent of Swedish couples were cohabiting without children. In 1990-91, Swedish women spent an average of 17 hours per week on household work excluding childcare, with men contributing six hours. In 1990-91, women had 33 hours per week for leisure activities with men having only a slight advantage with 35 hours of leisure per week.

The state provides high-quality childcare through municipal institutions and in 1993, 58 percent of kids aged one to six attended state-supported daycare centres. The state also provides "cash benefits" up to 450 days after a baby is born for both fathers and mothers of young children. There are many other special benefits provided for children who have special needs.

The functional and streamlined democracies typical of Scandinavia have opened up a substantial amount of time for both women and men who are interested in political work or any other work outside the domestic sphere.

However, the support system that is enjoyed by people living in Scandinavian countries is only possible because these countries have:

- very high income levels.
- not a very dramatic gap between the rich and the poor.
- small and culturally homogeneous populations.
- well-developed traditions of the state playing a social welfare role.
- a substantial number of women living independently.
- very high education levels for both men and women and high participation of women in the income earning labour force.



Campaigners block all traffic

For instance, in 1994, only five percent of women were unemployed in Sweden while the figure for unemployed men was a little higher at seven percent.

- a situation in which families are spending less and less time on housework and care of children. Interaction with “other family members”, such as elderly parents, let alone other relatives, is at a minimum.

It is no wonder that having freed themselves from the domestic sphere, Scandinavian women lead the women of the world in political participation. However, this has been achieved at the very heavy cost which most of us in India may not be willing to pay. Care of others outside the family takes up about 30 minutes a week for both women and men in Sweden. By contrast, Swedish women spend 32.6 and men spend 35.2 hours a week on leisure activities.⁴

All of this paints a picture of an increasing atomisation of human life and rapid erosion of family ties. If one compares the time involvement of Swedish parents with their children or relatives to the amount of importance given to family life in India, including time with children, old parents, relatives, neighbours, and friends, it becomes obvious why most people in India, not just women, are averse to sustained political work.

However, the gains Scandinavian women have made in the public realm are indeed substantial.

In this respect, Japan provides an interesting contrast where politics at the top is highly male-dominated but at the bottom is becoming rather woman-centric. In Japan, a majority of women do not work outside the house, while men are expected to work

4. *Women and Men in Sweden: Facts and Figures, 1995*. Gender Statistics Unit, Sweden, 1995.

In Japan, politics at the top is highly male-dominated but at the bottom is becoming rather woman-centric.

extremely hard to support their families. Employers control not only men’s long working hours, but also their leisure time when they are expected to socialise with male colleagues going in groups to bars or *geisha* houses. Consequently, men have hardly any time for family life. They come home too late, too tired, and leave too early to be able to take an active interest in family or neighbourhood affairs. Consequently, the whole domestic terrain and neighbourhood is left to women who have lots of free time on their hands once their husbands and kids leave the house. In addition, men are expected to hand over their earnings to women — family finances are controlled and managed mostly by women.

The male-centric traditional culture of Japan does expect women to remain servile to men and nurture them obediently. But since men are home so little, the time women spend serving and pleasing men is very small. During such time they tend to wear a Kabuki-mask-like expression and do the required rituals, only to shed that mask of servility as soon as men leave home. Unlike women in India, they socialise with other women freely, especially in their neighbourhoods and they do not live under a regime of restrictions over their movements and interactions with the outside world, provided they are not spending too much time with other

Having freed themselves from the domestic sphere, Scandinavian women lead the women of the world in political participation.

men or having extramarital affairs. Consequently, women as a group have the time and the resources to take an active interest in local neighbourhood affairs — including civic matters. The politics at this level is heavily female-centred.

The famous socialist party woman leader, Takako Doi, came into prominence by quietly building a vast political base by mobilising such female networks and energy into the political mainstream.

Thus, women in Japan have carved out a special space for themselves in politics at the base level without the confrontational militancy of the Western feminists. In this case, the fact that most Japanese women are relatively leisured housewives proved to be a positive asset. It would have been much harder had they been running from high-pressured jobs, to household shopping, to creches, and to the kitchens, as most Western women do.

All this only goes to underscore the fact that the problem is far more complex than simply that Indian women are lagging behind due to discrimination. We have to make politics worthy of women, tune it sensitively to their requirements or else even with reserved seats, only those who become like saree-wearing men will be able to survive in politics. □

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