

## Getting Foothold in Politics: Women in Political Decision Making Process

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*...Let us enter politics,  
Continue our struggle  
And take leadership.*

*Can't put up with patriarchal power anymore,  
O, Venubai, why do you remain repressed?  
Come out and join our rally.*

This is how the song sung for the first time by “Toiling Women’s Liberation Movement” members in the late seventies ended. It represented the gusto of a newly formed mass organisation of tribal women of Dhulia district (Vibhuti Patel, 1987).

It became popular among the women’s groups not only in Maharashtra but also all over India. This song represented the new understanding of ‘politics’. Politics as not only electoral politics or membership of political parties, but as collective action of women against oppressive patriarchal power with a long term goal of social transformation that ensured women’s liberation from exploitation, degradation, injustice, subjugation and superstition, casteism and communalism.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments in the Constitution of India made one million Indian women “elected representatives” in the rural and urban local self government bodies by granting 33% reserved seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions in 1992. During last 16 years, many grassroots activists of the women’s movement have plunged in electoral politics for empowerment of women in their constituency.

But when it comes to women’s reservation in legislature and parliament of India, we witness tremendous resistance from the patriarchs. For the first time, the Bill providing 33% reservation to women was introduced on 4 September 1996 known as 81<sup>st</sup> Constitution Amendment Bill and after massive political debates was referred to Joint Parliamentary committee chaired by Member of Parliament Late Geeta Mukherjee who presented the report to Lok Sabha on 9 December 1996.

Two years later, on 26 June 1998, the Bill was reintroduced in the 12<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha as the 84<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment Bill. Controversy racked by the opponents of the bill around ‘reservation (for SC, ST, DTNT, Disabled and minority women) within Reservation for women’ so that women from upper class and caste from majority religious group do not exclusively take away the advantages of women’s reservation once again scuttled the bill.

National Democratic Alliance brought the Bill to the Lok Sabha twice more in 2002 and 2003 but never managed to get it passed. United Progressive Alliance elected in May 2004 promised to pass the bill. Current controversy and high drama in Rajya Sabha over the 108<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment Bill providing 33% reservation to women introduced in the Rajya Sabha on 6 May 2008 betrays persistence of patriarchal power in the mainstream politics. On the one hand are MPs from Congress, BJP and Left parties advocating for converting the bill into an Act. While on the other hand, members of Janata Dal (U) and Samajvadi Party are persistently creating ruckus against introduction of the bill. For past 11 years, such discouraging scenario has been going on.

It is interesting to note that our neighbouring countries Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh have provided reservation of seats for women in their respective parliaments. As per Article 114 of 1991 of the Constitution of Nepal, 5% parliamentary seats in the lower house and three seats in the upper house are reserved for Nepalese women.

Pakistan made provision for 33% reservation of seats for women in the National Assembly and 36 out of 342 seats (i.e. 17%) in the Senate as per election Law Quota in 2002.

Bangladesh has ensured 15% reserved seats for women in its parliament as per 14<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendment introduced in 2004. (Website: CENWOR, UNDP, HDR, 2004).

### **Women's Liberation Movement and Electoral Politics**

The slogan 'Personal is Political' is popularised by the western women's liberation movement appealed to many city-based women's groups who realised how individual cases of violence against women were not merely 'personal problems', but an outcome of socio-cultural, historical, political and economic realities in which Indian women had to survive. As a result, the issues which affected women and treated as personal problems such as rape, family violence, dowry-murders, harassment at the workplace were put on the 'public-political agenda' of the women's movement (Vibhuti Patel, 1988).

The pressure from the new women's groups forced the mainstream political parties also to show greater concern for women's issues at least in their public speeches, press statements and election manifestos. After the nationwide anti-rape movement in 1980, cases of violence against women became issues for parties to score points against contenders in electoral battles as well as in the local power struggles (Vibhuti Patel, 1994).

In an interview conducted by *The Times of India* on 31 May 2004, the women Members of Parliament have identified issues to which they would give top priority, are as follows:

- Stringent punishment for the rapists and Special Courts to deal with rape cases and in-camera trials to avoid harassment to victims (Sumitra Mahajan, MP - BJP).
- Crimes Against Women to be dealt with at local level (Nivedita Mane, Nationalist Congress Party MP, Kolhapur).
- Help to widows to become financially independent (Sumitra Mahajan, MP, BJP).

### **Women's Movement and the Fourteenth Lok Sabha Election, 2004**

Horrifying experiences of communal carnage in Gujarat, attempt to change the name and scope of 'UGC-sponsored 34 'women's studies center' to 'family welfare center' by the right-wing decision makers and killing of the women's reservation bill that would guarantee one-third of seats to women in the legislative assemblies of the state and in the Parliament of India made women's rights activists to campaign actively against the National Democratic Alliance (Kiran Moghe, 2004).

The election results made Mrs. Sonia Gandhi a super-star for the secular humanists and progressive forces that were touched by her dignified conduct and a target of crude and cheap attack from the Hindutva lobby.

Recent election results once again brought the issue of 'personal and political' to surface. In a debate "Should Sonia Gandhi have declined the top job?" published by *The Economic Times*, in May, 2004; a veteran feminist publisher and writer, Ritu Menon has succinctly represented the position of women's rights movement in these words: "Feminists have been saying for ever so long, for all women – the personal is political and the political is personal. In her (Sonia Gandhi's) case, especially, it is pointless trying to separate the two. But equally, in her case, she embodies a conundrum, combines in herself every politically problematic and thorny issue we have had to deal with: womanhood, widowhood, religious identity, national identity, ethnicity, citizenship, minorityism, majoritarianism. Who is legitimate, who is not."

It is encouraging to note that many first time contestants women candidates of BJP refused to resort to character assassination of Mrs. Sonia Gandhi in their election speeches on the ground that "I am a mother and she is also a mother. I believe in dignity of mother."

## **Mobilisation of Women by the Political Parties**

The parliamentary parties started viewing and wooing women as a constituency in the eighties. This changing attitude of the parliamentary parties towards women is reflected in their election manifestoes, their attitude towards women candidates and their overall electoral strategies.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi started making references to “Stree Shakti” in the early eighties and Bharatiya Janata Party began advocating the revival of ancient Indian culture, eulogising mythological women characters. The BJP also demanded a Uniform Civil Code but from an anti-Muslim angle rather than women’s rights perspective.

During the mid-nineties, in Andhra Pradesh, at the time of the State assembly election, the popular regional party of that time, Telugu Desam made a legal provision for land rights for women. In the electoral process, we find two contradictory processes. On the one hand we have powerful, articulate women leaders who are mainly elite and on the other we have women who are mere rubber stamps.

However, the elite women’s political presence derives from their relations with male politicians – husbands, brothers, fathers, uncle and father-in-laws. Between 1962 and 1984, the total number of women who contested the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) has increased from 65 to 157 and the number of women who were elected was increased from 33 to 42. After 1985, meetings of women MPs to discuss important issues of women became more or less a regular feature. This was achieved at the initiative of the Minister for Women’s Development and Social Welfare.

Implications of Increased Political Participation of Women: Women’s visibility in the political scenario can be understood in the following ways:

- Increase in the number of women in the electoral process and their meaningful contribution in highlighting women specific issues.
- Qualitative change in political goals and processes as a result of accommodation of women’s perspectives and priorities.

We have seen increasing number of meetings, camps, welfare programmes, weekly meetings, national conventions organised by different political parties of their women cadres. Mahila Congress, BJP Women’s front, Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Republic Party of India, Janata Front and Shetkari Sangathana have all organised conventions to discuss/ highlight women’s problems. In terms of rhetoric on women, all of them are competing with each other to establish their credibility in the eyes of women.

If the Congress Government brought National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000), the Janata regime came up with the National Commission for Women. But in this image building exercise, both of them shared the same ideology. A good illustration is their response to the Muslim Women’s Protection of Rights (on Divorce) Act that took away the right to maintenance from a divorced Muslim woman. Likewise neither regime did anything to bring the culprits of Deorala Sati episode to book. NDA government went one step further. It freed the culprits of Deorala Sati episode!!

## **Hurdles faced by Women Candidates**

Most of the women face tremendous opposition from family, community and the male political leaders if they decide to enter electoral politics or public life. The present political leadership, in spite of its populist rhetoric, wants to keep women out of the political arena. Indian women’s lower educational level, inferior social status and lack of autonomy are reflected in their lower participation in politics. Increasing criminalisation, corruption and compromises required to sustain one’s political career also deter women from entering mainstream politics. (Usha Thakkar and Rohini Gawankar, 2004).

Even among the majority of women's rights groups, 'politics' is equated with 'politicking', 'dirty' maneuvering and manipulations and therefore power and politics remain an anathema to them. But at the same time, women activists involved in direct action for past two and a half decades have also realised the limitations of micro level activities.

### Electoral Politics and New Social Movement

Though the social movements have thrown up new band of educated, sincere and hardworking women as leaders, their participation in the electoral politics is quite limited.

**TABLE 1: Men and Women in the Parliament of India**

Sr. No of Lok Sabha Elections	Year	No. of seats available	Total no. of contestants	Male			Female		
				Contested	Elected	% winning	Contested	Elected	% winning
1	1952	489	1874	--	--	--	--	--	--
2	1957	494	1518	1473	467	31.7	45	27	60.0
3	1962	494	1985	1915	459	24.0	70	35	50.0
4	1967	520	2369	2302	490	21.3	67	30	44.8
5	1971	520	2784	2698	499	18.5	86	21	24.4
6	1977	542	2439	2369	523	22.1	70	19	27.1
7	1980	542	4620	4478	514	11.5	142	28	19.7
8	1984	542	5574	5406	500	9.2	164	42	25.6
9	1989	529	6160	5962	502	8.5	198	27	13.6
10	1991	521	8699	8374	492	5.9	325	39	12.0
11	1996	543	13952	13353	504	3.8	599	39	6.7
12	1998	543	4750	4476	500	11.2	274	43	15.7
13	2002	543	N.A.	N.A.	494	N.A.	446	49	9.1
14	2004	543	N.A.	N.A.	498	N.A.	432	45	9.6

Note: Gender-wise data for 1952 not available.

Source: Statistical Profile of Women in India, Government of India, 2006.

The number of women parliamentarians has gone down from 49 in the 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha to 45 in the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections in 2004 out of total number of 543 parliamentarians. Women's representation in Lok Sabha is less than 10% of the total.

Credibility of new social movements has been commodified by the electoral market. Women social activists who are ready to give thumb-impressions are promoted by the mainstream politicians. Women who stick out their necks have to create their own safety nets- financial security, gainful employment, credit-worthiness and self- sustaining life-style.

Women in public life need to have special skills to scrutinise budgetary provision in favour of empowerment of women. English educated articulate and aggressive women are tolerated by the mainstream, only, if they remain silent about budget. International Association of Feminist Economics (IAFE) has 550 members working in 31 countries.

Women leaders with mandated power should interact with the women economists of IAFE as they can provide "insights into the relationship between gender and power relations in the economy" (*Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay, 24 June 2000, p. 2280). It is important for women who have gained success through ballet also handle balance sheet and budget for developmental activities with equal dexterities.

The following table reveals that around 44 elected women had to represent 50 crore Indian women's interests in the 12<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha election.

**Table 2: Educational Qualification of the Members of the 12<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (1998)**

Educational Qualification	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Doctorate	26	4	30
Post Graduates	127	16	143
Graduates	227	19	246
Sr. Cambridge	1	0	1
Under Graduate	8	1	9
Matriculate	43	1	44
Under Metric	11	2	13
Intermediate	44	1	45
Diploma	1	0	1
Illiterate	0	0	0

Source: *The Times of India*, 1 October 1999

### **Elected Women Representatives and Area Development**

Elected women representatives can be successful in promoting women's development agenda only when their trusted soldiers and family members share their vision and don't force them to make unprincipled compromises. Each MP gets Rs Two crore of government funding known as Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS). Moreover, personal charisma of the MP and Member of Legislative Assembly brings investments for area development. MPs use these funds according to their political and personal priorities.

Limited personal demands of the women politicians ensure maximum resources for the area development. Female-headed households have been most successful in all social movements right from the pre-independence days. Elected-woman representative whose decisions are taken by others is not respected by her constituency.

It is very important for her to be aware of legal provisions, developmental schemes, help lines for emergency situations, tax structure, revenues and expenditure in her/ his department and constituency, women component plan-schemes and programmes targeted for women and marginalised sections of society, special needs of the constituency, labour relations and labour processes in her constituency.

### **Women in the electoral Bodies**

With amendments of Constitution in 1993 to decentralise political power as per 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments, a provision has to be made for devolution of power and decision-making in favour of women.

One third of all seats in the local self-government bodies have to be reserved for women. Rural India has already elected village *panchayats* with one third elective seats reserved for women i.e. India has one million elected representatives. Women elected representatives are taking active interest in using budgetary allocations for promotion women's education, safe drinking water and sanitation. But: "Neither the people's representatives at the center nor at the state level, wish to give up their powers over their constituencies and to share their power at the local level. Similarly the bureaucrats are not geared to play the role of facilitators. Giving up powers to representatives of the Panchayati Raj system is difficult for them. Voluntary organisations can play a major role in developing training programmes for all three groups- the politicians at the center and in the states as well as the bureaucrats in order to help develop new perspectives on their roles."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Armitry S. Desai "Challenges for the Voluntary Sector in India at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century", *Perspectives in Social Work*, Vol. XVI, No. 3, Sept.-Dec., 2001, p. 11.

Elected representatives are facing innumerable problems. Shetkari Sangathana Mahila Aghadi managed to win election for their all women panels in the last Gram Panchayat elections in spite of stiff opposition from the local vested interests. In spite of threats of rape and witch-hunting by rival political parties, several women in Dhulia district contested elections in Gram Panchayat.

In South Gujarat, when a woman activist working for women's rights contested election, the local vested interests tried to divide votes by putting up a 'rubberstamp' woman candidate. When Vijayatai Chowk, a courageous woman's rights activist of Dhule district applied for a Lok Sabha seat, she was refused the seat by the party bosses on the ground that while she would win votes from the brides side, she will not from the bridegroom's side because she had taken up so many cases of dowry-murders in the past 15 years.

The political compromises of principles and programmes in the policy resolutions, the increasing importance of 'mafia' politics and exorbitant money power required by the electoral politics act as deterrent for women's participation in the mainstream politics.

Yet Indian women have come on the political agenda of the country through various techniques – collective actions, programmes of consciousness raising, petitioning and lobbying. In addition they have produced well-researched documents and obtained, after great effort, some media visibility for women's issues. This contradictory process must be kept in mind to evolve a proper political understanding of women's political participation in India.

### **Women as Voters**

Indian women have become more aware of their rights but the level of political information of women voters is low. Many women's groups in Ahmedabad, Pune and Bangalore have prepared women's manifesto. They conduct educational campaigns, organise know thy candidate programmes and issue leaflets concerning women's issues.

They expose those candidates who had a criminal or unsavoury background such as involvement in murder of wives or daughter-in-law, or sexual molestation of women. Vimochana in Bangalore campaigned against several candidates who had a record of violence against women by organising street-corner meeting, writing in newspapers, issuing leaflets in Kannada and English. As a result of this campaign, all the candidates lost their seats.

In response to the complaints of sexual violence by Mr. Narvekar, Speaker of Legislative Assembly of Goa and CPI (M) cadres in Kerala and Bengal, the feminists' organisations demanded 'a code of conduct' for the party cadres. In Maharashtra, Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti (Women's Liberation Coordination Committee), a state level United Front of the progressive and the leftist women's organisations issued a leaflet before the Lok Sabha Election in February, 1990 that expounded the perspective of women's organisations on elections and suggested to voters the principles and programmes around which the choice of candidate should be made.

The manifesto considered the issues such as fundamentalism, family laws as well as development. Development alternatives with women and ecological perspective should address fuel-fodder-water issues, implications of electrification, and dams and education, health, employment etc. Political education of the masses on violence against women, sexist media, rural and tribal women's survival struggles need to be carried out and the candidates should be answerable to constituencies on these issues.

### **Reservation of Seats for Women in the Electoral Bodies**

In the thirties, the women leaders of India involved in the nationalist struggles were pressing for universal adult franchise and now, sixty years later, the women leaders of the same political parties have agreed to support 33% seats for women. Is this mode one step forward or two steps backward?

Those who regard it as one step forward is empowering women to do so because they think” It will broaden the base of women’s political participation and will help to strengthen women’s faith in the political process which is otherwise dominated by men”. (Women and Media Committee, Bombay).

Those who are opposed to this move have consistently held this approaches undesirable, right from pre-independence days.

Moreover reservation as such is unlikely to solve the main causes of limited political participation of women in furthering women’s cause, because given socio-political context where mass illiteracy prevails along with the style of politics that encourages growing violence, mafia politics, character assassination of candidates, prohibitive election expenses and opportunistic/debased politicking pursued to achieve very narrow and short term political goals. Where such influences are operative in the Indian politics in an overwhelming way, more reservation of seats has a limited value.

It is interesting, that same national level male politicians who support 33 % reserved seats for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions have expressed their outrage against the reservation of 33% seats for women in the Legislative Assembly and in the Parliament (IAWS, 2002). They are using the same arguments as our colonial masters used against the native then, i.e. women will not be able to govern, as they are inexperienced. Many corporators of Bombay and Chennai Municipal Corporation have openly expressed their discontentment over this decision of the present government. (Archana Ghosh, 2002).

During 1990s sharp polarisation of political opinions took place around Women’s Reservation Bill. It was first tabled in parliament in 1996, “and was mired in the conflict over the demand for special quotas for women of the other backward classes and minorities”. (Mary John, *EPW*, 2000).

The autonomous women’s organisations’ doubts about 33% reservations have different reasons. They fear that by participating in the corrupt electoral process women’s rights activists will not be able to further the broader interests of women (Vibhuti Patel, 1993). They feel that women activists will have to make compromises in their principles, programmes and practices. Moreover, the talented women will be co-opted by the system. The 33% reservation has other dangers. It prepares the ground for opponents of the women’s rights movement (the mothers-in-law) to get elected in most of the places. These women will be from the elite sections, mainly the kith and the kin of male politicians. Women politicians in South Asia are not different from their male counterparts (Rounaq Jahan, 1987).

Some scholars and women’s organisations do think that the entry of women in the electoral process will help the curbing of violence and corruption, in other words, female presence will moralise the system. Experiences of Karnataka and Kerala have proved the same (Uma Prachar, 2001). This is the argument that women have often advanced as for example in the USA.

The decade of 90s has witnessed several roundtables on Women in Decision-Making. Round tables in the Eastern parts of India highlighted the need for networking. In the Western India they focused on the achievements of women’s movement and need for women’s policy. In the Southern states the round tables were concerned about initiatives in women and development. In the Northern states, they were concerned about formation of state sponsored National Commission of women. In the national round table, the need for mainstreaming of the women’s agenda was emphasised.

### **History of Decision Making in India**

The first generation of women decision-makers in India was the product of the independence movement. In the post-independence period, they made important contributions in the fields of education, institutions for women’s welfare, diplomatic relations, and administration of the state and central government and in politics. They were perceived as super women and enjoyed honorary male status in the society.

## **Collective Decision-making Processes of the New Social Movements in India**

1970 onwards, development of social movements highlighting the problems of the rural and urban poor, industrial working class, tribal masses and minorities threw up a new kind of women decision makers who had strength of street-fighting, formal education and strategic thinking. They had to work under tremendous adversity, as they were a part of politics of protest. In the nineties, other sectors of the society also gave space to competent and highly qualified women to be in the decision-making bodies.

At present, gender sensitisation of state and central government, management and trade unions, mass organisations, educational institutions is one of the topmost priorities among the development-oriented organisations. In the last two decades, women who have held important positions have had positive experience whenever they have done thorough homework and have played a role of problem shooters diligently and fearlessly. At the same time, in several places they have faced tremendous male hostility and physical violence. Competent women in the public life who have promoted the ethos of distributive justice have managed to get popular support.

### **National Commission for Women**

At present, the National Commission for Women has generated a lot of debate among the women's groups. The Committee for the Status of Women (1974) had recommended the formation of such a commission to take up women's problems. The Congress (I) government did not pay any attention to this demand. The report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women ('Shramshakti') gave a comprehensive picture of women's status and recommended many concrete steps for women in the informal sector. This too was not officially discussed in the parliament.

In this climate of official apathy to do anything concretely for women, when the bill on the National Commission for Women was tabled in Lok Sabha on 22 May 1990 many welcomed it as a forward step but these early hopes were soon belied. The content was found less than satisfactory and invited a lot of criticism from women's group as it lacks an autonomous status and has an inbuilt structure that provides far too much governmental interference.

The Women's Organisations have proposed to the government that it explicitly define the clauses to protect the autonomy and independence of the commission. Moreover, the reports of the commission should go straight to parliament via the president. It should be empowered to conduct enquiries concerning women even when the government officials or agencies themselves are involved in perpetuating violation of women's rights. Alas, in spite of detailed recommendations given by the women's groups, the present government has not included all of them in the Act. Now, State level women's commissions are active in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala.

They are executing state policies for women, promoting advocacy work on women's problems, strengthening elected women representatives in the Panchayati Raj institutions and selectively taking up cases of violence against women. They are effective in the social sector of the economy as they take up women's problems in the areas of education, employment, welfare and health- public health and reproductive rights. (Vibhuti Patel, 2002).

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution in 1990 had opened avenues for women's empowerment. For example, in Kerala the state government had given Panchayat bodies power, authority and finance. Out of the state budget, 40% was devolved to the Panchayat and of this 10% was mandated to be utilised for women's programmes. Other states could emulate this pattern.

The Maharashtra Policy for Women, 2001 has also targeted 10 % of development oriented budget to women. This would enable women to develop their capabilities, to take control of the programmes in such a way that through interaction, criticism and continuous learning, they would develop self-confidence and greater self-esteem.

## **The Round Table on Women Empowerment Policy, 2001**

In Round Table discussion on Women Empowerment Policy, the sub-group on 'Women in Governance' stated that Women should be represented in important committees formed by the government like standing committee, resource and budget allocation committee, etc. so that they can strengthen the hands of women elected representatives executing women's development agenda.

Any funds either of MP/MLA or any organisation, when remain unutilised should be diverted for the development of weaker sections only. A monitoring mechanism to keep vigil on such instances must be put into action.

Corruption in and criminalisation of politics had kept women away from politics. Women with commitment to the ideology of good governance should be brought into politics. How to do it was a big question, thought the group.

In response to demand of 'reservation within reservation' (Rekha Thakur, 2004)<sup>2</sup>, the group had no objection to 25 % of reservation going to OBC women candidates for the Lok Sabha and assembly seats. The initiative to debate this issue with women's groups should be taken by the Maharashtra State Women's Commission. This would hasten the process of passing the Bill seeking Reservation of 33% for women in Parliament.

## **Womanist Party of India**

Womanist Party of India headed by Ms. Varsha Kale (Bhartiya Streevadi Paksha) got registered on 27 November 2003. It has published its document that demands 50% reservation of seats in all electoral bodies for women. It aims to strive for a constructive approach in politics that executes development agenda such as women's rights over natural resources-land, water, fuel-wood, opening of district level women's banks, sustainable development to get rid of drought, identification of hawkers' zones and 50% allocation of space and infrastructural facilities to be targeted to self-employed women. WPI will field its candidates in the forthcoming Assembly elections. (WPI, 2004).

Many spokespersons (who have been community workers, trade-unionists, NGO activists, researchers and field-investigators) of WPI have been foot soldiers and street fighters of the varied social movements for over a decade. At present, WPI does not have any godfather or godmother. Culture of summer-camps, training programmes, small group discussions, demonstrations, rallies in the social movements and formal education and computer literacy have given its members great deal of confidence to deal with complex and violent political scenario at local and state level politics.

Renowned social activist, Medha Patkar has also launched a political party with the backing of National Alliance of People's Movement.

## **Women Political Empowerment Day, 24-4-1994**

On 24 April 2004, more than 1500 women elected representatives from the urban and rural local self-government bodies celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women Political Empowerment Day in New Delhi. The gathering concluded with a charter of 20 demands. (*Peoples Reporter*, May, 2004). For the first time such charter has been prepared to empower women. The demands raised reflect the needs and aspirations of the women's rights movement and they are as follows:

Raise the percentage of reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions from 33.3 % to 50 % and ensure reservation of seats for women in the state legislative bodies and in the parliament.

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<sup>2</sup> Rekha Thakur, General Secretary of Bharatiya Republican Party-Bahujan Mahasahgh led by Prakash Ambedkar states, "We want reservation for Other Backward Classes according to the strength of the OBC in the population, i.e. 52 % within 33 %. Our stand is clear: No tabling of the bill, till changes are made."

For capacity building of and continuous skill up-gradation women elected representatives within a year, set up training centre, minimum one in each division in every state. Refresher Courses that enhance competency must become an annual feature and they should include computer literacy and an internet access for enhancing efficiency.

Start regular orientation programmes for gender sensitisation for MLAs, MPs and administrators about budget, funds, functions and implementing machinery of the panchayats.

Self-help groups of women must be guaranteed contracts for village level construction work. Ensure that due consideration is given by authorities at all levels to the proposals of gram sabhas, especially those concerning women and children.

Facilitate women's association at different levels to act as watchdogs and pressure groups. Provide reservations for women for the posts of Up-Pradhan and Up-Sarpanch of gram panchayats. Ensure adequate number of women panchayat secretaries and entrust not more than two gram panchayats to one panchayat secretary/village development officer.

Ensure that every state government opens a toll-free help-line for panchayat women at the state and district levels to attend urgent needs (adverse or favourable) of elected women of PRIs in terms of police assistance, information dissemination, legal assistance, counselling, so on and so forth. Set up national centre in Delhi to coordinate all state level help-lines and act as a resource centre. Provide for sub-quorum for women in the gram sabha.

Give representation to women on all committees of the panchayats at all levels and see to it that parallel committees are not formed.

Implement Women Component Plan (to assure at least 30% of funds/benefits from all development sectors flow to women) through panchayats.

Provide for stringent laws to deal with violence against women during and after elections. Scrap the two-child norm as applicable at present in respect of the representatives of panchayats. Provide right to land and housing in joint names of spouses and for single, deserted, Dalit, tribal, devdasi, widowed and battered women, and for those rendered homeless in caste/communal riots and due to displacement.

### **Enforce Equal Remuneration Act, 1976**

Provide literacy training under special crash programmes for illiterate women panchayat members. Facilitate exchange programmes for panchayat women representatives inside and outside the country. Give awards for outstanding performance by women representatives inside and outside the country. Ensure that the government provides funds for celebrating women empowerment day at district, state and national levels.

This charter has received due coverage in the national as well as the social movements' journals and newsletters. (Panchayati Raj Update, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

At present, most of the women's organisations are demanding 33% reservation of seats in the legislative assemblies and in the parliament. But if they don't acquire sufficient skills and abilities to handle unfolding reality with efficiency and harmony, they will be the objects of jest. To empower aspiring women candidates, the S.P. Jain Institute of Management and Research and The Times Foundation has started a six-month certificate course on Women in Governance. In Maharashtra, Mahila Rajsatta Andolan, a network of women elected representatives in the local self government bodies in the state, is

mentoring them for contesting election for legislature and parliament along with executing constituency-area development programmes.

Without popular mandate if women are selected for the top positions, they will have to face non-cooperation from the administration and the law and order machinery. Women in the public life need a protective shield of popular support and tremendous good will so that they can execute a development agenda more meaningfully. If we don't want to be puppets in the hands of different power-blocks, we will have to empower ourselves with the first hand experience of the operational reality. We should consolidate our experience gained during Training of the Trainers (TOT) workshops of different types of the decision-making bodies to evolve our day-to-day tactics and long-term strategies (Devaki Jain, 2000).

There is no short cut to fieldwork and efficient handling of the crisis situation. We also need to see ourselves as change-agents and not as beneficiaries of the welfare departments of the government structures and private foundations. Women in the public life need to create their own support- structures for safe night-halts, safe transport and clean toilets.

Constant up-gradation of skills and knowledge base is a must for each and every woman decision-maker to survive in a public life for a long term. Ability to handle more than one portfolio is a key to success in this rapidly changing socio- economic and political environment. Women in public life must give up phobia for modern equipments for better communication such as computers (internet), cell phones and advanced technologies, which reduce human drudgery.

Majority of Indian women are seeking protection of the benevolent patriarchs and only 11% women (widows, separated, divorced, deserted and single) are actual/ nominal heads of the households. Hence it is unrealistic to seek women's liberation without active support of sympathetic men.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to unfold an era of partnership between men and women dedicated to the cause of liberation of humankind, which will ensure social justice, safe environment, communal harmony and world peace in an era of terrorism in the name of religion that has upset the power relations in the world.

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