

Cutting Across Party Lines

Women Members of Parliament Explain their Stand on Reservation Quotas

Meenakshi Nath

Reservation for women in legislatures is an issue which has brought most women members of Parliament (MPs) together from across the political spectrum. Only a few like Maneka Gandhi (see article on p. 27) feel the move will be counterproductive. In the following interviews, four women MPs from our national parties explain their views on reservation quotas for women.



Margaret Alva,
Congress (I)

WHA T is your personal stand on the issue of 33 percent reservation for women?

I was the one who initiated this in the '80s when I was Minister for Women. It was the *National Perspective Plan on Women* which, for the first time, spoke of reservation from *panchayats* to Parliament.

So right from the beginning the intention was to go right up to Parliament?

That was our demand. But there was quite a lot of opposition at that time. So it was decided that we should start with the Panchayati Raj amendments and move up later. However, in 1989 the united opposition defeated the Panchayati Raj bill. We re-introduced it in '91 and it was passed. In three years the states have passed legislation as required by this constitutional amendment. As a result, one million women have been elected to local bodies.

The argument against reservation was that we will never find women who will seek election in the rural areas, that they are too conservative, mostly living in purdah. However, in many states they have even exceeded the quota — for example, in Karnataka, women constitute 47 percent of the elected *panchayat* members. Bengal has also been a success story, as have Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

I am not saying that there aren't aberrations but aren't

there aberrations in all the main political parties? Does every party put up saints as nominees, or even the best, most effective individuals? We need reforms not just for women — the whole system of selection of candidates needs to be overhauled.

So you see reservation as part of a greater change in the system?

I believe the quality and the atmosphere of politics will improve if more women come in. I'm not saying that every one of the women who has come into the *panchayat* is a graduate or is appropriately qualified. But how many MPs are? How many MLAs (Members of Legislative Assemblies) are? Whenever we ask for tickets for women in the legislature they ask us "Are they going to win?" as if every man who gets a ticket ends up as a winning candidate.

Someone stated that reservation will mean admitting to the weakness of women. I say, "Do you have any doubts about it?" After seeing the system work for 45 years, it is obvious that we are the weaker sex, whether we like it or not. We are excluded from jobs, the economic mainstream, decision-making processes, inheritance rights...

Whether one is fighting for the Scheduled Castes, the Backward Classes, or the minorities — the largest group that is affected is women. The Khalekar report has said that women are the single largest group of Backward citizens in the country. And things have not changed since then. Unless we are guaranteed an entry point by law we will never be allowed to participate. I really believe that.

Some women say that we must come into decision-making positions on our own steam, but how many have come so far? To all those who say that they will do it on their own — I want to ask why is the number of seats occupied by women in the legislatures declining?

You have made some personal efforts at getting larger numbers of women party tickets. What have you found to be the barriers?

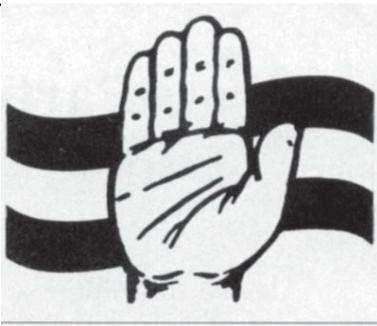
We have tried but we have been ineffective because we are neither in the selection panels nor are we represented in decision-making bodies. We give lists, we fight, we recommend, but they don't listen to us. UP has 127 or so seats for the Congress, but only two women got tickets — after so much talk.

I'll give you an example of a woman in Khargoda, Meerut district, who has been elected chairperson of the *panchayat*. She's done it on her own; the party has neither funded her nor supported her. She asked for an MLA's seat. Communitally, it's a Tyagi stronghold. She's a Tyagi and an elected person. She said, 'don't give me any money, I will raise my own money, I don't want anything from the party, I will win — you just give me the ticket.'

I went to the Congress president, to the members of the so-called selection committee. I went to as many people as I could. 'Yes, yes, her name is there,' they said, 'her name is in the eight withheld seats. her name has been decided upon, I will be done ...' But in the end, who do they do? They get a man from Ghaziabad and make him the candidate in Meerut. If this is the way parties are making selections, is it a wonder that we are demanding reservation?

How will the system of reservation be managed?

The election commission will reserve 33 percent of the seats by ballot for women. These are retained for women for two terms and are then



rotated. In the meantime, women can establish themselves and if they are popular they will be able to contest on their own merit as general candidates by the next elections. So every constituency has a chance to throw up women. We can establish a deadline of 25 years, or five general elections, by which time the reservations for women could be withdrawn. By that time by rotation every constituency in the

country would have been represented by women at least twice. This will create the nucleus for women's political leadership.

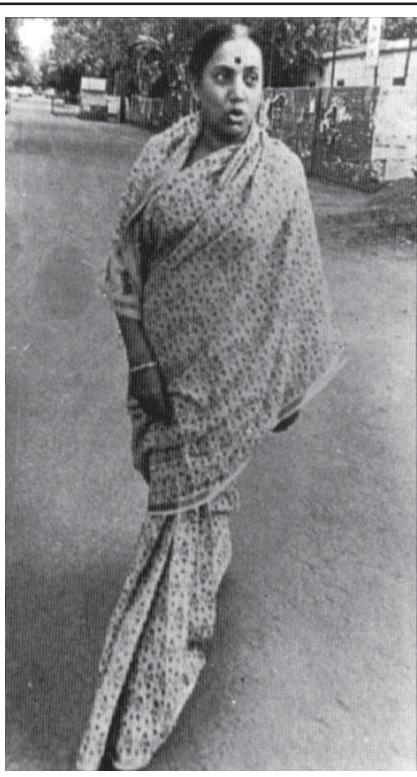
What about the issue of only the wives and daughters of politicians benefiting from reservation?

Maybe five to ten percent will be wives or daughters, but that does not make them any less women. The parties gave tickets to relatives of those in *hawala* rackets. When it comes to protecting their interests they don't mind their daughters, wives and sons contesting.

It's possible that I would not have been given an opportunity if I was not an Alva. But only those who are good enough will be able to sustain themselves. If women do not have an entry point, how will they ever get in?

How did this issue get included in your party's manifesto?

Apart from our lobbying, the importance of the women's vote forced parties to include this bill in their manifestos. The United Front government mentioned it in their Common Minimum Programme as a priority. When we raised the issue in the House, the Prime Minister stated that the bill will be passed in the first session. The first session was coming to a close. You can see their hypocrisy — they colluded to delay its introduction until the last day. This reveals their lack of seriousness on the issue. We had argued for its early introduction so that discussions and debate could be allowed.



Finally, when it was introduced, those who had never spoken about reservation for Backward Classes suddenly become the champions of Backward Class reservations. Between 1991, when the *panchayat* bill was introduced, until 1996 when this bill is on the verge of being introduced, these people did not articulate any of their concerns for the Backward Class men! The issue gains importance only now because women are about to obtain seats.

Do you think this is just party games?

No, no, even women in our party stood up to oppose the bill. There is a lobby of self-interest amongst women as well. As Narasimha Raq/7 said "It is like a train coming onto the platform. Those who are inside don't want anyone else to get in."

The greatest fear amongst male MPs is that they will lose their seats. They kept saying, "Do you want to leave your seat? If you vote for this bill your seat will go." It was an attempt to create a fear psychosis amongst those seated in the house. While some parties had issued a whip, some senior MPs stood at the main gate of Parliament telling the arriving MPs, "Why have you come? Go away or your seat will go. You are mad."

The Minister for Parliamentary Affairs called a meeting of women MPs to discuss the bill. Once all the parties have agreed that it's part of the Common Minimum Programme (CMP), why have a women's meeting? Just to create divisions of Backwards and Forwards between us? In the meeting everyone said something different; no one could agree.

What is the status now?

A Select Committee has been set up. I've been nominated as a member of that committee. No meeting has been held yet, so we will have to see what happens.

What is your position on reservations for Backward Castes?

I don't want reservations for women to get mixed up with anything else. I am not proposing anything, let them fight and break their heads. Based on the Mandal Commission report we made reservations in the services. Nobody had spoken about reservation for Backward Classes or others in Parliament or legislatures. Women cut across all sections and by giving reservations to them you will be helping women from all sections to come forward. There are currently no reserved constituencies for the Backward Classes and minorities, so why should this issue get tied up with reservation for women?

Are there any other measures required besides the reservation of seats?

The Election Commission should announce that every party must put up a certain number of women or else they will be derecognised. Women contesting against men will be at a disadvantage so constituencies that are reserved solely for women will help them.



Uma Bharti

Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)

There are two aspects to this reservation bill: the principle of reservation and the practical application of it. In principle, I am against reservation because I believe that women should come forward on the basis of their own merit and hard work. But my 12 years of experience in politics has led me to believe that this does not happen. Large sections of people are being deprived of their human rights on account of caste and other discriminations. Women rarely manage to come forward and when they try to do so, their own colleagues brand them as 'loose-characters'. Therefore, I believe that women will come into politics only if a reservation policy is implemented.

My own entry into politics was in a large part a result of my rare luck; few women have gotten the kind of opportunities that I have. Most qualified women do not get a fair chance in politics.

Did your party ever try to encourage the involvement of women in the party?

A resolution to provide 33 percent seats in Parliament to women through a constitutional amendment was adopted by the BJP during our convention in Baroda in June '94. Advaniji, our party President, was the one who proposed it and it was passed unanimously. Ordinarily, resolutions which are put forward by party members are followed by a debate and then voted upon. However, if the all-India party President himself puts forward a proposal, it is not debated but passed directly. This is very rare in our party and occurs only once in 10 to 20 years. Our 1996 party manifesto states that if the BJP comes to power, we shall ensure that this constitutional amendment is made.

Why didn't the BJP also resolve to provide 33 percent of the tickets to women in the party?

Kalyan Singh had announced in Uttar Pradesh that in

every *zilla* (district) at least one woman should be given a ticket. In every *zilla level* party meeting Kalyan Singh and Bhandari requested that at least one woman's name should be put forward, but this did not happen. This convinced me that without constitutional compulsion, men will not yield space to women. What man is willing to sit at home while his wife becomes an MLA? Will he fight for a ticket for himself or for his wife?

What are the reasons that women have not been able to come forward?

The reason is centuries old. Once the division of labour between the sexes was established, it became very difficult to change it. Woman took care of the home and men went outside to work. Men and women became physically and mentally conditioned to accept these separate occupations. Now all these barriers have to be broken.

Most women do not have the courage to come forward without the support of a man. The society fosters the belief that women are incapable of taking their own decisions and our laws reinforce this. If a woman's husband suddenly decides that there is no place in his house for her, it is likely that when she tries to return to her father's house she will find that she is not wanted there either. Because of these conditions, most women require financial, social, mental, and physical support from men.

What suggestions will you give to your party to check the tendency of politicians to give tickets only to their own female relatives?

There is a lot of opposition to nepotism in politics, especially in our party. But if people are even a little bit vigilant about this problem, tickets will have to be given to other women also. Parties will have to create a separate cell which will decide who should get a ticket.

Unfortunately, what I have seen so far in *the panchayat* elections has not been encouraging. Women have been made the *adhyaksha* (head) of the Janata Parishad, Mahila Janata Parishad, Gram Panchayat, etc., but they are not doing any work. They put their thumb print down and keep their *ghunghats* (veils) on.

In one case I was introduced to the *Janpad adhyaksha*. Only after a year did I come to know that it was actually his wife who held the post! Neither he



nor the public ever acknowledged his wife. Even in his speeches he addressed himself as the *Janpad adhyaksha* quite naturally. Since that constituency happened to have been declared reserved for women, this was how he got around this hurdle, with the endorsement of the entire constituency.

Another such case is in Jatara block of Tikamgarh *zilla*. The people there call Surendra Singh the *adhyaksha*, even though it is his wife who officially holds the post. This is not uncommon. In many rural areas the husband of an elected woman automatically begins to

act as if he is a member of the *panchayat*. He even manages to sit alongside her, and he keeps signalling to her what he wants her to do. Everyone knows what is going on — when people have proposals they even go to the extent of contacting the *adhyaksha*'s husband directly.

It should not be as bad at the parliamentary level as it is in the lower levels. A husband will not be able to sit alongside his wife or tell her where to put her thumb-print in the Vidhan Sabha, at least not as easily as men are doing at the *panchayat* level.

What is the reason that women such as Sushma Swaraj, Mamta Banerjee, Maneka Gandhi and yourself have been able to come forward and your respective parlies have been unable to refuse you tickets? How difficult is it for ordinary women without familial connections to do this?

Each one of these women has made a certain space for herself. As for myself, prior to joining the BJP, I was known as a very good orator. At first I used this talent in the religious field but then I decided that working in religious institutions alone will not remove poverty. So I brought my oratory skills, dedication, and sincerity into my political work.

At the time I entered politics, apart from the Congress Party, the other parties didn't have too much nepotism. Even the Congress had much less nepotism at the grassroot level. If someone displayed a little merit and talent they were given a chance. However, I still believe I was very lucky — only a handful of women have the kind of luck that I did.

Is there more nepotism now?

Not really. But currently, we are having a dilemma in politics; there is

Without constitutional compulsion, men will not yield space to women.

lot of political uncertainty. At such a time, ^^^^^ it is difficult to say who will gain and who will face losses.

Have you ever faced resistance in your own party while trying to promote women's advancement?

Have you ever suggested the name of a woman (as deserving of a nomination) on the basis of her work, but found that she did not get a ticket?

No, this has never happened to me. But I have suggested very few names. The women whose names I have suggested for organisational work have been recruited. None of the women that I have tried to push forward have had this type of problem.

Is there a shortage of active women or are the active women simply unable to get tickets?

There is no shortage of women. Women are more capable than men, but they are unable to break the barriers. By nature, we are physically weaker than men. Earlier when humans lived in caves whoever was the strongest, physically, became the leader. In today's world, however, whoever is mentally superior should be the leader. So now women can and should be in leadership positions as well. But the old attitudes of both women and men are not changing much.

Please explain the issue that you have raised regarding the need for a provision within the proposed reservation bill for Other Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes.

I am firm in my argument that the bill needs to be altered. We have introduced this bill because we have accepted that the weakest section of society are women. Their situation is even worse than that of Dalits. A scheduled caste employee insulted by his employer can quit his job. However, a wife who undertakes all of the same tasks undertaken by Dalits — eating *jhootan* (leftovers), sweeping and mopping, washing clothes, cleaning the faeces of the children, picking up shoes, etc. — does not have that option.

Since I am from the Backward Castes, I know from experience that women from the oppressed classes

The bill had so many lacunae that even if it had been passed it would have been debunked by the courts.

are the weakest of the weakest section of society. She is hit twice, once outside the house because she is a Dalit and secondly, within the house because she is a woman. Though she shares the second type of oppression with upper caste women, she deserves

some compensation for the first as well. But even after these groups got reservation in government jobs and educational institutions, there has been little positive change, especially among the women of these groups. I am not proposing that anyone should be given political advantage only because of their caste. Those who are promoted should, of course, be able and sincere.

Those who criticise your stand on this issue say that you never brought up this issue in the past and that you are just attempting to obstruct the bill's passage.

I had raised this issue previously with the party and it was decided that if the BJP comes to power we will include this provision before passing the bill. As soon as Deve Gowda had become Prime Minister I communicated my stand to him through a letter.

So the BJP resolution included this clause?

No. I spoke to them later. It was decided that whenever the party introduces the Reservation bill this aspect will also be taken care of.

So do you have your party's support on this issue?
Yes, lagbhag (almost).



Uma Bharti roughing it out among men

Do you think you will have the BJP's full support on this bill?

If one takes a secret ballot from all the men, this bill will be blown away. It will only obtain a couple of votes. Similarly there will only be about two or three votes from the Congress. However, the bill will have to be passed anyway because they want women's votes. So they will all pretend to be very happy with the bill.

The other allegation is that since your party is considered to lean towards the upper castes, this issue will make the BJP look like the defender of low caste interests as well.

No, this is not the case. After all, I am from the Backward Castes and I have reached a high-level post in the BJP. There are many others, also, like Kalyan Singh, Keshu Bhai Patel and Gopinath Munde. In every state, the person at the highest level is almost always from the lower castes.

Do you think that on some pretext or the other the passing of this bill will be postponed?

I have faced numerous allegations that I am at fault for stopping the passage of this bill. But I am actually a real supporter of this bill. The bill had so many lacunae that even if it had been passed it would have been debunked by the courts. I just want all the shortcomings to be removed so that we won't face any hurdles from the courts after the bill's passage.

No one will be able to stop this bill now. If anyone attempts to do so, the women of this country will react swiftly and strongly. There will be a new type of battle in the streets of India. Women want respect and they are demanding their share in all aspects of political and social progress.



Pramila Dandavate,

Janata Dal (JD)

Until 1975-76 I was in favour of reservation for women only up to the local and *zillaparishad* levels.

When the Janata Dal came to power, women were given very few tickets even though they had participated in the struggle for democracy under Jaiprakash Narayan. Since then I have become a consistent supporter of reservation for women, including in

Parliament. I feel that our party wants women to be decorative pieces, like *achar* (pickle) with food or a flower

pot. They do not want to share power in the real sense of the word. I believe that unless reservations for women are constitutionally guaranteed, the number of women in these representative bodies will decline.

Women's organisations and women's wings of all political parties have concluded, on the basis of their experiences in their own parties, that men have thousands of excuses for not giving an adequate number of tickets to women. This is common across party lines. They ask so many questions — 'Is it guaranteed that she will win? (As if all men who contest get elected!) Will she get the required funds? Will she open her mouth?' There are so many *mauni babas* (meditative saints) in the Parliament who never open their mouths! But when it comes to women, they ask: 'Will she be articulate? Will she understand? Do women have the time? Where will they come from? How will they come? They are so illiterate!' The same arguments were put forward while the Panchayati Raj bill giving reservation to women was being drafted.

Reservation at the *panchayat* level has been a huge success. During the 1987 elections in Karnataka, 18,000 women were elected to the various local governments bodies after the JD-led government introduced 25 percent reservation for women in the *panchayats*. Women proved to be better representatives than men. The government's positive experience with the women who were elected at that time influenced them to increase the reservation quota to 33 percent at the *panchayat* level. Subsequently, Rajiv Gandhi realised the potential of this measure and proposed the Panchayati Raj Bill.

I think that the quality of the Parliament will definitely improve as more women come in. In the past, women's performance has been far better and they tend to be less corrupt. I won't go so far as to say that if women are elected, there won't be corruption. Not with women like Jayalalitha and Indira Gandhi who institutionalised corruption. But in general, there will be less criminalisation in politics. The women who will be elected cannot possibly be worse than the men with criminal records who currently occupy the seats of power. Finally, if more women reach Parliament, there will be greater justice for women who are the victims of atrocities.

Is there unity amongst women MPs across party lines on this reservation issue?

All women are in favour of it. But of course, there are women who are playing their parties' political game. I

don't think Uma Bharti is actually against reservation but she is also a politician who wants to help boost the

image of her party, despite her differences with it. So she has raised the bogie of the lack of a provision for Backward Caste women.

What do you feel about a provision for Backward Castes?

We have no objection to it. However, now some parties are raising the issue of the Backward Castes for their own political gains. Everybody knows that the Panchayati Raj bill did not have any such clause. The BJP doesn't want the UF to obtain the credit for passing this bill. They are daydreaming about this government falling so they can come to power themselves. Only now that the BJP leaders have their eyes on the UP elections are they interested in letting it be known that it's their own party (and not the JD) who are so concerned about the Backward Castes. In the past, they never discussed these aspects of the bill.

What is the general reaction to this bill?

In general, men from all political parties are terribly upset because they do not know the future of their own constituencies. If 181 seats are reserved for women, many of them may lose their chance of contesting. Right now there are 36 women MPs, which means 145 more will have to come in to fill the quota if the bill passes. Though they have supported the bill publicly as a party and included it in the Common Minimum Programme, it is only now that they are realising its impact.

The male members joke about the issue but basically they feel threatened. Chandrasekhar has said "What is the necessity of these 181 women?" Others ask in jest: "Who will make our food?"

How has the issue reached this stage?

I'll give you a parallel example. While drafting the constitution, women were given equality with men. The men did not object to this at the time but later they opposed the Hindu Code Bill when it proposed to grant women equality in property rights. Even a person of the stature of Rajendra Prasad opposed the move. The same thing is being repeated



Promila Dandvate addressing a public meeting

now. Men included the reservation clause in their manifestos just to show how progressive they were and to obtain the votes of women.

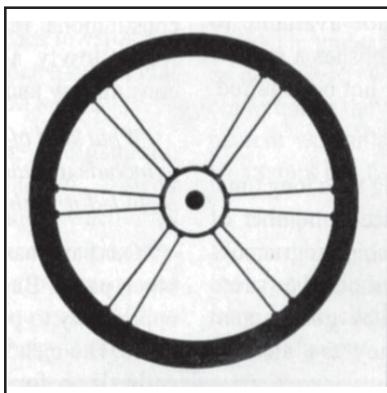
The women of the JD held the first conference demanding that the bill be introduced in the first session. We went to the leader of every political party and asked them to support it. We held state conferences as well, forcing Prime Minister Deve Gowda to go beyond lip service on the bill.

Why was the reservation lobby against a parliamentary debate?

We never objected to a debate. We only suggested that Parliament be extended or all other parliamentary business be suspended until the matter was finalised. The main objective was not to disallow a debate, but to get the bill passed in that very parliamentary session.

The men have anyway managed to stall the passing of the bill by ensuring that less than 275 members were present when a vote on the bill was called for. And now it will not be so easy to get it passed in the next session because the same men will be there with their delaying tactics. They will put up other excuses.

We accept that the bill has its drawbacks. The bill grants reservation for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha, houses which have directly elected representatives. In principle, we



demand reservation in the Rajya Sabha and the Vidhan Parishads as well, but it is difficult because there is no uniformity in the way those members are selected. The modus operandi will have to be decided. We wanted the bill to be passed in principle; the details can be worked out later.

If the government falls, the whole process will have to start all over again. So women's organisations and women from political parties will have to take advantage of this period and work hard to ensure that a favourable public opinion is mobilised.

Do you think that qualified women are being obstructed from entering politics or is there less interest amongst women to do so?

There is definitely a reluctance amongst women to participate in elections, in spite of several women's organisations demanding greater participation in the decision-making process. In my opinion, the reasons are: the lack of funding for those whose families are not willing (or able) to support them; the criminalisation of politics; rampant character assassination of women in politics; and the burden of household duties.

How will reservation tackle all these problems?

A woman whose decision has so much importance outside is gradually given recognition even within her family. Her position in the family changes due to her position outside. It is not the other way around.

What about funding?

I suggest state funding for the implementation of the bill proportionate to the performance of the party. A minimum level of funds should be made available to women candidates. Once a woman establishes a rapport with the public, financial assistance may not be required.

Are these reforms outlined in the bill?

We have been demanding state funding for a long time. Criminalisation will be reduced if a greater number of women are in the fray. In addition, internship programmes to train potential women MLAs and MPs should be started by voluntary organisations as well as by government agencies. At the *panchayat* level they are already conducting such programmes.

Is there anything that you and the other MPs can do to ensure that these things really happen?

Yes, but the first thing is to see that the bill is passed. After the bill is passed in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, at least 50 percent of the legislative assemblies will also have to pass the bill using the same principle of a minimum of 50 percent attendance and two-thirds majority of votes before it can become law.

We hope that a select committee will be set up immediately which will go into all the problematic aspects of the bill and remove the flaws. We also hope that they will come forward with their recommendations on the very first day of Parliament.

Do women have difficulty setting up and nursing their constituencies, thus making it easy for the party to sideline them?

Even women who have achieved something substantial in their lives and have competed favourably with men in other fields are afraid to enter the political arena. ^_^. Reservation will give them exposure and training in politics. After they work in their own constituency for a while they will be bold enough to fight.

Our party wants women to be decorative pieces, like achar (pickle) with food or a flower pot. They do not want to share power in the real sense of the word

After each constituency has been reserved for 10 years, the reservation for that constituency should rotate. At the end of 25 years, there should be a ^_^ comprehensive review, and hopefully by then we would find there is no longer any need for reservation.

So the parties have to nominate certain women to fight in these particular constituencies?

What is happening now? Even though parties are not giving women an opportunity in their own organisations, they seek women for local elections since it is a constitutional requirement because of the Panchayati Raj Act. Slowly a woman will get entrenched in her constituency and will be willing to fight in the open.

What kind of measures has your party previously taken to include a greater number of women? Or have they simply included it in their manifesto?

Our party has more Backward Caste members than any other party. Backward Caste members are getting the opportunity to participate in decision-making for the first time. The men feel that it is their right, but they lack the enthusiasm for including women. The JD constitution specifies that women must be included. Women, SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities are entitled to 60 percent of party positions. Yet women don't even constitute 30 percent. At most levels, we have at least a handful of women, but

in the higher bodies — the Parliamentary Board and the Political Affairs Committee — the party has not included women at all and we are fighting for that.

What has been your personal experience in the party? Have you tried to obtain tickets for some women?

Despite all my efforts during the UP elections, as well as before that, when I tried my level best to see that more and more women get tickets, it still has not happened. Now I am convinced that unless there is a constitutional compulsion, our men will not give tickets to women.

What about the risk of women simply acting as pawns for the men behind them?

In the beginning, even in the rural areas, women listen to their husbands. But slowly they realise that their own opinion and their own power matters, and they begin to assert it. It depends on the socio-economic and political climate in the state. This is to be expected at first, but after two or three elections it will change.

If the parties could put a 33 percent reservation clause in their manifestos, what prevented them from passing party resolutions to include 33 percent women candidates?

You should ask this question to the party leaders.

How will the inclusion of women in Parliament alter the course of development?

A woman's perception of development is totally different from men. A male farmer will prefer a cash crop to a food crop because he wants money. However, a woman will prefer a food crop because she is afraid her husband will squander away the money. Similarly, women prefer food-for-work in the employment guarantee schemes even if there's less money to be made. Men, on the other hand, prefer cash income. A number of surveys have shown that 100 percent of a woman's income goes towards the welfare of the family while in the case of men a substantial proportion goes towards satisfying his own whims.

The priorities of women are different. We naturally think more about our families and our children. Instead of spending so much on destructive and combative activities education, child welfare, and health will become priorities. Unnecessary conflicts that are a drain on our resources will stop. Perhaps men would also become aware of this waste if they were to start looking after their families. It has to do with the fact that we have been endowed with the uterus where children are born. We are creators, not destroyers.



Vimla Ranadive,

Communist Party of India

(Marxist)

I feel personally that unless and until basic changes are made in our society, the major questions will not be resolved. The reason for this is the feudal nature of our society.

Change depends upon the removal of these feudal tendencies. This will be a long process. Both men and women have to be convinced that change is required. For instance, this bill was sent to the select committee at the last minute.

As a party we will not oppose the bill for one-third reservation even though we feel that it has its limitations. I agree that our party has a very low representation of women in Parliament and state assemblies, but I do not accept that the women in our party are in Parliament only because we are related to some male politician. Those who are have achieved independent status.

Women are doing well at the *panchayat* level, particularly in Bengal and Maharashtra. If you meet those women you will see that they work hard, sometimes better than their husbands do. They have also shown their ability for developing schools, encouraging literacy, etc. They are doing splendid work. They have aptitude but they should be given a chance by their counterparts to come forward.

What specific measures have you taken to encourage the participation of women?

We have started such a process in our Coordination Committee. Through our trade union we took up the issue of women's representation. We encourage membership of women in trade unions, their representation in committees, as delegates. We sent circulars to all the states that at conferences they should ensure that there is at least 10 percent women's representation. Some states have made an attempt but two states still failed to send any women.

The All-India Coordination Committee of Working Women addresses these deviations or feudal tendencies amongst trade unions. After 10 years of pursuing this issue, some changes have been made, although it is still not satisfactory.

Earlier at our conferences for plantation workers of 200 to 300 delegates, there would be five or six women, even though 80-90 percent of the workers were women.

As the President of the All-India Plantation Workers' Union, I demanded that representation of women be increased. On the current Executive Committee of our Federation, out of 45 members, at least 20 are women. For the next conference in Assam, I have asked them to send 25 percent women. We will have to wait and see how many come.

At the party level are there any such measures being undertaken?

There are no such measures. It is a question of political consciousness. There are no women in our Politburo, which is our highest body. There are five women out of 70 members in our Central Committee. But we will not give representation to women just because they are women. We need to include women in mass-organisations such as agricultural workers' associations, *kisan sabhas*, and student unions. If they don't come forward, they will not be able to develop themselves.

As a party how will you encourage this trend?

The Centre for India Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Democratic Women's Organisation (AIDWA) are both doing it. A good number of women are in the Kisan Front and they launch struggle along with the men. When I give a call for *anganwadis*, women are the first to come. They speak well about their own problems but they are not coming forward in the party or in the mass organisations. Through the mass organisations we are trying to train them because they have to take up the responsibility.

Are there cases of women who want to come forward but are prevented due to some weakness in the party?

We will not give representation to women just because they are women

Yes, sometimes because of a lack of political understanding, ideological development and education, they are unable to come forward. However we are attempting to bring women into the agricultural front, the trade union front and also into the party. We are holding conferences on behalf of AIDWA, CITU and other organisations.

Have there been any individual women who could have gotten tickets but were not able to?

Yes, this happens. This is the reality and we must accept it. There will always be some women who are capable enough but are not pushed forward.

But what do you feel about the panchayat reservation? Is your stand the same or is it any different?

That will come easier, women at the grassroot level will get involved, as our experience in Bengal and Karnataka has shown. They are doing excellent work. But in the higher bodies it will be a little

more difficult. Just because a woman is the wife of a politician she shouldn't get a ticket.

She must also be able to contribute and speak in Parliament on behalf of women and men.

What about the proposed reservation for Backward Caste members within the women's quota?

I have not had a chance to study the issue so I would not like to comment. □

All pictures except for the one on pg 15 courtesy of Indian Express.

Meenakshi Nath is a Delhi-based freelance consultant working on development issues.



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