



# The Inside Story of an Election

by  
**Chetna Galla**

*This is an insider's account of how even those who enter the electoral fray to challenge and overthrow corrupt and authoritarian power elites, inevitably end up behaving no better than those they sought to overthrow. This has happened at the national level (the two-time fiascos of Janata Party/Janata Dal rule) as well as at the regional level (the regimes of NTR, MGR and Devi Lal ending up no better than that of the Congress) and the local level as comes out vividly from the experience of the Mahaswad Corporation elections. We are presenting this detailed account in the hope that our readers will join the debate on what kind of structural changes we need in our institutions of governance so that people can stay honest both during and after the elections. How do we make our elected representatives stay accountable to us? Why is it that even reasonably honest people become rogues and crooks as soon as they enter the electoral fray? —Editor*

Mahaswad is a small township in Maharashtra containing 25 wards. Each ward has about 500 - 600 voters. Mahaswad has a total of about 15,000 people eligible to vote out of a population of about 30,000. It is hard to determine the exact population of Mahaswad because the census survey is carried out in March, when many people migrate from here in search of work. For 42 years, political power in Mahaswad had remained in the hands of the Rajmane party. The Mahaswad Municipal Corporation was run by the royal family to serve its own interests. During this period, the raja or some other member of his family always served as president of the municipal corporation. In the corporation elections held on November 24, 1991, I was a member of the opposition coalition that finally defeated them. I hope that a description of how and why we

contested this election against the Rajmane party, as well as what happened after our victory, will be useful to other activists who are engaging in electoral politics against an entrenched local power elite.

## Beginning of the Conflict

A conflict arose in the 1940s over the earnings of the Sidhnath temple in Mahaswad. Sidhnath is the family deity of farmers belonging to the Maratha clan and the middle castes in neighbouring areas. The devotees of Sidhnath bring offerings of coconut and grain to their deity. A part of the temple's earnings are divided among people of the Gurav community. In the 1940s, Rajmane, then ruler of Mahaswad, claimed that the Sidhnath temple was the property of the raja along with a share of its earnings. On hearing this, the people of the Gurav community went to the court to retain their share of the temple

earnings. A High Court ruling went against the raja. The Gurav community won the right to a share. Those who were against the ruler at that time also opposed the Rajmane panel at the time of the elections.

In early 1991, before the Lok Sabha elections were held, a Citizens' Forum was formed in Mahaswad. The members of the Forum decided that until a permanent arrangement was made for adequate supplies of water and electricity in Mahaswad, the citizens would not cast their votes. They decided that no party would be allowed to campaign, nor would they be permitted to write electoral messages on the walls or even enter the town. It was a *goon bandi*. The local members of the various opposition parties relinquished their party identification for the period of the local elections and joined the Citizens' Forum. A few young people

from the town, including my husband Vijay, Nitin Doshi, and Tarun, long time Sangharsh Vahini workers, also joined. The people in the town were happy about the stand the Citizens' Forum had taken. The ban on electoral propaganda went into force and electoral sloganeering on the walls of the town was not permitted. In each ward, meetings were held. Full preparations were made so that only empty ballot boxes would be collected in Mahaswad.

### Water, Electricity Deficits

For many years, Mahaswad village has had the problem of obtaining sufficient water and electricity. Mahaswad is situated on the banks of the Man river. In earlier years, sufficient water was obtainable all year from the river. People would just go there and fill their containers with water whenever they needed some. Now, even in good years, the river has water only till Diwali. Ground water is now available through pipelines to the various parts of Mahaswad. However, the municipal corporation releases water from its tanks for only two hours per day. This two hour water supply reaches the taps only till the month of December. After that, water doesn't arrive reliably because of low pressure in the pipes. From March to July, water scarcity reaches even more serious proportions. There are several reasons for this: there is insufficient water in the well, the tank is too small for Mahaswad's population and the workers who are supposed to maintain the system are not doing their job properly.

The town has always received less electricity than it required. In

1986, when the electricity subdivision board which was situated in Mahaswad was shifted to the taluka headquarters at Dahiwadi, the electricity problem became far worse. The ostensible reason for the shift was because the taluka headquarters and the taluka court are in Dahiwadi. However, Mahaswad is a bigger town than Dahiwadi, with far larger essential requirements for electric power.

During March 1991, the electricity went repeatedly and there was very little water available. Without electricity, the water supply to the fields was cut off. During the festival of Gudipadvah, there was no electricity for three days



**A public meeting to discuss the solution to municipal problems**

consecutively. The flour grinding *chakkis* remained closed and so did the powerlooms. The weavers were out of work because they were completely dependent on powerlooms for their livelihood. There are a large number of weavers from the Koshti community in Mahaswad. They have had to resort to agitations on many occasions to bring the problem of electricity shortage into focus. The women had to climb down into a 40 foot deep well to get water. On one occasion, the electricity went off on Sunday evening and returned only on Tuesday night. It was the farmers and weavers who suffered the

most as a result of inadequate water and electricity. The youth of the weaver community were the main promoters of the Sidhnath panel. Passing the Buck Each time the electricity went off and we rang up the Electricity Board we would get the same reply; they would always blame the lack of electricity on load to shedding due to a breakdown in the area's electricity grid. Yet Dahiwadi, very near Mahaswad, had electricity when we didn't. Everybody knew this. One evening, when the electricity had been off for three days, some women activists decided to confront the staff at the Electricity Board office. On our way we kept on asking the people we came across to join us instead of remaining quiet. As we were passing, many people decided to come along with us.

Approximately 2,000 people arrived at the Electricity Board's office. The Board's workers were about to lock up the office. The people in the crowd were quite angry and spontaneously decided to close down this Board. We put a second lock on the Board's office and went home after a meeting. The electricity came on the same night. It was evident that it was only because of the negligence of the Electricity Board officials that there had been no electricity in the village for three days.

The next day, the Electricity Board was not able to open because we had left some of our people to continue to cordon off the area. The Board's officials lodged a complaint with the police against me and some of the other women who had helped to cordon off their offices. The police came to my house. They were told that they could meet us only at the

Electricity Board office.

Later that morning, approximately 1,500 women gathered at the Electricity Board office. We insisted that the Board was not doing its job and told the police that we wouldn't let the Board office reopen unless it arranged for Mahaswad to get a regular supply of electricity. An official of the Board said that such matters were beyond his control, that he couldn't give us such a guarantee because only the head of the whole area's Board had that kind of authority. Nobody was ready to listen to us.

Finally, after we continued to insist, the police sub-inspector made an emergency call to senior officials. These officials said that they would come to meet us on Monday. We came to an agreement with the Board staff that, until then, Mahaswad would continue to be connected to the electricity express line and we would remove our lock from the door of the Board office.

After this incident, our election boycott *andolan* gathered momentum. The people of each ward called meetings on their own initiative. The youth clubs took a very active interest in this whole campaign.

The senior officials of the District Electricity Board arrived at their offices two days in advance of the date of the meeting, on a Saturday. Maybe they thought that if they came before schedule they could catch people off guard. Two other women, a few of the young activists and I went to meet the officials after we had received a phone call informing us of their arrival. Simultaneously, members of the youth clubs began to go from house to house to collect women.

Within half an hour, about 300 women had gathered in the room where the meeting was being held.

The senior officials of the Electricity Board said that there was a shortage in the supply of electricity and they could do nothing about it. We women told them that until they gave us an assurance that electricity would continue to be regularly supplied through the express line we were going to stay there in the room and so were they. The room was locked from inside. The officials kept sitting there for about two hours. One official finally made a lightning call to Pune and got permission to provide Mahaswad with an express line. The



**Women's procession protesting water and electricity shortages**

officials gave us a commitment in writing that Mahaswad would remain connected to this express line.

After this incident, Vijay, Nitin, some young men and I decided that when the corporation elections would be held we would put up our own panel. That is why, during the Lok Sabha poll boycott programme, we went from ward to ward and established youth clubs that would be in a position to help us in our future campaign in every ward. We called our candidates the Sidhnath panel because that is the name of the deity in the Mahaswad temple.

In the meantime, on May 21, 1991,

Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. Because of the vast amount of public sympathy towards him during the Lok Sabha elections, we felt a complete boycott of elections would not be possible. That is why we called all the party candidates to call off most aspects of the total poll boycott. Nevertheless, we continued to request that there be no campaigning or holding of election meetings.

The boycott on campaigning and election meetings remained very effective. On the day of the election, even many party workers felt uneasy to vote. Even party activists ended up not voting because they were worried about what people in the town might say about them. Only six per cent of the eligible voters cast their votes in Mahaswad.

### **Election Preparations**

On August 9, we called a meeting to prepare for the municipal corporation election. All the presidents of the youth clubs and senior opposition leaders were called to attend this meeting. We decided that the Citizens' Forum would put up candidates against all of the Rajmam panel. All the opposition leaders were convinced that the Mahaswad elections should be fought jointly. Every group would get some representation and all of us would try, despite our conflicts with each other, to ensure a victory for the Forum. Vijay was made the president of our opposition coalition.

During August, we anticipated that the elections would be held within two months. Vijay, Nitin and other youth activists went from ward to ward to ensure that the names of all the voters were on the electoral rolls. Whenever you want change, it is very

important to have the involvement of young people. While the list was being finalised in the second week of September, we again checked to ensure that the names of all eligible voters were included, especially those who had just reached the age of 18 and were to be included in the list of voters for the first time.

All the wards were being restructured this time because an increase in the number of voters necessitated an increase in the number of wards. We made a major effort to transfer some of the names of our supporters from the wards in which we were particularly strong to neighbouring wards in which we weren't as strong, so that we would have a better chance to win in more wards. For example, in ward numbers 10 and 11, which were adjacent to each other, number 11 was one of our strongest wards, while the Rajmane panel had won many times in ward 10. We decided that if even 20-25 of our votes could be shifted from ward 11 to ward 10, we might win in that ward, while still having an easy time winning in ward 11 with the voters that remained. In ward 10, in previous elections, the Rajmane panel had purchased votes to help them win.

Similarly, in many of the other wards, we involved ourselves in this type of activity by transferring some of our voters to wards from which they would be of the greatest help from wards where they were not essential to victory. Vijay and Nitin spent a lot of time and energy doing this. They went around from ward to ward for a week for this purpose alone.

### **Selection of Candidates**

In October, they announced the election date. Our panel had no central nominating committee for the selection of candidates. We made our decisions ward by ward. These are the main points we kept in mind when considering candidates:

1. None of our panel of candidates

for a ward could be from outside that ward.

2. In every ward, the candidate would be chosen in a meeting open to all the ward members. Every ward was to hold its own meeting. Leading residents would be present in that meeting along with the president of the Sidhnath panel. Decisions would be taken at these meetings to decide who were to be our candidates. If anybody had an objection, he could either raise it openly at the meeting or he could do it later; he could even do it by sending in an anonymous letter. In every ward, three or four meetings were held before the names were finalised. It took a lot of time and effort. But, as a consequence, the candidates had a wide base of support in each ward and a large number of people in each ward were willing to take responsibility for participating in the Sidhnath panel's election campaign.

3. These are the selection criteria we used:

a) the candidate should be a person active in neighbourhood matters, ready to involve himself or herself in, the ward's work;

b) the ward panel should reflect the caste and religious composition of each ward and

c) the panels in eight out of the 25 wards should be reserved for women. The Sidhnath panel would choose women who, besides meeting the criteria listed above, also had some independent identity of their own.

Two actual examples will help explain the process of selection of the Sidhnath panel candidates: In ward 24, a reserved ward for women, there are a lot of well educated people. Brahmins and Gujars are in a majority in this ward. At the ward meeting, they decided to put up a woman called Vasudha Shastri who is very good natured and helpful. She maintains good relations with everybody in the ward. Another advantage of having

her is that her husband is an astrologer. He draws up horoscopes and is also a priest. He has a very good relationship with all the communities in the ward.

In ward 10, Bhui Jani, Chamar, Mali and Muslim community people were predominant. As mentioned previously, in this ward, votes had always been purchased. This was well known. This ward was also reserved for women. The Rajmane panel had put up a Chamar woman as their candidate. Our panel already knew this and had selected a Muslim candidate in the neighbouring ward 12 who had many relatives in ward 10. We felt that as a result this family might like to vote for the Sidhnath panel in both wards. The woman we selected from ward 10 to be our candidate is a devotee of Yellama Devi (a deity worshipped by the middle castes such as the Mali and the Bhui).

We decided that this time we would not use either posters or public meetings for electioneering. From experience we knew that many people look at the posters, come to attend the public meetings of both parties and clap at the speeches but decide for whom they're going to vote on other considerations. That is why we decided not to use the size of the crowds as a way of judging our strength. Instead of spending our major efforts on meetings and posters, Vijay, Nitin and I worked very actively in all these wards to try to develop good personal relations with many families in a variety of ways, including helping them get their bank loans sanctioned.

It proved very important to chalk out and carefully follow a clearcut strategy. We could sense that there was a wave of opposition to the Rajmane panel. That made it vital for the anti-Rajmane vote to remain undivided. Independent candidates who decide to run in the wards are a major problem because they take

away some of the votes. Had there been any independent candidates in addition to the Sidhnath panel candidate, the opposition vote might have been seriously divided. On the contrary, it was necessary for the Rajmane panel to divide the vote because if the votes against it were divided, its per-cent-age of votes relative to those of its opponents would be more.

In wards 16 and 19, independent candidates did insist on standing. It was probably part of the Rajmane panel's overall strategy. We managed to convince these independent candidates to withdraw their nominations by paying them off. Both these candidates took the money and withdrew from the contests. In order to win it was essential that the contests be restricted to united opposition Sidhnath candidates versus Rajmane candidates in all the wards. (This is not always the best strategy; for example, in the zilla parishad elections, it was important to try to divide the groups opposing our candidates. In those cases we even paid some people to stand as independent candidates in some areas.)

### Political Spadework

In Mahaswad we had been preparing for a whole year for this election. We did not wait until the municipal election campaign to begin our work. In addition to our previously described confrontations with the Electricity Board, we also used our own efforts to get help to those suffering from a water shortage.



**Women at a public meeting**

From March to June in the year of the Lok Sabha elections, there was a severe water crisis. The old women remembered a time when the river had sufficient water throughout the year; now, however, in part because there were a lot of fields sown close by the riverside, the river water didn't last nearly as long.

We were able to persuade a couple of farmers, who had big wells and were members of our coalition, that it was their moral responsibility to ensure that they provide water to others in the town. The farmers agreed. In ward 5, which is by the side of the river, we laid a pipeline to the street pipes from the farmers' two wells. The farmers are still allowing water to be released twice a day through these pipes to ward 5 when needed.

Women were deeply involved in the whole process of laying the pipeline. Women also participated in the preparatory meeting. The inauguration of the pipeline in each ward was done by a woman. The entire village saw that even though the Rajmane party had been in power for 42 years, they had done nothing to relieve the water shortage. As a result of our efforts to make more

equitable water arrangements, women got even more fully involved in the election process. Many more groups of women began to go for electioneering.

The electioneering had barely begun when some people came from ward 19 and told us that before every election the Rajmane panel leaders took each

family in the ward to that family's deity and made them swear before the deity to vote for the Rajmane candidates. They explained that they would not be able to refuse to go when the Rajmane leaders came to get them to take the oath.

However, they wanted to vote for the Sidhnath panel. They suggested we could help them escape from their dilemma. These voters asked us to make arrangements to have them take an oath before their family deities to vote for the Sidhnath panel before the Rajmane leaders came to their houses. Then they would be able to tell the Rajmane leaders that they had already been required to take an oath to vote for the Sidhnath candidate before their deity and couldn't go back on it. The family deity of the ward 19 people is near Satara in Pali village. That night three lorries full of people were taken to Pali to have them take this oath. They swore that they would put their stamp on the cycle (the symbol of the Sidhnath panel).

Electioneering exerts a lot of pressure on people. Because it was a small scale election, the activists for both panels had direct contacts with a lot of people. That is why the pressure was all the more intense.

Every ward had at least one representative of both panels keeping vigil and trying to deter the other side from exerting pressure on those they felt were likely to vote for their own panel's candidates.

On the evening of November 19, Shakuntala Khade, our woman candidate from ward 10, came and told us she had learned that during the night the Rajmane panel leaders would arrive in a lorry and compel her entire *basti* to pick up the *gulal* and swear to vote for their candidate. Shakuntala Khade was worried and wanted us to get there first and get them to take an oath with the *gulal* to support her. I tried to convince her not to worry because we felt that the *basti* people were going to vote for her as the candidate of the Sidhnath panel, whatever oath the Rajmane leaders forced on the *basti*. But she was unconvinced. Shakuntala had come to us with many people from her *basti*. They were all worried and put a lot of pressure on us, so we took them with us at once and got them to take the oath for the Sidhnath panel.

### **The Monetary Factor**

Two days before the election, the atmosphere was very tense. Many rumours were being spread about how the Rajmane panel was purchasing votes at the rate of Rs 200 a vote. I found the amounts they were paying hard to believe. The rumours also claimed that in ward 21, where the Rajmane party president, Rajmane himself, was the candidate, the rate per vote was Rs 500.

I told people not to believe these rumours. Nevertheless, I got concerned and surreptitiously watched from a hiding place while they paid off a family of five voters with Rs 2,500 (Rs 500 for each voter). In every previous election, this family had voted for the Rajmane panel. They had told us they were ready to vote for Sidhnath panel, but expected to be paid the proper rate for their

votes. I was shocked both at those who were purchasing the votes and those who were being purchased. But I couldn't do anything. Nobody would have listened anyway.

I had believed, as do many other people, that ordinarily it is only the poor who end up selling their votes. But in Mahaswad I saw it wasn't just the poor but also those who were well off who were taking money. Among them were school teachers, salaried permanent workers and doctors. In the election, the Rajmane panel spent around Rs 3.5 lakh to Rs 4 lakh. The Sidhnath panel spent between Rs 2.5 lakh and Rs 3 lakh. The Sidhnath panel candidates spent some of their own money in the campaign and the shop-keepers of the Mahaswad bazaar gave a total of Rs 70,000 to the Sidhnath panel. Votes were bought in only one or two wards. Even in these wards not all the votes were bought. Neither panel had enough money even to attempt to buy all the votes they needed to win in the rest of the wards.

On the day of the elections, we placed two polling agents from our panel at each booth. It was important to have two very strong and determined workers there to prevent bogus votes from being cast. In previous elections, it had not always been possible to find enough poll watchers to cover all the booths. Rajmane party people usually had an easy time stuffing the ballot boxes.

At the time of the Lok Sabha elections, we had already observed that wherever the Janata Dal was weak, the Congress would pay people to stand for the elections as Janata Dal candidates. Even the Janata Dal people would often be fooled. On the day of the polling, some of the Congress people would come to the booths pretending they were Janata Dal polling agents. Then, in collusion with corrupt polling officers, they would engage in bogus voting in favour of the Congress.

This kind of manipulation is not just indulged in by the Congress Party. Every party does it. In 1989, the Janata Dal had done exactly the same thing. But this time it was not possible for the ruling party to indulge in bogus voting in Mahaswad because of the high level of public involvement. We learned that if we could arrange to get at least 60 to 70 per cent of those eligible to vote, then there would always be a crowd in every polling booth and it would not be easy to have bogus voting. We ensured two polling agents per booth. In Mahaswad we were able to help get 96 per cent of the eligible voters to cast their ballots.

At the time of the Mahaswad Municipal Corporation elections, the Sidhnath panel people made arrangements to bring back the migrants for the elections in trucks and trains. In addition, we made arrangements for their food for two days. Previously, each time the opposition took part in elections, there would never be any money left for the last stages of the election campaign, especially for arranging enough polling agents and bringing back migrant labourers. Since in this election we had spent no money in organising big meetings and in poster campaigning, we were able to conserve enough money for these two crucial tasks. It was also fortunate the election was limited to local contests so that outside money was less important.

### **The Elections and Aftermath**

On November 24, 1991, the day of the elections, there were long queues outside every polling booth. I got the feeling that this time the people were going to decide the fate of the candidates, no matter what stratagems each party had adopted. The long queues invested the ballot boxes with added significance. Both panels had arranged for vehicles to bring voters to the polling booths. However, theci

were some people who refused rides in these vehicles and came on their own to vote.

Both panels had put up 25 candidates. Eight out of the 25 candidates from each panel were women. The Sidhnath 'panel managed to get 15 people elected, out of which eight were women. Up to the time of the elections everyone had worked together collectively and selflessly. But as soon as the election was over and the Sidhnath panel won, the atmosphere changed. Everyone began to fight over the posts of president and vice-president of the corporation. Because the women's group had already made it clear in advance that the vice-president must be a woman, we finally were able to reach an agreement that Shakuntala Khade, a scheduled caste candidate, would get this post. We tried to keep the victorious opposition focused on what needed to be done to further Mahaswad's development but in many respects we were unable to do so.

The elders of Mahaswad say the atmosphere of the Mahaswad Municipal Corporation election was completely different from anything they had ever experienced. Never before were the people as intensely involved in an election as they were this time. When there is a wave of this kind, only then can the agenda of political change stand a chance.

### **The Inevitable Compromises**

I had done some electioneering in several elections prior to my work in Mahaswad. But this was my first experience of fighting an election in which we had actually tried and succeeded in forming an opposition coalition that was able to capture

enough power to bring about a change in party equations. The experience that I gained through the Mahaswad election has an important place in my life. It changed some of my preconceptions. I have done election work with Sangharsh Vahini as well as with Shetkari Sanghatana. This experience included lending support to a Lok Sabha candidate from one of the mainstream parties. In the 1989 Vidhan Sabha election, we put forward our own candidates on a party platform. But we never got a



**Shakuntala Khade who was elected as vice-president of the Mahaswad Corporation She is a Shetkari Sanghatana activist as well**

chance to play a direct role in changing the power structure; we just didn't have sufficient electoral strength.

In the Mahaswad City Corporation election we took the responsibility of putting up a complete panel in order to bring about some change in the power structure. Even though this was a small municipal corporation election and one can't generalise too much from it, it may be that when people are determined and persistent in trying to change the power elite they can sometimes manage to do so.

While taking part in the elections, there was only one immediate aim: to defeat the Rajmene party at any cost and get the Sidhnath panel elected.

Certainly, the elections were fought on issues like the need for sufficient water and electricity, but there are many things that were done in this electoral battle that I don't think were right. I do not regret what I did enough to say that I would have done otherwise if I had to do it over again, but I certainly feel bad about what I ended up doing at certain times. In retrospect I can say that even if the representatives of the Sidhnath panel had not distributed money, the people would still have voted for them.

However no matter how progressive the organisation to which we belong, we tend to lack self confidence and try to win the election with the help of money.

I have, repeatedly observed that some organisations which are at the forefront of people's movements and are sometimes capable of mobilising large groups for direct action do not usually do well in electoral battles. There has been a longstanding debate within progressive activist organisations that decide to participate in elections. Some of them think it advantageous to participate by directly supporting their own candidates under their own banner. Others think it better to support some other party or join in a coalition of parties.

Activists who believe in participating in elections under their own banner, see the advantage primarily in one of two ways. The reason often given publicly is that taking part in elections is part of carrying forward a movement. The hope is that if the people who are part of the movement organisations get into elected bodies, they would then themselves be able to raise those

issues around which the movement has been built more effectively than if they remained outside the formal political structure. Those who take this position maintain that even during the periods when active agitations are successful, support from one's own members who are elected officials is extremely advantageous.

Activists who see an advantage in supporting a mainstream party or joining a coalition of parties during an election give several reasons for doing so:

1. In elections to the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha a strong opposition to the ruling party is important for maintaining democratic traditions and some political balance.

2. Equally important is that there should be a social balance in the Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha and other elected bodies. Every section of society, including the backward castes, minorities and women should get adequate representation. For that a special effort is necessary. If you leave it to the undisturbed operations of the mainstream parties, backward groups are not likely to get much chance to take part in any meaningful way.

3. Most progressive organisations, that is, organisations which shun caste or communal politics and espouse the cause of the poor, are connected with issue based direct action movements. At election time, when campaigning for a mainstream party or a coalition candidate, they get a good opportunity to lobby on these issues. In some instances this lobbying has been

effective. For example, the farmers' movement was fairly successful at this in 1989, and the tribal movements at several other points in time. By using the political campaign for educating the public and for lobbying with the politicians they are able to compel all the candidates and their parties across the board to take a more sympathetic stand on their key issues. Even after the elections the movements are likely to be able to keep the pressure going on whichever candidates are elected, by indicating to the ruling political configuration the possibility of realigning movement support to some other electoral party or alliance. Even more important, if a movement has taken an effective part in elections and ensured that there is a strong opposition, a parliamentary regime cannot do whatever it pleases to repress democratic groups. It has to act with some restraint.

Whether to put up your own candidate and try to share in power through direct representation or to support a mainstream party or a coalition party that will promise to advance parts of your movement's agenda if they come to power is a decision that must be made by every movement, except at times in the few who do not believe in the electoral

process.

In progressive organisations, leaders often argue in favour of nominating their own candidates and emphasise direct participation in elections. The argument these leaders most frequently advance is that they themselves, or other carefully chosen disciplined party members are the most effective spokespersons to raise the movement's key issues in the public forums provided by mainstream political institutions, especially on occasions when they win an election and become representatives.

### **Andolan Politics versus Electoral Politics**

However, the second and, I believe, the stronger reason why many movement leaders support direct movement participation in elections under the movement's own banner (even though it is never owned up to) is that, after working in a movement type of organisation for several years, it becomes a personal need of the activist to make a political career by standing for elections. The activists try to give an ideological colour to a choice that some leaders make to fulfill their own personal desires.

Many movement based organisations do decide to put up their own candidates, justifying their actions with the explicit reasons given above, but also acting under the compulsions of the unmentioned reason of personal advantage. But the politics of elections is very different from the politics of *andolan*.

The strategy of movement

**Four of the women among the eight who won 30 per cent reserved seats**

organisations is to put pressure on the state to take decisions that will resolve the everyday problems of people. This manifests itself in large turnouts at conferences, meetings, *rasta rokos* and *dharnas*. Since the aim of these organisations is to influence people, their work seems spread out. However it is not necessary that a whole village be involved in a programme.

On the other hand, to win or fight an election requires a network that can reach not just a whole village but every household. To put up such a network requires not just money but very many villagers as well to carry out electioneering which includes preparing revised voters lists, covering polling booths, and above all resolving the everyday problems of people. On the whole, progressive or movement organisations lag behind both in terms of money and local people for this form of political work.

When a candidate stands for election, the issues and programmes of the movement become far less significant. The only thing that becomes crucially important is how many ballots you as a candidate can get in your favour, whether you can get the requisite number of votes to win. In any case, if you want to generate pressure for your movement's key issues you can do that best by putting your main efforts into greater strengthening of the movement.

After taking part in the Mahaswad elections, the most important conclusion I've reached is that in this kind of an electoral system whoever takes part is going to be under a lot of pressure to do anything that is

necessary, whether right or wrong, proper or improper. If a movement organisation takes part but does not indulge in the necessary malpractices, it is unlikely to win.

### **Back to Square One**

While the earlier part of this report was written soon after the elections, this concluding part is written a year after the election. All our hopes of changing things for the better with change in political power have been shattered. The new councillors are behaving no better than those who held power in the past though perhaps less highhandedly.

The main issues of the Mahaswad elections were water and electricity. No sincere efforts have been made to find solutions to these problems. Instead, municipal funds are being spent on buying new cars for the councillors so that they can move around with an air of exclusiveness which they think they do not get from travelling in hired-erto used Corporation jeeps. They are also busy building new shopping centres even though there was no pressure from the local people to do so. The existing shops do very poor business because farmers have little money to buy

consumer goods. The only shops that do moderately well are those selling grains and fertilisers. Why then are they making a new shopping centre?

The reason is obvious: to make money for themselves through commissions and cuts from contractors and suppliers and corner these properties for their own people.

Unlike with the Rajmane panel, the Sidhnath panel did not have a leader who would be regarded as the natural choice for the presidentship of the municipal corporation. In order that nobody got upset at being sidelined, we had decided that both the posts of president and vice-president would be rotatory, that is no one would hold either of these offices for more than a year. Thus, during the tenure of the corporation, five persons could be president and five could be vice-president. It was also decided that the person who became president could not become vice-president and vice versa.

However, even before the year was out, fierce battles began to be waged to topple the existing office bearers. The president is trying his best to avoid resigning and stick on to the post beyond the agreed one

### **The Mahaswad Municipal Corporation office**

year period. It won't be surprising if in the coming months the Sidhnath panel collapses altogether given the kind of faction fighting and mutual back stabbing that is currently going on. (*translated from Hindi*)

