

# THE QUOTA QUESTION

Women and Electoral Seats



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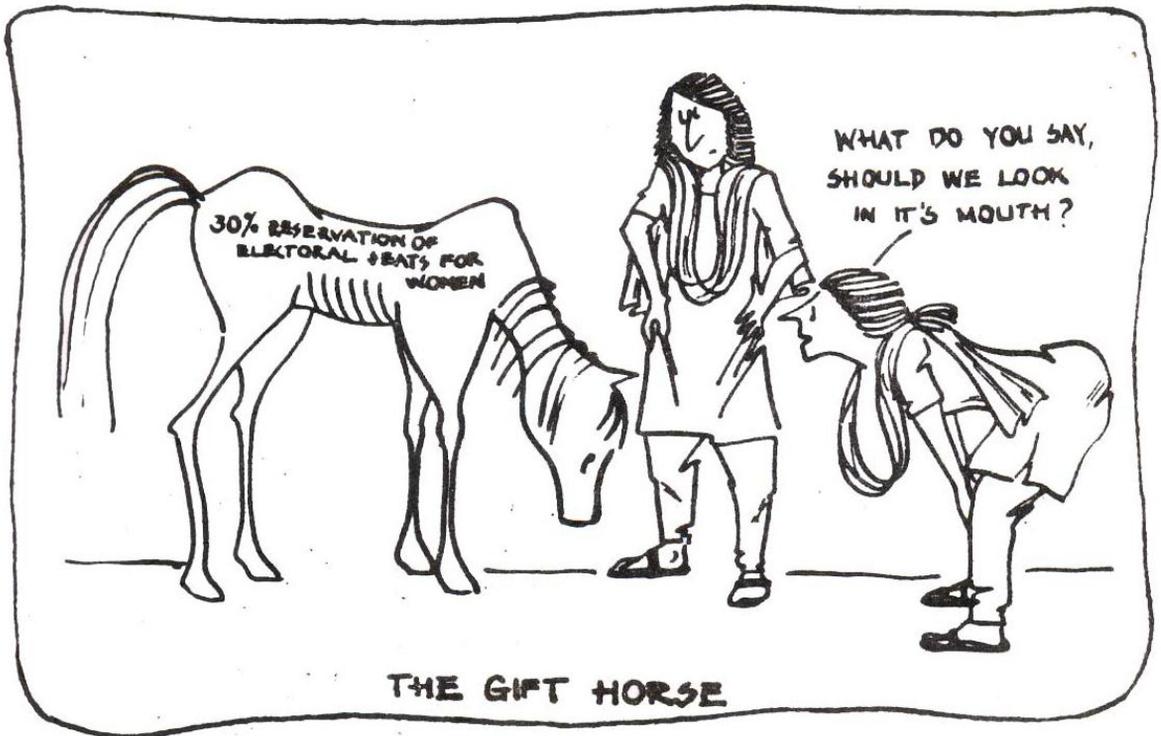
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## DO WE NEED 30% RESERVATIONS?

In March 1990 the Sharad Pawar [Congress-n Government in Maharashtra announced that 30% seats in all the Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, Zilla Parishads, Panchayat Samities and Village Panchayats will be reserved for women candidates. It was a sudden and surprise announcement. Women's groups and the opposition parties were quite unprepared for it. Explaining the reasons for the proposed legislation the Governor C. Subrama-nium said, "(it was)...to secure active involvement and support of women in the task of social reconstruction by providing full scope to the development of their abilities..." and also "...to pay homage to the noted social reformer Mahatma Jyotiba Phule on the occasion of his hundredth death anniversary..." There was not much debate in the Legislative Assembly when the bill was passed in April 1990.

Thirty percent reservation of seats for women is not Pawar's original idea. The Janata Party Government in Karnataka had passed a bill a few years ago to implement a 25% reservations for women in local elections. Recently in January 1991 in Kerala, 30% seats were reserved in the district level elections for women. It is rumoured that the Left United Front in West Bengal is thinking along similar lines. And if we were to go further back into history, the issue of reservation has been on the political agenda from the early days of the Nationalist Movement. Then in 1974 The Committee on the Status of Women raised it as a debate and recommended 30% of seats for local self-government. This was once again proposed in the Panchayat Raj Bill by the Rajiv Gandhi Government and again in the National Perspective Plan for Women in 1988. It is indeed a step forward that governments are speaking in terms of women as elected members in positions of power and not of nomination and token representation.

Today the Bombay Municipal Corporation has 5 women corporators, out of 170, with 30% reservation it will have 51 women corporators which is a 10 fold increase. The reservation of 30% seats in Maharashtra will mean that more than 3000 women will be part of decision making in the state's 11 Municipal Corporations, 228 Municipal Councils, 29 Zilia Pariahs and the many Village Panchstyats. This is the number of elected members. The electoral contest itself would involve as many as 9,000 women if we assume about three contestants per seat.

The Maharashtra Act No. XIII of 1990 proposes that thirty percent of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections is to be reserved for women. While doing so thirty percent of the total number of seats reserved for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes are to be reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes respectively. For example, Solapur Municipal Corporation has 67 electoral wards, out of which 6 electoral wards are reserved for the Scheduled Caste; according to the Act 2 out of these 6 wards will be reserved for Scheduled class women. Out of the 67 electoral wards, 20 wards are to be reserved for women. Since two wards are to be reserved for women belonging to Schedule Castes, this means that 18 wards out of 61 General wards are to be reserved for women.

A conference held with all Municipal Commissioners and a select number of Chief Officers of Municipal Councils on 5th May 1990 discussed several methods for implementing reservations. The roster method was adopted to decide which wards will be reserved for the coming election. A list of 10 blocks was made [excluding the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes reserved constituency] and every 1st, 5th and 9th ward was reserved for women. The reserved wards will change with each elections i.e. the wards reserved presently will be de-reserved the following election or after two elections. The Chief Minister is yet to decide the number of terms for each reserved constituency.

Similarly the Maharashtra Act X of 1990 will amend the Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act 1961 to reserve 30% of seats for women in the Village Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. Here also the roster system is adopted with a little difference from the method adopted in the implementation of the above Act. Instead of blocks of ten, the continuous system of roster is adopted with Zilla Parishad's having 1st, 5th, 9th, 13th—constituency as reserved for women and in Panchayat Samiti it is the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 8th ... constituencies after taking the reserved constituencies for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes out of the list.

Reactions to 30% reservation of seats for women were varied and sharp. The first to speak out were the opposition parties namely the Bhartiya Janata Party and Shiv Sena. They voiced their suspicion that this was a clever move on part of the Congress-I to politically out manoeuvre them, turn opposition held constituencies into reserved wards for women and delay the elections. They were quick to repeat that they were not against reserved seats for women but doubted the motives of the government. Some Congress I corporators were also opposed to it because they feared that they might have to give over their wards to women candidates.

The only support for this move came from different women politicians belonging to political parties.

Saroj Kashikar [Janata Dal]

*"Women are reluctant to contest because of the violence, murkiness and potential character assassination. But reservation will encourage them and would be a stepping stone for them to enter politics."*

Mrinal Gore [Janata Dal]

*“Reservation in the local bodies will be a good training ground for women politicians.”*

Ahiliya Rangnekar [CPM]

*It is a shame that in this day and age we have to speak of reservation. But if that is the only way that women will get justice, then why not?”*

Such clear positions did not emerge from the rest of the women's groups especially the new ones which have emerged since 1975 in the wake of the post Emergency period. This was interpreted by political party affiliated women's organisations as a basic disinterest in politics, mass mobilisation and mass work. But there are a variety of opinions ranging from a boycott of 30% to setting up women's panels as well as confusion and debate. It would be too naive for women's organisations to either sit back and feel triumphant or ignore the whole thing. We will have to confront many questions. How effective will women are in elected bodies? Will women in politics be able to assist the women's movement or be a hinderance to it? Should we support or oppose such a move?

This booklet is an attempt to put forward some of the arguments and trends of thinking on 30% reservations of seats for women in Maharashtra. We believe this is a first step and will be followed by a much wider debate, sharing of experiences from different parts of the country and theorising to enable us to evolve a more holistic stand on this issue.

## THE NECESSITY FOR RESERVATIONS

*“With the decline of women elected candidates and the party’s apathy to files more women , we actually do not have any choice but to accept reservation for women.”*

The Left party women have expressed a concern for the declining numbers of women candidates. Only a handful of women from the generation of freedom fighters like Mrinal Gore, Ahiliya Rangnekar, Manju Gandhi, Pramila Dandavate are still active in politics. All of them acutely feel the lack of younger women to take their place, lead their organisations and keep alive their struggles. This trend in declining numbers is confirmed by statistics. The last Maharashtra State Legislature election of 1989-90 had a total number of 288 seats which were contested by 6268 male candidates and 148 female candidates i.e. 2.3%. Only 5 female candidates were elected to the Legislature. This wide gap between the number of male and female contestants and elected members can also be noticed for the Lok Sabha elections from Maharashtra in 1989. For a total number of

48 seats there were 573 male candidates and 20 women candidates. Only 2 women made it to the Lok Sabha.

Nationally the situation is not very different 110 we can see in the table below:

#### Women Contestants in the Lok Sabha, Elections

Year	Total Seat	Seats contested by women	Seats won by women
1952	489	51	23
1957	494	70	27
1962	494	65	33
1967	520	66	28
1971	518	86	21
1977	542	70	19
1980	542	142	28
1984	542	173	43
1989	543	189	28

Referral Handbook- General Election 1989, Press Information Bureau. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India)

The numerical decline of women candidates has to be seen against the backdrop of an increase in the female voters and the reduction in the gap between men and women voters. In a small constituency like Chimur in Maharashtra, there were more women voters than men for the recent general elections- 84.36% women as against 73.8% men [Thakkar U., 1990,). For the State Legislative Assembly election, more women voted in 43 out of the 288 constituencies [The Independent 13/2/1990). Whilst many factors determine voting patterns, what is clear is that women form a sizable vote bloc and cannot be ignored.

Women politicians put the blame for this sad decline on the laps of their parties. Was it not the support of the Nationalist Movement and political parties which encouraged women to struggle for franchise and participate in the electoral process? And how are the parties now facilitating women's entry into the political process today? Ironically these same parties for the first time since their inception have made the most lavish promises to women. All of them speak about removing gender discrimination and providing economic opportunities. The Janata Dal manifesto promises to reserve 30% government jobs for women. The Bhartiya Janata Party would like to make a wife a co-sharer in her husband's wealth and income. The Congress-I, besides 30% reservation for women in local self-government, promises to include women's names in land and house ownership and to spread consciousness amongst women about their rights.

In the electoral field, each party had promised to yield 30% women as their candidates. But as most electoral promises, this one remained unfulfilled.



Post elections (1989) analysis show :

Congress -I fielded 53 women out of 508 candidates (10.4%)

Janata Dal fielded 5 women out of 240 candidates [2%]

CPI-M fielded 4 women out of 68 candidates (8%)

BJP fielded 8 women out of 205 candidates (4%)

Regional parties have fared as badly if not worse. "The idea that a woman candidate would necessarily get women's votes seemed to have initially caught the fancy apolitical parties but even this was not a sufficient factor to push for more women candidates." (Thakkar, IL1990)

It is this apathy of the political parties to field women that one finds many women standing in election as Independent candidates with very little success. There is an increasing trend in the general elections of Independent members contesting on their own but both men and women find it very difficult and lame out in the end. The following table gives an idea:

Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra.

Year	Total Seats	Total Candidates	Independents Candidates	Elected Independents
1980	48	415	234[56%]	0
1984	48	498	377[75%]	1
1989	48	593	347[58%]	1

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The All India statistic of the General Elections also confirms that while more than 50 % candidates were Independent, only 5 were elected in 1984 and 12 in 1989 elections. None of them were women.

*"The main reason for lesser number of elected women candidates is not that they are not good or that they don't have support from the electorate but that they have to face the hurdles of a patriarchal society at every*

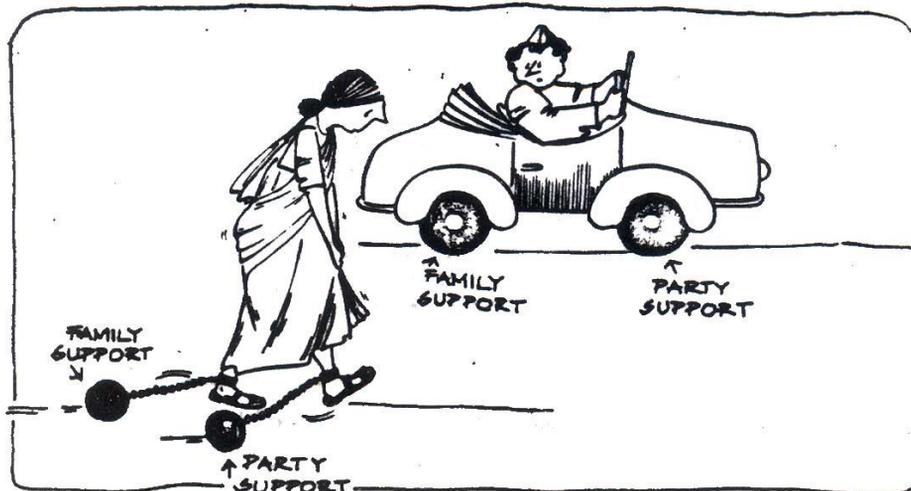
Neelum Gohre

Most parties are reluctant to field women candidates. Women are considered liabilities, inexperienced and resourceless. They are usually not considered for electoral politics unless they are supported by some godfather or party bigwig and have the patronage of political families. Many a times they are given difficult constituencies with little chances of winning or asked to step down during electoral adjustments. In short women except for the important leaders have felt him unwanted relatives or reserves waiting in the wings for an opportunity.

On their parts, the parties say that much as they would like to encourage women there are very few who have the time and capacity to be seriously interested in politics. But parties hardly ever question the existing societal and patriarchal notion about women's primary role and duty as a wife and mother which restricts their participation in the public sphere. Most often women are bearing a double burden of work within the household and in the work place. Political activity would become a triple burden.

Popular notions also perceive politics as something unsuitable for women's temperament and abilities. Hawaiian have we heard the comment "Kya leadernibarmejati hai?"

"Abhi sab mardo ko chudiya pahenao" (So you want to be a leader. Than let all the men ware bangles.)



Some women may with courageous determination overcome the physical constraint of domestic and other work and the restrictive patriarchal notions which generally deter them from politics. But all of them are vulnerable to references and charges of a sexual nature. Character assassination is a sure way to destroy a woman politician's progress. They have to keep disproving rumours of affairs, secret marriages or relationships. Instances of molestation or rape, which may have happened against their will, can make them public controversies and disqualify them from electoral politico. However, political parties are not so squeamish in fielding wife beaters, rapists or molesters as their candidates. These rigid and moralistic double standards hamper women in yet another way. Unlike men., they have to be more careful in taking very confrontationist struggles as a way to get political prominence. The potential of sexual assault as political revenge is a stumbling block. Whereas for men, courting arrest, stints in jail and fights with authorities are 'sacrifices' which lead to greater political prominence.

A striking difference between male and female politicians is their class and regional background. Men from a lower demand caste background, with little education have been able to move upwards from local bodies and organization to occupy national level high positions of leadership. It is nearly impossible for a woman with a similar background to do so. Most of the women politicians in Assemblies and the Parliament come from economically well off families or from royal backgrounds and are high caste Hindus. Women who have aspired for Prime Ministership are the daughters or wives of

leaders. In fact the family plays the role of the political patron in women's political careers. Those without such families have to seek out male patrons and bear the brunt of sexual rumours as in the case of Jayalalitha and MGR in Tamilnadu.

Women wanting to enter the political field find the dice loaded against them. Poor, rural and semi-literate women lose out even before they can begin. Those from wealthier families with political connections survive the first round. If they are careful and stay away from all sexual insinuations and find patrons or powerful lobbies to support them, their parties are willing to risk their candidature. It is therefore not surprising that in Indian politics most women politicians have not worked their way up but "... have been grafted on the political system at different levels because of their contacts with persons in positions of power and influence." [Status of Women Report, 1974]. About 30 to 40 women politicians have stayed in politics for a long time. Many of them have contested thrice and some all elections. "This shows that the circulation of women elites in the electoral processes and thus in the parliament and state legislatures have been slow and restricted." [Mazumdar Veena; 1979]

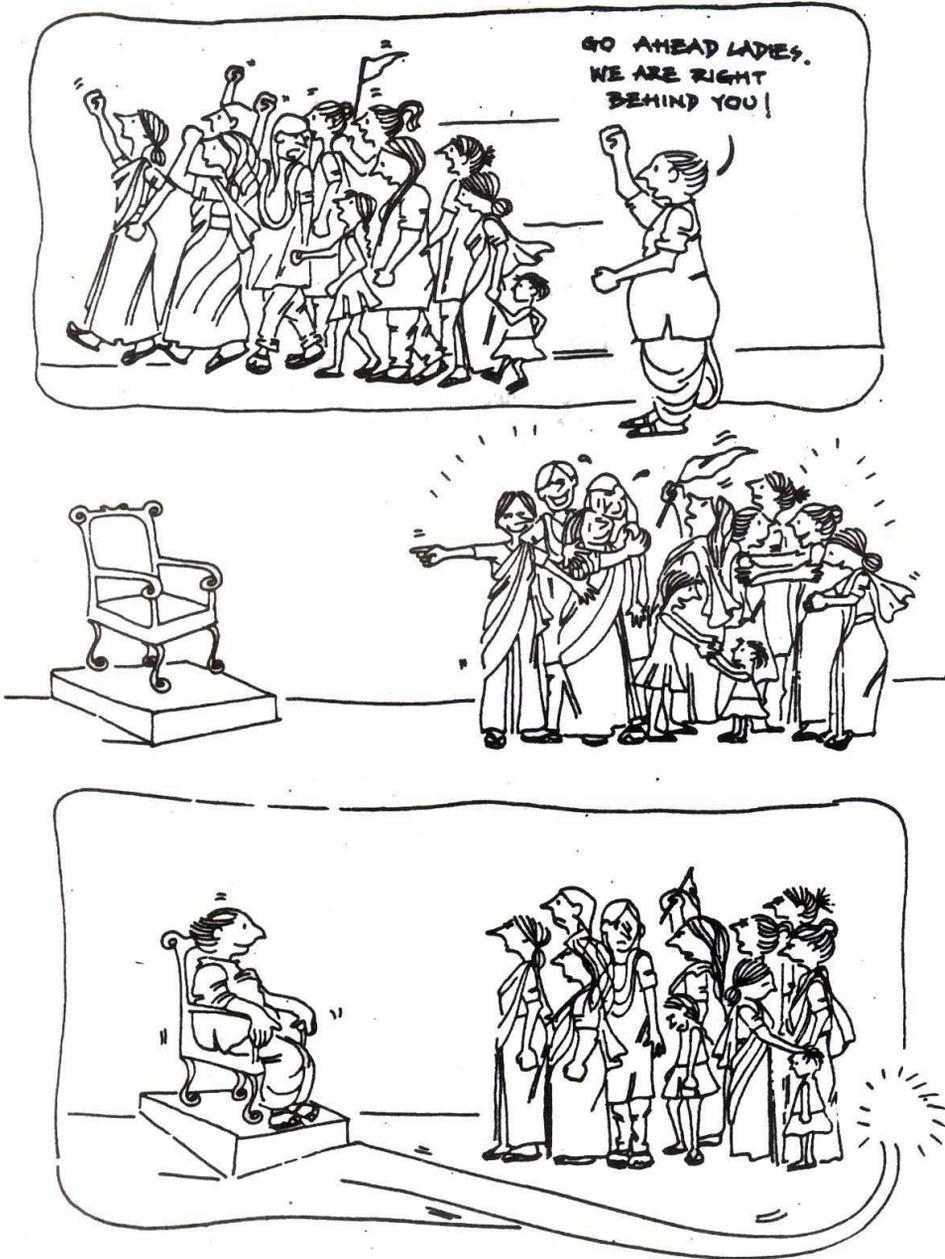
*"What is generally noticeable not only in South Asia but over the world that women are often in the front ranks when a political struggle is in its ideological phase but they become invisible when the struggle enters the phase of distributing the fruits of power"*

Rounaq Jahan

It is to the credit of the women's movement that the focus of study has shifted from women's formal i.e. voting and leadership patterns to their informal or mass level political participation. There are adequate data to show that women have played an important role in political struggle and have fought along with men in all major agitations and movements against colonialism, for wages, against rising prices, for control over land, etc. They have sat in dharnas, gheraZied officials, gone to jail, borne police beating and shouldered the burdens of struggle. Women have often played a supportive role sheltering activists, nursing or as messengers in underground movements. And in emergencies and crisis situations women have taken over leadership and sustained the movement.

Now that women's activism and militancy has become visible the question being asked is why should it be that women should hold the protests and men hold the positions of power? Women are now ready to contest for leadership positions. Rural women attending a series of seminars organized at the Dandekar School for Political Economy (1982-84) in Lonavala spoke of bossism and corruption in the local level governments and asked why they could not contest for those positions? (Omvedt, G., 1990) Forty women activists sat for 4 days discussing various aspects related to electoral politics like functioning of the panchayati raj system, the criteria for selecting candidates, need for a women's front, etc at a training shibir in Ambethan (June 1987). Women in many villages of Maharashtra have organised women's panels in the gram panchayat elections.

The Shetakari Sanghatana had put up 9 all women panels for gram swaraj elections in July 1989 out of which 7 were successful (Afternoon Dispatch & Courier 9-7-90)



It is argued that if women enter the corridors of power they will be able to take up women's issues within state structures and also effect changes in the party and local bodies. They will have access to state resources which can support women's groups and provide services to them. Their positions and actions can legitimize the women's cause in the eyes of the people and parties. Women have in a short while learnt the skills of managing, debating and policy making. They have generated a lot of confidence in not only themselves but amongst neighboring women and villages. Women are more likely and less afraid of approaching women corporators directly rather than male ones. Wherever women have contested, regardless of whether they have won or lost, they created waves of confidence and determination.

On the other hand some ask will not reserved seats isolate women from mainstream politics? Women have replied that SC and ST reservations have not isolated them from mainstream politics but in fact acted as a pressure on the political system without which the dalits and their issues might have remained outside the field of public debate [Mazumdar Veena; 1979]. Most women view reservations as a stepping stone to join general politics.

Saroj Kaahikar, a Janata Dal MLA said, "Reservation should not be like "lakshnzan rekha" wherein women will be kept away from general constituencies. What the party is likely to do is field a woman in a reserved ward, when it is de-reserved the standing woman corporator will most probably be shifted to another reserved constituency. This would mean that she will have no one constituency and continuity in an area They should not be stopped from contesting from general constituencies." (The Independent, 21/3/1990]

Neelum Gohre had contested through the Republican Party of India (Prakash Ambedkar group) for the Lok Sabha elections from Bombay in 1989 She said, "Reservation at the lower level will definitely help women enter the political field and to prove themselves. It will then be up to them to win elections at the higher levels on merit." However academicians like Veena Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar are against the idea of reservation for women only at the local level. They think that a political system cannot be based on ideology alone but must keep in touch with the actualities of the social situations. Considering the many hurdles that women have to face, reservation for women should be extended to all the levels of legislature both at the State as well as at the Centre (Status of Women Report, 1974].

The Committee on the Status of Women recommends reservations to reverse the declining trend in the number of women legislators, to help women gain confidence and to provide greater space to articulate their views. Women elected through the system of reservation will have a greater sense of responsibility and concern for the problems effecting women. Thus ensuring the presence of a body of spokespersons for women's cause in the representative bodies of the states. This would also lead to greater

mobilization in the electorate and within the parties. Women's participation at the local level will help bridge the gap between the state and parliamentary levels. It will also alter the very character of decision making and will compel the political parties to change their strategies and tactics. They argued that such a transitory measure will not be retrogressive to the doctrine of equality of sexes or to the principle of democratic representation but in fact would serve the objective of democracy and equality better by democratizing the representational base.

They further demanded that reservation should be accompanied by measures which will aid the process of women's participation. There should be a permanent committee in each municipality to initiate and supervise programmes related to women's welfare and development. They recommended establishment of Statutory women's Panchayats at the village level as an integral part of the Panchayati Raj structure, with their own autonomy and resources to manage the affairs related to welfare and development programs for women and children (Status of Women Report, 1974).

### THE RECURRING ISSUE

The issue of reservation is an old one which has been with us since the Nationalist Movement. It has been strongly propagated by some and equally vociferously rejected by others.

When the right to vote was given to propertied men, the question posed was should women also be given this right and should the same criteria be applied to them? A group of women leaders [Dowager Rani, Mrs. Ahrtum Shah, Mrs. Chitambar and others] went in a deputation to appear before the Simon Commission [1929]. "It was foolish to think," they argued "that women owned property, paid income tax and house rent." The deputation recommended that all men who were property owners and all literate women be given the right to vote. And to ensure women's actual participation in the electoral process there should be reservation of seats. This dialogue continued till after the Second Round Table Conference (1931) when two opposing points of view emerged between the two nominated members where Begum Shah Nawaz disagreed whereas Mrs. Subbarayan, maintained that without reservation of seats, Indian women would find it difficult to contest elections [Mazumdar Veena, 1979].

All through the 1930's there were many occasions when women leaders had raised the demand for reserved seats especially at the level of the municipality because they feared that women will not be able to test as such special provisions were made for them. The Woman's India Association had demanded that although adult franchise was the only answer, for a transition period it suggested that "reservation of 20% of seats in the new enlarged legislature and proposed that they be voted for by proportionate representation by the newly elected members of the council from the panel of names sent forward by the officially recognised association of women. [ibid]

However, the atmosphere of the Nationalist Movement, the decision to support Mahatma Gandhi and to pressurise him to give up his fast spinet communal awards for elections seemed to have had a considerable impact on thinking of women on the

franchise crossbow It was then with the rejection of communal awards and to abide with Gandhi's wishes that all women's organisations i.e- All India Women's Council, National Council for Women in India, Women's India Association demanded adult franchise for women with joint mixed election, no reservation of seats for women, no appointment by nomination and no co-option.

The reservation debate, then surfaced again with the publishing of the Report on the Status of Women in 1974-75. Once again there was a heated debate between the 11 member committee with two of them opposing the idea of reservation, another two wanting reservation from the local to the Parliamentary level and the rest proposing reservation for women only in local elections. The paper on women in India prepared by the Ministry of Social and Women's Welfare rejected the idea of reservation and maintained that " the policy of reservation, though seeming to ameliorate the situation in the short run, may very well turn out to be counterproductive in the long run... Instead, although slow and arduous, the process of electoral participation, issue oriented protests and a larger movement may prove to be more effective means of launching the second battle [universal franchise being the first] for political equality and effective citizenship of Indian women" [as quoted in women and media, 1990]. No decision was taken and both the report and paper were pigeon-holed away for a future date.

In 1988, even though there was no demand from either the report written or women's groups, the national perspective plan formulated by Rajiv Gandhi Government recommended 30% reservation of seats for women in local self government, panchayat samities and zilla Parishads. Even as the women's groups were debating its pros and cons the Janata Dal implemented it in Karnataka. And now the Congress Government of Maharashtra seeks to bring it in for the next municipal elections.

## **JUST A POLITICAL GIMMICK**

It is not only the opposition parties but also many women's groups which have opposed the introduction of reservation of seats for women. The former have mainly attacked it on the grounds of political maneuvering as they unlike the Congress Party do not have many women members to field for elections. They have raised specific doubts on its actual functioning like the rotation system will be so manipulated that wards which are under the influence of the opposition parties will be reserved to put them at a disadvantage. Secondly the male corporators of the reserved wards are likely to lose interest in their constituency. Or he will put up his female relatives for one term only to regain it back later. The very purpose of reservation will thus be defeated. In Maharashtra, Bhartiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena, through their supporters filed a petition against reservations which was dismissed by The High Court.

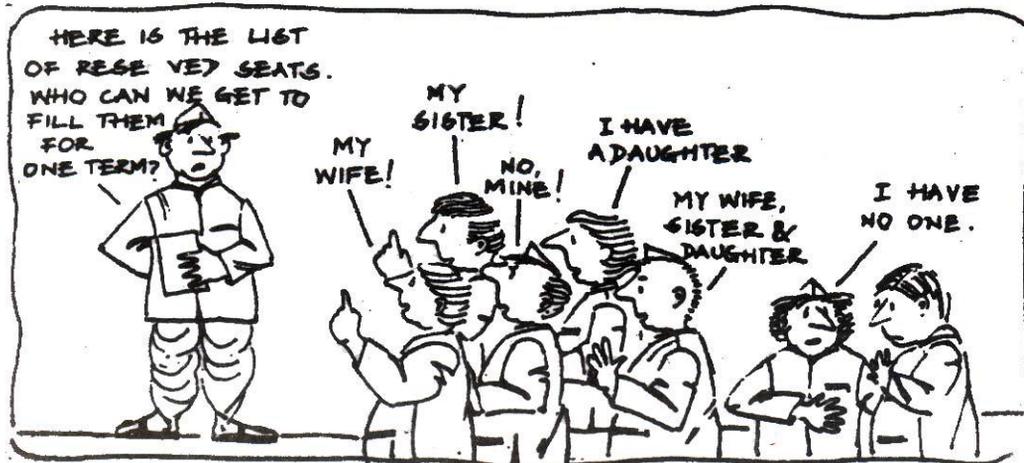
However, Rine of the political parties including the two behind the scenes petitioners have directly opposed reservations of seats for women. Individuals, intellectuals, progressive comrades within smaller parties and other organisations have generally supported reservations as a step towards encouraging women's greater political

participation. But unlike men, women not under a moral compulsion to prove their 'support' or 'femininity' have been more critical and raised fundamental questions regarding its effect on women and the movement.

Many of the newer women's groups including some Marxist Leninist affiliated groups are wary of the electoral process, the State as well as the motivations of the political parties in its sudden interest in women's electoral participation. Neither of the three have particularly been concerned with women's oppression which is the reason for the emergence of these groups as autonomous bodies. The State continues to play an important role in the perpetuation of the unequal relations between men and women through its development policies, half hearted legislations, etc. The State also attempts to co-opt any movements or any section of society that it sees as either challenging its authority or disturbing the status quo. Whenever a movement like the dalit, tribal or women's has put forward radical issues or demands for change, the State has responded by creating an illusion of acceptance. In 1975 as a token gesture to the International Women's Year it gave women the unimplementable Equal Remuneration Act and in 1983 it conceded to amending the rape laws but bypassed the anti rape campaign's major suggestion.

The political parties have never seen women as a viable 'bloc' of votes (till recently) and fused their specific interests with their class, caste, religion or regional identities. And both the State and the parties have abused the 'democratic' process, degraded it with their manipulation, rigging and corruption which has not only discouraged women from entering the race but robbed them of their democratic rights of representation.

Thirty percent reservations will force the parties to recruit women or lose the particular reserved constituency. The question is what sort of women will the parties recruit? Newspaper articles have reported the disgust of opposition leaders at the introduction of reservations for women and have applied for permission to field their wives and relatives. (Indian Express 12-9-90)



These women will have no political experience, ideology or enthusiasm. Numbers will definitely make women visible in the party structure but how will they contribute to alter some of the root causes which have prevented women from entering these parties? How will they challenge the parties for incorporating societal patriarchal norms which do not take women's double burden at home and at work into account, which has a rigid hierarchical structure that provides no space for the development of their skills and by its silence accepts the double standards of sexual morality for men and women? Will these women be able to point out that parties have always mobilised women in times of crisis and protest, channelised their militancy, opened new horizons for them but without taking up their own issues or giving them any leadership positions?

The other part of same argument claims that more women in the representative bodies will not only show the social and political advancement that women have made but also facilitate the raising of women's issues. There is a strange paradox at work here. In 1980 in the Lok Sabha elections some 142 women contested from a total of 544 seats but only 28 won. Far from this dismal situation, outside the parliament, a new phase of the women's movement had emerged and initiated a national anti rape campaign. These new 'spokespersons' continued their agitations against all forms of violence against women like bride murders, wife battery, sexual harassment etc which had hitherto been considered as non political, social issues.

The two dissenting voices (Phulrenu Guha and Maniben Kara) in the Committee for Status of Women Report had other reasons to reject the reservation demand. They considered it retrogressive to accept such favoured treatment as women have been always competing with men as equals. Such an acceptance reinforces the common belief that women are weaker. "It should be our aim to see that the masses of women of all classes become equal partners with men in all senses in society. Separate seats will

weaken the position of women. They must come up on the strength of their own abilities and not through special provisions." [Status of Women Report., 1974].

Secondly such reservations even as a transitory measure will only help a few women from the upper class and caste who are already in a privileged position. Thirdly, they argued that reservations once granted are very difficult to withdraw and this would only perpetuate the already unequal status of women instead of eliminating it. They condemned reservations as a measure which becomes a sort of vested interest in women's backwardness. Rather than reservations, women should be made conscious of their rights, they should be educated to take responsibilities and a public opinion should be created for their increased political participation.

Many of the Guha and Kara's arguments are still echoed to-day. The Constitution recommends reservations for weaker sections of society and so far the scheduled castes and tribes have been granted such measures. But women do not form a caste, do not occupy a particular region, are not a community but are a cross class, caste, regional etc group related only to each other by virtue of their sex.

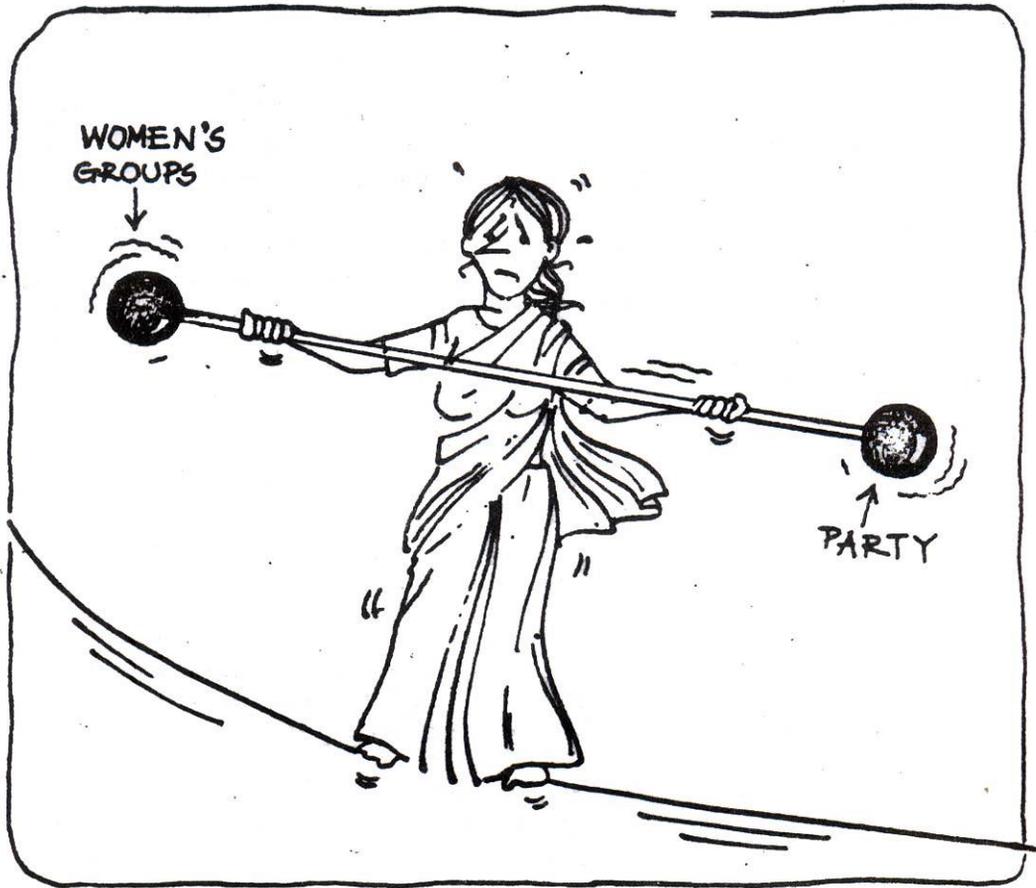
Women are not the sole inhabitants of a constituency nor do they represent a specific grouping so the sex of a candidate cannot be the basis for selection. Women's interest though different in some ways from men cannot be isolated from the economic, social and political interests of the rest of society. Besides, there is a danger of projecting women as only women's leaders and ghettoising women's issues. Reservations will only reinforce the concept of separate identities and hamper the integration of women in society.

The women's cause, as is shown by our history especially the Nationalist Movement, has been taken up by progressive women and men. The concept of reservations implies that only women will be interested in raising women's issues. In the context of rising fundamentalism and right wing conservatism, there is a greater likelihood that the women of the Bhartiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena winning elections. Will right wing women raise women's issues and if so will they not raise them in their own particular manner? In Bombay we have had two militant demonstrations by Shiv Sena women. One for scrapping late night foreign classic films on TV because children stayed up late to watch 'obscene' scenes. The second one was to protest against the preference given by a Christian managed school to children of their own community and not Maharashtrians. Women from the Bharitya Janata Party in Pune had taken out a demonstration a few years ago to refute that women were unhappy or in any way oppressed as claimed by other women's organisations. Perhaps, argue some women, it might be better to have sympathetic socialist minded men than right wing women in power.

The question which has bothered women's organisations is - can we gauge the material and ideological efficacy and strengths which the movement might derive from women

seizing positions of power? Should women's organisations actively encourage women to enter the formal political process? One stream of argument points to the notional power which women hold because they are always in a minority in elected bodies and even after being elected women rarely get to be in positions where they can be part of the-decision making process. The situation is worse in villages where men expect women members to keep silent. An activist in Uttar Pradesh reported that when one of them made bold to speak out her mind in a village panchayat she was physically threatened and ordered out.. It is argued that this continuing struggle within formal structures is more time consuming, emotionally draining and less effective than the struggle from outside.

By entering the electoral process women are accepting the already set hierarchical pattern between the electors and the elected without any hopes of being able to change it.. They will have to dilute their programs and cater to a wider mass of the electorate; bear the burden of council matters at the expense of their other programs; and be extremely careful of their public image which might prevent them from raising any controversial issues. Most women politicians will get trapped between party requirements and its marginalization of women's issues and women's groups and objectives of the movements.



In order to see that their own programs and policies are considered and executed they have to devote all their time and energy to persuasion of their colleagues and officials, playing the numbers game and trading obligations with other council members. This in effect removes them from other non-official or movement work and from their day to day contact with their local organisations and communities. Once elected the nature of their accountability to the local women will be reduced as they will be forced to make decisions on their behalf and the feedback of information and necessity of debate will be bypassed due to lack of time and excessive work.

Then as Gangaben, a dalit and active social worker in her community, asks should not women and organisations reject being wooed by the carrot of elections as it is a definite way to remove and alienate them from their community? Rather should they not put their energies in taking up basic issues and programs for Inman?

## INTERVIEW WITH AN ACTIVIST

Gangaben Solanki is a 34 year old dalit Gujarati woman who has been working in her basti for the last ten years helping women informally, solving their marital problems, accompanying them to the police and other authorities as well as organising cultural programs. She is employed in a municipal school and works at home looking after her two children and husband- She has often locked horns with the local dalit party's leaders and caste leaders in putting forward the women's question. Her natural dynamism and deep concern for women makes her an instinctual feminist and activist. When 30% reservations of seats for women was announced, she formulated her viewpoint based on her own experiences and thoughts.

'When I first heard of 30% I felt quite happy about it. Women, social workers like me who work in a community and all of us in the women's groups, need official support for everyday living. Its not only taking out morchas and haiku; campaigns. Some women have problems when they are out hawking with the municipality or with the polio& They can be also given stall space through the corporation. In my case I was allocated a house but the files just lay there for three years. So many women who become widows have to go to corporator. pay bribes or do sexual favours to get their room in their name.

If women are elected then women can go to them, without feeling afraid, and ask for help. For example, they may need certificates or other official papers. Men have been corporators for years they have contacts with builders and have perfected the art of fooling people. It is common for them to glue slum dwellers taps or latrines by asking them to waive their rights over the land. Or they take a commission from builders. Wherever there are old buildings they tell the tenants that they will repair them but in actuality they take money from the corporation. Women candidates can expose such going on. See, no one is concerned about women, why look the gilt horse in the mouth? So I thought if this government for whatever reason is giving something to women we should just take IL "

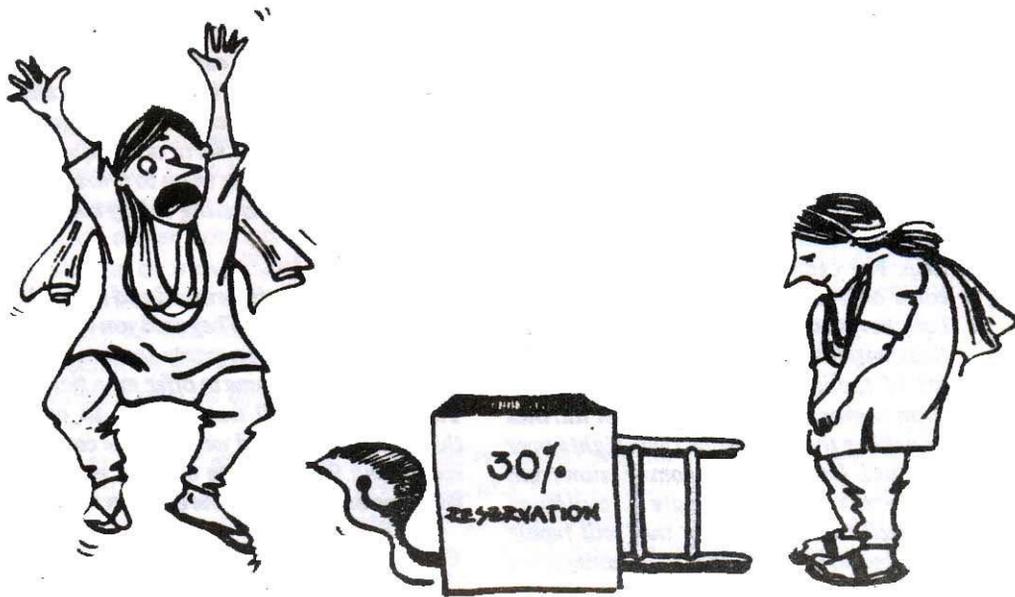
"Around that time my caste ptnchayat had its elections. Do you know that still women have no right to vote. We have the right to vote for the corporation, for the Assembly and Lok Sabha but not for the panchayat I went there with a huge board and sat there explaining to people why women should also be allowed to stand for the panel. They did not like it at all They made me move rzy board saying that according to rules I could not sit near the election booth. Their enemies (those who were against them) brought me tea and gave me space. They thought that it was a good thing I was doing. I went around the basti and spoke to men and women. It is such a problem for women coming before the panchayat. Suppose there is a dispute, divorce or battering, these are all the problems to be solved by the panchayat. But what happens, the woman feels hesitant coming before a group of men, her own inlaws are there so she cannot speak freely and her family is not aware of what she really wants. Again women have to go to the panchayat

for all sorts of certificates like domicile or asking them to pressurise a husband who is refusing to pay wantsnonce."

"People were quite impressed and the leaders offered me a seat. They said you should stand and very won party leaders also heard of this and came to offer me a ticket. They said you will not have to do anything, just stand and we will take care of everything for you. One of them even opt fend me money for ail the election work. Ithought look at this stssially they seket all sorts °fawners for givbag a ticket. Some of them have a bad character or are in the illicit liquor trade. One of them used to break municipal water piles and sell wa-ter to the people for Rs 10 a bucket This 30% is going to encourage the parties to select any type of woman especially their mothers or wives who will listen to them. If I stand, not only will I have to resign from my job but do what they soy. As a woman I will never have the same status as men corporators. And than who will take care of the women of my caste here?"

"So I thought nothing doing I am not going to be sucked into this sort of a thine Being elected to the corporation will me more of a symbolic thing. Male leaders will continue to rule over the conunstnity. III Stay where I am I could do much:WPC for women and see that they get a better deal from the p• By pushing me out ofthe conunsmity the mak leaders will continue doing exactly what they have bee doing so far, solve problems according to their beliefs or money power. Alright suppose I was elected. what would be my position in the corporation? I will not be allowed to do wry thing I want I will have to get involved stonily in pars politicsDo you know that there has been no woman =Dor or sheriff in Bonabqy in the last 40 years?"

"All sorts \*father thoughts also came up. Elections will make women oppose aids other. If there is another woman like me in my basti that another party will promote her, so both of us who might have co-opended earlier in helping women will now stand against each other. Then who knows women can also become cormated like the male corporators. Practically I don't know how I would be this to man-age The party is hardly going to manage my home for nse. But that I think that gad knows how many schemes exit' t gathering dust that we don t even know of. Al ebxted members women mad do so much of good—If )vu ask me straight of say Jiles or no should there be reservations? then I think that reservations for women should be &treble I ass doubtful about it "



## RAISING SOME QUESTIONS

Within the movement., women have either accepted 30% reservations of electoral seats as an unfortunate necessity or rejected it as a clever political ploy. Undoubtedly it is a political gimmick coming from Shreshth Pawar, a chief minister, who has never shown much concern for women in his long political career. But the use of 30% reservations at this juncture reflects simultaneously the frenzied state of realpolitik in Maharashtra as well as the recognition of women as a political grouping and force. We, as members of social organisations and women's groups, need to debate this issue and share with each other our thoughts and experiences. What is the ideological base from where we draw our arguments and what do we perceive as our strategy for the women's movement?

### The 'Unfortunate Necessity' Argument

This argument of women politicians is only part of the reasons for our extending support to 30% reservations. No doubt, more women in the party and state bodies will highlight the entry of women in a primarily male dominated field; it will begin processes of change in the language used and decorum in the body; and will bring confidence to the candidates and women in general.

A larger number of women could also join hands across party lines in case of extreme atrocities and basic services for women. As women experiencing oppression they are likely to have more of an empathy with other women and their problems. In fact they have the potential to be more sympathetic not only to women but other oppressed sections like dalita and tribal&

We disagree with the argument that inexperience and political naivete will hamper women and show them as incompetent and ineffective leaders. It does not take long in that environment to learn the ways of political functioning and trading. On the contrary, women's familiarity might be advantageous to the public because their presence might serve as obstacles to the ways of corruption.

Women once elected have been able to use power quite effectively. Newspaper reports and personal interviews with activists show that at the gram panchayat level, with an all women's panel and with the backing of their party, women have made a significant impact. In July 1989, the Shetkari Melilla Aghadi put up 9 all women panels for the panchayat elections out of which 7 were elected. The first thing they did was to shut down all liquor shops and appoint new teachers in the school. In Metikheda village, they installed 90 taps and many gohar gas plants. The other interesting fact was that "... the nature and even physical place of electoral activity changed, drinking was forbidden during the last three days and slanderous propaganda was laughed 21 off." [Omvedt G, 1990] This is but just one example.

However the main reason for encouraging those women who feel blob stepping into the political world is not such reasons or the fact that they can bring services for women or that they will 'humanise' or 'clean up' politics. But that their presence will herald the erosion of one area of the sexual division of labour between men and women in society men in the outside, public world and women in the private world of the home. It will challenge the cliché that politics is no place for women. And the acceptance of women as leaders will in the long run change to some degree the prevalent humiliating and condescending attitude towards women in general.

Hopefully such processes will first begin within the party structures. Veteran women politicians can take courage to begin a much needed internal debate with their male colleagues on the relationship of the party to women and their role in the revolutionary process. Such debates will point out some basic conceptual and structural problems and the necessity for recognising the deeply embedded patriarchal notions which control women and which cannot be overcome by patronage and tokenism.

Thirty percent reservations provides an opportunity to widen the base of individuals participating in the electoral process. It can begin a process of democratisation which can introduce different women from various socioeconomic backgrounds instead of the few middle, upper caste women who now hold positions in elected bodies. Further these

women together with the women's movement can create new relationships of feedback, accountability and responsibility with the electorate which can be put forward as an alternative to the existing distanced and once-in-a-term contact.

### Reform. Versus Revolution?

Reservations have been criticised and rejected also because activists think that at the most it will bring in some services but does not have the potential for any fundamental changes. Perhaps here we need to reflect on what we mean by reforms and revolution.

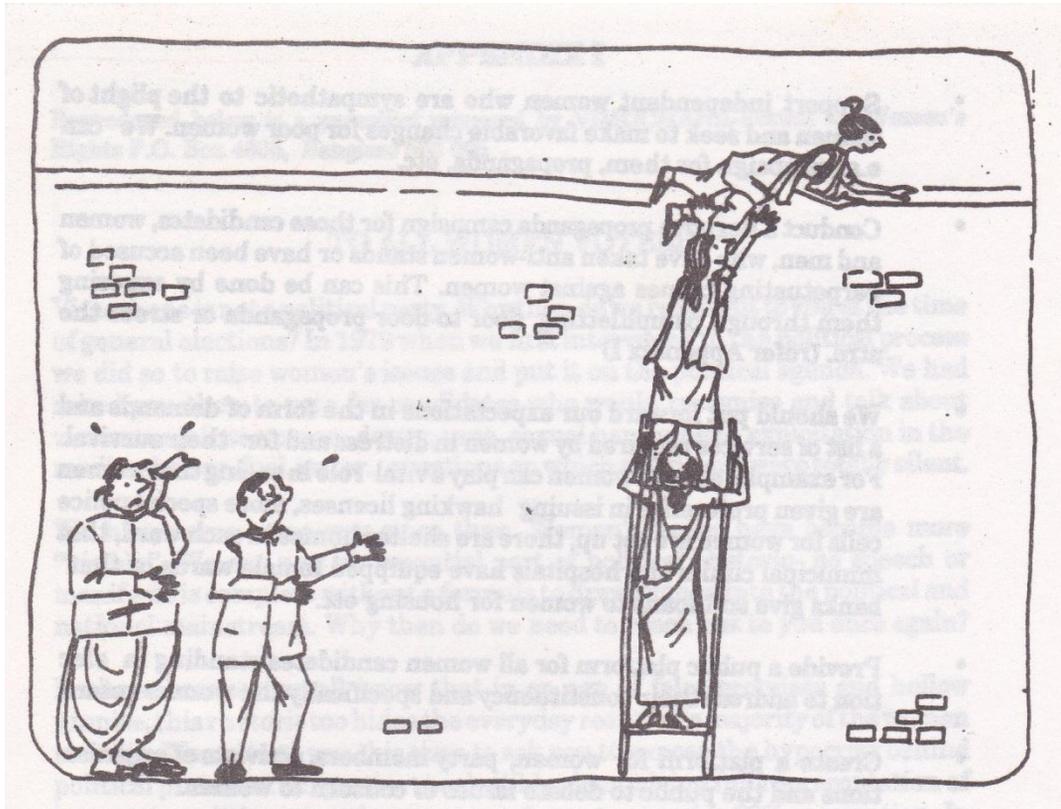
Every movement and every historical period has posed the reform versus revolution contradiction before its activists. In the context of 30% reservation of electoral seats there is a curious and ironic reversal of roles. Those who have traditionally opposed the strategy of reforms or changes and redress within the existing political framework are the Left parties. They consider themselves the vanguard party destined to lead the working class and the struggle against the entire social and political system of capitalism. This revolution will establish a new order and ultimately a new socialist society. All other issues except those that lead to revolution are considered reformist. Their struggle is against the capitalists and the State, the primary instrument of the capitalist class, which will oppose, co-opt and repress such radical movements. The communist party abandoned its strategy of armed revolution for the electoral path to power after the end of the Telangana Struggle in 1954. The two communist parties, the socialist and now several Marxist Leninist ones

Though there is no one common strategy adopted by the diverse women's groups within the movement, most believe in a systematic and organised struggle in all spheres of life—within home, at the workplace, against the State and in society in general to ensure equality, freedom and dignity to all women and men. All structures and institutions have to be challenged from both outside and inside, creating a collective consciousness and strong pressure groups. Our immediate priority is to ensure survival needs through access to and control over the means of production, basic amenities, prevention of violence and atrocities on women and challenging the deep rooted patriarchal notions and beliefs.

In the wide canvas of inter-related long and short term strategies, reservation of electoral seats for women is but a part. It is of importance because it combines possibilities of struggling from within and the provision of services which will strengthen women's struggle for survival. Women's movement can support elected candidates to raise issues, expose manipulation and create a new relationship of accountability to the women electorate. The creation of such vigilance and genuine answerability are not easy tasks but it could be the beginning of a democratisation of the electoral process. We feel that women's movement should accept 30% reservations and work towards their effectivity. We should limit reservations to only local levels and review its efficacy after 15 years.

Such a review should take place in form of public debate where women's organisations, academicians, other social organisations take a leading role. It is only after such a review should we decide the need to continue reservations at local level and/or to extend them to Assembly and Parliament.





## WHAT WE CAN DO TO MAKE RESERVATIONS WORK

The women's movement has usually allied itself with socialist minded women rather than those belonging to rightist one who do not believe in the existence of a systematic oppression of women. Nor do they have any vision of a new society based on a changed and more egalitarian relationship between men and women, the classes and castes. There is a common thread of hope, justice and equality which binds all Left and progressive women's organisations which require them in spite of their differences to support each other.

When local government elections are declared we can

- Find out which constituencies are declared for women and who are the likely women candidates from each party.
- Make an appeal to all political parties to not put up dummy candidates. Gather information about the backgrounds and political careers of each candidate and

make sure that they are genuine candidates and not proxies for the sitting Corporator.

- Organise public meetings and dialogue with these women candidates about their responsibility to the women's movement and women else torate.
- Support independent women who are sympathetic to the plight of women and seek to make favorable changes for poor women. We can e.g. campaign for them, propaganda, etc.
- Conduct a negative propaganda campaign for those candidates, women and men, who have taken anti-women stands or have been accused of perpetuating crimes against women. This can be done by exposing them through pamphletting, door to door propaganda or street the acre. (refer Appendix I)
- We should put forward our expectations in the form of demands and a list of services required by women in distress and for their survival. For example, elected women can playa vital role in seeing that women are given preference in issuing hawking licenses, more special police cells for women are set up, there are shelter homes in each ward, that municipal clinics and hospitals have equipped female wards or that banks give soft loans to women for housing etc.
- Provide a public platform for all women candidates standing in elec l i on to address their constituency and specifically the women voters.
- Create a platform for women, party members, activists of organisations and the public to debate issues of concern to women.
- We should demand that the elected women candidates are given important position of power within the local bodies. Women candidates should be placed in standing committees and made deputies.
- Create structures of accountability in each ward by forming women voters vigilance committees. These could meet every few months for a debate and reporting.

## APPENDIX I

Reproduced below is a pamphlet prepared by VIIIIOCHANA-Forum ter Women's Rights P.O. Box 4606, Bangalore 560 006

### TO ALL 'WOMEN VOTERS

Vimochana is not a political party. Why then do we reach out to you at the time of general elections? In 1979 when we first intervened in the political process we did so to raise women's issues and put it on the political agenda. We had asked you then to vote for candidates who would recognise and talk about violence against women- dowry, rape, sexual harassment, exploitation in the media, shelter, fuel, water.-questions on which politicians were totally silent.

We have come some way since then. Women's issues have become more "visible". We are now an essential part of political rhetoric- no speech or manifesto is complete without a formula to draw women into the political and national mainstream. Why then do we need to reach out to you once again?

Perhaps because we all know that in an age of false promises and hollow utopias, this rhetoric too hides the everyday reality of a majority of the women in India. We write to you this time to ask you to expose the hypocrisy behind political promises. All parties speak glibly about giving full representation of women in politics- some have gone so far as to promise 30% reservation. In these elections how many parties have fulfilled this promise? In fact this year the number of women candidates has drastically decreased.

We ask you to expose this hypocrisy because we all know that most of our 'representatives' rarely practice at home what they preach on the streets they cleverly separate private ethics from public morality. Today wife beaters and rapists can talk of equality for women; mafia dons can talk of justice; fundamentalists can preach secularism as women and 50% of the electorate we have to exercise our vote to transform this degenerate political culture. Let us all take a strong stand against 'leaders' like:

- Z. R. Ansari, the Union Minister for forestation, who despite being directly implicated in an attempted rape charge by Mukta Dutta, a woman activist working in Haryana Pradesh, has been given a Lok Sabha ticket.
- Kalvi, a Janata Dal leader from Rajasthan who openly came out in support of the murder of Roop Kanwar, a young widow burnt alive on her husband's pyre in 1988

- The 19 CPI[M] activists arrested in connection with the gang rape of a young woman activist of Kashtakari Sangatana, an organization working with the tribals in Dahanu District, Maharashtra.
- Suraj Singh Deo, Bihar's coal mafia king, who is the trusted lieutenant of Chandrashekhar, senior leader of the Janata Dal.
- H. K. L. Bhagat, who has been directly named by a number of the post Indira Gandhi murder riot victims in Delhi in 1984 as the man behind the mass killing of Sikhs and yet continues to be a Union Minister and a senior Congress [I] leader.
- R. L. Jalappa, a Janata Dal candidate from Doddaballapur, who has been implicated in the murder of a lawyer.
- Dr. Venkatesh, a former Janata Party M.P., at present contesting on a Congress [I] ticket from Bethamangala to the Karnataka Assembly, who has not only deserted his wife and child without paying any maintenance despite the court order, but also has a criminal case of assault on his wife pending against him.

The list is endless.....

The irony is that none of the political parties involved is. the CPI DLL Janata, or the Congress [I] have thought it fit to initiate any enquiries against these individuals who have all been implicated in serious crimes. The greater irony is that some of these are not even seen as crimes- deserting a wife is seen as a 'personal' domestic issue. Society too sanctions such acts with its silence and cynicism about the "criminalisation of politics".

- We ask you to use your vote this time to regenerate the ideals in public accountability and morality.
- Boycott those candidates in your constituency who get up on a public platform and speak of equality for women while denigrating and violating them in their personal lives.
- Support those candidates who you are assured will respond positively to issue of violence against women in your constituency.
- Support those candidates who genuinely attempt to put to practice what they speak, both in their public and in their private lives.

It is a small step but the first one.

Let us vote our conscience and bring consciences back to politics.

## APPENDIX II

[A Pamphlet (originally in Marathi] by the Samperk Samiti- a joint platform of women's organisations in Pune, Maharashtra\_]

### OUR CANDIDATE IN THE ELECTION

The Lok Sabha elections are just over and on 27th February, the Vidhan Sabha elections are going to be held. There is a decline in women elected members. It is not known how many women will actually get tickets for the Vidhan Sabha elections. Women avoid participating in elections for various reasons :

- 1) Heavy expenditure in elections
- 2] Character Fisansgination of women candidates and many others.

All the political parties of today have promised to give 30% tickets to women but in reality, women candidates are sidetracked by them. Women are sidetracked even as voters. Most party manifestos rarely have concrete programmes on the women's question.

The media is emphasising the 'value' of the vote but are women really conscious about importance of their vote? Many women vote without thinking or by blindly following their husbands. But the time has come to think about who we would like to give our valuable vote to in this election.

### WHO IS 'OUR' CANDIDATE ?

In a society with increasing violence and oppression on women, it is difficult to search for a candidate who will be able to find a way out But the candidate who attempts to remove the cause of existing violence and oppression, will be `our' candidate.

We think that all citizens and especially women should think about the following points`

1. Today in the name of religion, the new political parties and their platforms are propagating communalism and promoting their selfish aims in politics. Growing communalism poses greater threat to women. It is again in the name of religion that there is a revivalism of the inhuman tradition of Sati or denial of maintenance to divorced Muslim women. Communalisms from both sides are dangerous. It is in the atmosphere of caste and religious riots that one is confronted with more violence, murders, rapes he candidate who uses religious

feelings for social and political motives will only bring more insecurity in the lives of women. Thus, the defeat of such a candidate should be our first duty.

2. Our Personal Laws which govern all family matters are based on different religions. It has been our experience that none of them... Give justice to women. The candidate who will try to bring new family law which is based on equality between women and men should be a candidate worthy of women's votes.
3. Women are today considered as an important factor in 5 Year Planning. But in development projects women's upliftment is not given much thought. Schemes like dams, electricity, and education are structured in a way to add to the heavy workload of women. No nation can evolve unless its women who are the most oppressed also share in development. That is why we need a candidate who will keep women's development as the most central point in planning and give priority to the various schemes like water, fuel, fodder, education, health, employment.
4. We should vote for a candidate who is taking a strong ideological stand against the social, familial, political violence on women.
5. Character assassination and sexual harassment of women are common occurrences. Candidates, who have either in their personal lives or in election propaganda misbehaved with women, should be rejected by us.
6. Our candidate should be one who will respond to the needs of poor dalit, adivasi women in rural areas and alum women in the urban areas. The basic problem faced by these women concern their survival- water, toilets, health, maternity services, should be the priority for our candidates.

You can propagate these and many other aspects and can guide other women as well as conscious citizens about 'our' candidates. You can ask various questions to the candidates who come to us for propaganda and also demand answers to their promises once they are elected. But for this we need to build a strong pressure group and united strength.

Malini Tialpule, Shanta Ranade, Neelam Gohre, Late Bhia, Pushpatai Bhaidev, Saudamani Rao, Nil nala Sathe, Sadhana Dagich.

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**Thank.**

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