

In *Crossing the Sacred Line*, the authors, Abhilasha Kumari and Sabina Kidwai, are true to contemporary attitudes in posing the question: why are only 6.7 per cent of the total seats occupied by women in the Parliament when in the 1996 general elections the turnout of women to cast their votes was 47.75 per cent and of men 52.25 per cent.

The 1996 elections reduced the number of women MPs to its lowest in the 50 years since Independence. Why were only 38 women elected to Parliament? Some sections of the women's movement and women MPs of major parties had joined hands in September 1996 to attempt to push the 81st Constitution Amendment Bill through Parliament providing for 33 per cent reservation for women in legislatures. But the Bill was stalled. Say Kumari and Kidwai, "Women are not even seen as a vote bank to be approached and canvassed, as it is expected that once the men are mobilized, women will merely endorse their choice of party and candidate."

"The exposure" say Kumari and Kidwai, "of women to political debates and issues has always remained indirect and almost exclusively on the basis of what is reported to them by the males in the family."

According to them, the fear is not unfounded that reservation for women in Parliament would mean that the female relatives of powerful politicians would win elections. During the struggle for independence from the British, especially in the Congress Party, many women belonging to influential political families were mobilised. In the 50 years since, it has generally been accepted that more women have not come to the fore because of "their own backwardness." Kumari and Kidwai have done well in placing this misperception within a moral framework: when other marginalised groups are accorded rights on democratic principles and jobs reserved for them, "the question of access to that right is not discussed as being contingent upon the capabilities, education, or awareness of the group concerned." In fact the deterrent to women's participation is not a *Lakshman rekha* or sacred line as the book's title but an invisible leash, pegged in social

BOOK REVIEW

Crossing the Lakshman Rekha

Women's Search for Political Power
by Abhilasha Kumari and Sabina Kidwai

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New Delhi, 1997

Review : Mina Singh

traditions, which has barred women's participation in politics.

The authors present in-depth interviews with about 50 women in an attempt to corroborate their study. But unfortunately these interviews only lend a journalistic flavor to an otherwise weighty book.

Kumari and Kidwai rightly point out that it is not the number of female voters that is the correct indicator of the quality of women's participation in politics, of voting behavior, candidacy or holding of public-office, but it is the success of their political agenda, which will truly indicate the extent of their participation in removing social inequalities.

It is true that we have had a woman prime minister for 16 years and an all-male ministry could never be formed again in India. But why is it that Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Mrs Bandaranaike and Sheikh Hasina did so little for women when in power? Why did Mrs Gandhi not speak up for women or focus on women's issues? Why did Mrs Gandhi choose not to have any other woman in her Cabinet?

It is truly amazing how so many women have become Prime Ministers in the Indian subcontinent, only to further their father's or husband's political dynasty. Such symbolic continuations of husbands and fathers or dynasties would be impossible to perpetuate in properly functioning democracies. The political agendas of all these women Prime Ministers were not different from that of male leaders because they were interested in power as it is presently constituted: ethnic warfare in Sri Lanka, the Emergency in India and terrorism in Punjab and Kashmir have all been presided over by women leaders. Kumari and Kidwai have investigated the cultural and

socioeconomic factors that enable only symbolic transformations of women into political participants with emphasis on how the process of marginalisation begins within the main political parties, the travails of the unsung, unhonored party workers and the remarkable personalities of the comparatively successful women politicians of the Congress, the BJP and the CPI(M).

Crossing the Sacred Line reveals that no relatively successful woman politician takes up issues that really concern ordinary women — such as rape, police violence, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty, education, equal inheritance, equal wages, divorce laws, etc. — for fear of being accused of ignoring more important issues such as caste and class conflicts, religious and national identity.

Once a woman reaches the highest office, since her example is so rare, she shies away from women's issues lest she be accused of being a typical woman! Mrs Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto and other women prime ministers ignored opportunities to put more women in power who could then be organized as a powerful women's lobby. They never encouraged other women's political participation.

In the months after the 1996 elections, the phrase 'people's mandate' was bandied about by political parties (read political patriarchies) to explain the major loss of seats by the Congress party and the major gains by the BJP, but no political party ever spoke about 'women's mandate'. Was it the 'people's mandate' that only one woman minister should subsequently grace the 35 strong cabinet? Was it the 'women's mandate' that women MP's should constitute the lowest total in 50 years since Independence? □