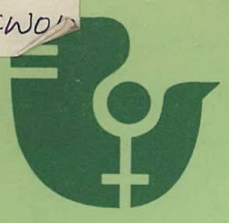


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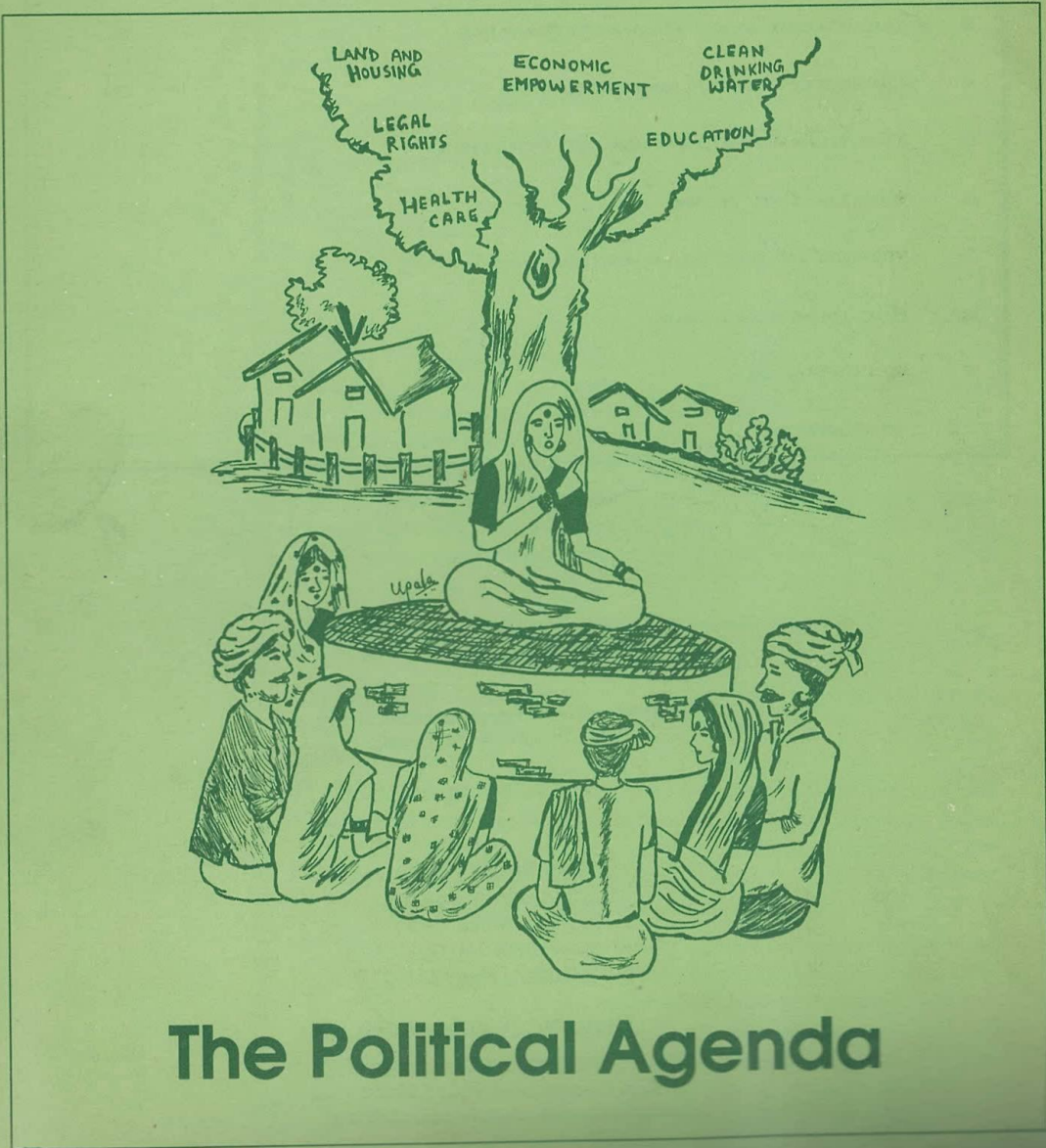
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# ISSUES

## *Towards Beijing*

For Private Circulation only



### The Political Agenda

# Contents

1	WHAT DOES POLITICAL PARTICIPATION MEAN?	3
2	PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL POLITICS	4
3	THE PANCHAYATI RAJ ALTERNATIVE	5
4	CRIMINALISATION AND POLITICS	8
5	THE COMMUNALISATION OF POLITICS	11
6	WOMEN AND WORK	12
7	WOMEN IN THE BUREAUCRACY	14
8	RECOMMENDATIONS	16
9	REFERENCES	18
20	APPENDICES	20

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Published By  
Coordination Unit  
802, Arunachal Building  
19, Barakamba Road  
New Delhi-110 001  
Ph. : 3713221, Fax : 3713219

Reprinted : October 1995

Typesetting and Designing  
Kriti Composers Ph. : 6921363

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## PREFACE

'Come September' and it marks a major event, the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing, the capital of China. The conference will be a time to review and appraise the policies for the advancement of women, to determine priorities AND evolve strategies and implementation mechanisms. The conference is to be one of commitment that will finalise and adopt the Draft Platform of Action, a document that will set the direction for the progress of women in the coming decades.

Preparations towards this major event is worldwide. The women's movements all over the world are not just working towards alternatives but are strategising on mainstreaming women's issues and perspectives in the National and Global agenda and Policy formulations.

The Coordination Unit was set up in India in December 1993 to facilitate preparations towards this world conference on women.

The objective being, to reach out to NGOs through out the country with information on the World Conference. To facilitate issue based meetings, discussions, workshops at the grassroot level on critical concerns affecting the lives of women. Through the concerns that emerged from these deliberations, the micro-macro linkages were established to enable advocacy and lobbying on critical issues affecting the lives of women. The Coordination Unit facilitated liaising and networking with government and Non governmental organisations, networks, mass-based organisations as part of preparations for Beijing. Provided a meeting point for activists, researchers, policy makers and different kinds of groups.

Studies and research papers on emerging issues have been supported by the Coordination Unit.

One of the key concerns that emerged from the deliberations at the grassroots as well as the national forums was that of women's political participation.

Democracy cannot be realised if marginalised sections, which include women, remain outside political and social systems of power. In the Majority of our societies today, the most disadvantaged have the least access to political and social structures. This, in turn, goes to further accentuate their marginalisation.

The term "political participation of women" needs to be redefined since in public perception it denotes participation solely in electoral politics. The terms should include all such participation which leads to, influences, decides, infringes upon policy evolution and decision making, including movements, organisations, governments/NGOs or associations with political, social, economic, and cultural concerns from the international to the local levels.

- Many governments have attempted to provide space through reservations and quotas for women to enter the political arena. Such affirmative action is an absolute necessity, given the fact that societies and governments continue to be patriarchal structures. However, a mere numerical representation of women will not change the political climate. Change will only take place when women, as representatives of their communities and gender, are empowered to bring their own insights and experiences to the process of decision-making.
- The growing violence, criminalisation and fundamentalism in politics is of major concern in our region. These affect women's lives directly. They act as serious impediments to women assuming leadership roles within society. Therefore, there is an urgent need to create an enabling environment.
- As a group, women have suffered the worst adverse effects of the global economic and structural adjustment policies. Such policies have resulted in widespread displacement, depletion of natural resources and have led to an increase in both unemployment and underemployment. This is a process over which women have had little control, although they have had to bear the terrible consequences that ensue. Empowering them politically will help them to articulate their views about such policies and help them to be in better control of their situation.
- The unending search for food, fodder and water which has been further aggravated by the globalisation process, has affected the health of women and increased their work-load, leaving them with little time, energy or inclination for political participation. Any attempt to empower women politically must provide for supportive structures.

This document is an attempt to present the different concerns and strategies related to women's political participation, and to articulate women's agendas for future action.

These concerns have emerged during the course of workshops and studies organised by the Coordination Unit.

**Asha Ramesh**

Convenor - Women's Political Participation

## What Does Political Participation Mean ?

At its best, the Indian women's movement is a search for human transformation. At a general level, it is a demand for social equity, or equal access of women from various strata of society to scarce resources. More specifically, it is a struggle waged by women for access and control of those very resources which may range from food, wages and employment to education, personal freedoms and powers of decision-making.

In fact, the modern phase of the women's movement in India, which can be traced to the early 1970s, was a popular response to the corruption of the state and its inability to provide its citizens with better living conditions. Droughts in 1972 and '73, the costly war waged in Bangladesh, increased oil prices, and other factors sparked off popular discontent that manifested itself in numerous urban and rural movements. The anti-price rise demonstrations which saw women come out in their thousands on to the streets was just one example of this social ferment. There were also many rural struggles on issues ranging from land redistribution to liquor. An *andolan* like the one that has famously come to be called the Chipko movement of the early '70s grew out of grassroot participatory organisations. It was through a process of conscientization that the 27 women of Reni village in the Chamoli district of Uttar Pradesh resorted to hugging the trees that grew in the local forest to prevent them from being axed by timber contractors.

The Chipko' movement and others like it demonstrated clearly enough that movements impact both on state and society. Its importance lies in this. It also has the potential of transforming its actors, so that those who go through the processes of the movement emerge empowered. This is all the more so in the case of masses of disempowered women whose opportunities to play a role in mainstream political institutions are non-existent.

Social, economic and political power are closely interconnected. It follows from this that marginalised groups who don't have social power, who are plagued by poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy, are both politically and economically powerless. That Indian women lack economic power is evident in the fact that only 29 per cent of women were recorded by the 1991 census of working in an economically gainful way. Of these, 90 per cent work in the primary sector. In the industrial section, they are largely concentrated in the household industries which offer only uncertain, ill-paid, seasonal work. Not surprisingly, the Eight Five Year Plan states that 30 per cent of the households in India that come under the poverty line are women headed.

So any movement that seeks to change women's economic and social position, would necessarily be a political movement. And conversely, any movement that seeks to empower women politically could also transform their lives socially and economically.

## Participation in Formal Politics

But first, let us examine the track record. How have Indian women fared in mainstream politics—both as voters and as leaders? Very unevenly, it appears. While women have made their presence felt in mass movements, group upsurges and protest struggles, their role in more structured decision-making processes has been minimal.

As voters during parliamentary elections, their turn-out at the ballots has been consistently less than the men's—ranging from 38.77 in 1957 to 43.90 in 1989. However, on occasion, the female voter turnout indicated popular opinion on a mass scale. For instance, in 1977 the percentage jumped from 49.15 in 1971 to 54.96 in 1977 reflecting popular anger over the forcible sterilisations of the emergency period. Once again, in the 1984 polls, the turn-out rose from 51.22 in 1980 to 58 percent because of the sympathy factor for Rajiv Gandhi, generated by the assassination of his mother. As people's representatives,

women have fared abysmally, despite the emergence of an Indira Gandhi or a Mayawati. Women's representation in Parliament and in the state assemblies has never gone beyond 8 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. Even those who have managed to make their way through the political labyrinth have been able to do so only because they came from affluent and politically powerful backgrounds, or from well-established, politically important, social groupings. And even these women fall by the wayside when it comes to the very temples of power. For instance, the Union Council of ministers have only a 13 per cent representation of women.

A look at a list of women members in the 10 Lok Sabhas constituted to date reveals that the high point of female representation was in 1984-90, when a paltry 8.1 percent of members were women. Otherwise, the figure varies from 3.4 percent in 1977-80 to 7.07 percent in the 1991 Lok Sabha.

### A Case Study : 1995 Bihar Elections

The 1995 elections to the Bihar state assembly demonstrated all the awesome hurdles that women in politics have to face. Although 264 women filed their nominations for the 324 seats, only 5 per cent won. Further, while all the political parties promised to give one third of the party tickets to women candidates, none of them kept their promise. The Congress gave 19, the BJP 14 and the Janata Dal (which subsequently came to power) a paltry 5—these amount to only 5.6 per cent of the total nominations.

A study conducted after the 1995 assembly elections by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, Bihar, for the Co-ordination Unit, based on responses from newly elected as well as defeated women candidates, revealed that most of the political candidates do not understand what political participation is. A large number joined politics on the death of their fathers or husbands following which the party concerned gave them tickets in order to cash in on the sympathy vote. Rarely did the women themselves have an independent base. In fact, apart from a few belonging to the militant leftwing CPI (ML), few had even taken part in grassroots level movements, let alone led any.

The study also found that women leaders generally considered themselves unfit to deal with violence during election and cited it as a major reason for the low number of tickets being given to women. This, coupled with lack of education were factors that affected the emergence of women on the Bihar political scene, according to the respondents.

Twenty years ago, the Status of Women Committee observed in its Report that "the structure of the parties make them male dominated and in spite of outstanding exceptions, most partymen are not free from the general prejudices and attitudes of the society. They have tended to see the women voters and citizens as appendages of the males and have depended on the heads of families to provide block-votes and support for their parties and candidates." Unfortunately, the situation remains much the same today.

## The Panchayati Raj Alternative

One of the more significant recommendations of the 1974 Status of Women Committee Report was that for the establishment of "Statutory Women's Panchayats at the village level to ensure greater participation by women in the political process". The National Perspective Plan for Women also recommended 30 per cent reservation for women at the grassroot level with special emphasis on the involvement of Dalit, tribal and other marginalised women.

### How the Institution Evolved

The concept of the panchayati raj, or local government, dates back to the 10th century during the Chola period. Mahatma Gandhi developed on the idea. He saw it as a way of institutionalising the decentralisation of political and economic power, with each village community producing enough to meet its basic requirements in terms of food, shelter, clothing. The Indian Constitution enshrined the concept in Article 40 of its Directive Principles.

In 1957, the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team specially appointed to study community development argued for a more efficient system for devolving power. The Study Team recommended that the basic unit of democratic decentralisation should be located at the Block and Samiti level. For the first time, the Team recommended the inclusion of women representatives in panchayats by cooption.

In 1977, the Ashok Mehta Committee suggested measures to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). It recommended a two-tier set up for its administrations—at the district and mandal level—and suggested the holding of regular elections to these bodies.

The Seventh Five Year Plan while admitting the extremely limited status PRIs have been accorded in the planning process emphasized the need for radically changing the conventional methodology of planning for village and block level activities and called upon State governments to activate PRIs particularly at the block and village levels so

that they could be more actively involved in the planning and implementation of the special programmes of rural development.

Another significant initiative came from the sub-committee of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee attached to the ministry of personnel, public grievances and pension, in 1988. Chaired by P.K.Thungon, it held that Panchayati Raj bodies must be constitutionally recognised. It also recommended a constitutional provision to ensure timely and regular election to the bodies which had a five-year tenure.

Of the State government initiatives, Karnataka's proved the most innovative. In 1983, it introduced 25 per cent reservation for women at the zilla parishad and mandal panchayat level. And in fact, during the 1987 elections to the Panchayati Raj, 26.65 per cent of those elected were women.

But despite all these attempts at strengthening Panchayati Raj, it still suffered from some serious flaws. The cardinal problems was that the establishment of the panchayat system of governance did not by itself ensure a full-scale representative authority. Groups and factions inevitably politicize these institutions and use them for personal aggrandizement. Local elites muscled their way in. Besides this, the various state governments tended to neglect these institutions which suffered as a result of lack of funds, assistance and guidance. Not surprisingly, elections to these bodies were not held with any credible regularity.

It was to rectify some of the anomalies and strengthen PRIs, that the P.V.Narasimha Rao government introduced the Constitution (Seventy Second Amendment) Bill on September 16, 1991. After detailed deliberations and changes suggested by various political parties and after 17 states had ratified it, it emerged as the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, which came into force on April 24, 1993. All the states had passed legislations amending their existing Panchayat Acts by April 24, 1994.

The 73rd Amendment Act, among other provisions, declared that panchayats shall be constituted in every state at the village, intermediate and district levels. Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Tribes has been provided in proportion to their population at each level. Not less than one third of the total membership has been reserved for women and these seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat. Similar reservations have been made in respect of the office of the chairperson of the panchayat as well.

The 74th Amendment Act seeks to empower people by granting constitutional recognition to a third tier of urban local government. According to it, no less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Municipality shall be reserved for women. Further, that the office of chairpersons in the Municipalities shall be similarly reserved for SCs, STs and women. A 1989 estimate put the total number of municipal bodies in the country at 2,789.

#### **The Promise and the Problems of Panchayati Raj**

This Act is not merely an instrument of democratic decentralisation that should, if it is effective, bring about important changes in the rural power-status structure, but it is a delivery system for economic development. It is historic when viewed in the context of the traditional political disempowerment of women. For the first time, it allows an estimated eight lakh women, including those from tribal and backward castes, to make an impact at the policy planning and programme administration level at the grassroots, as panches and sarpanches.

The village of Kultikori in West Bengal's Midnapore district is evidence enough that women can rise up to the challenge. Its 7,685 inhabitants know this otherwise they would not have elected an all-woman panchayat in 1993. The 11 women who made it, known locally as *didis*, or sisters, were all young—only 2 were over 30—and not one of them have finished high school. Yet they have managed more than Rs 6 lakh (one lakh is 100,000) in government projects. As Rebati Das, the *pradhan* (headperson) of Kultikori put it: "Most of us

were never really in control of our domestic budgets before this. The government's orientation course helped initially, but we are taking each day as an education."

Hundreds of miles away, in Karnataka, Suman Kolhar, the vice-president of Bijapur Zilla Parishad, provides a graphic account of her attempts at politicising women in her area: "In the beginning, women were terrified to even sit on the chairs, let alone talk about their grievances. But they changed over time. They exerted pressure on the higher ups on various issues. They never failed to bring to the notice of the authorities, the substandard quality of work done in their division. They attended meetings without fail."

In Bittargaon, in Maharashtra—a village with a population of 16,000 and an all-woman panchayat—it was found that the women members, who were illiterate, had learnt to keep accounts from the local school teachers. They had put an end to gambling and had come down heavily on liquor dens with their policy of "shutting the door on every drunken husband". Incidentally, Maharashtra was the first state to boast of an all-woman Panchayat. In 1984, at Mauje Rai, in Pune district, an all-woman panchayat was elected unopposed with a scheduled caste woman as part of the team. A chronic shortage in drinking water was one of the first issues addressed and solved, soon after the elections.

In areas where training modules were introduced, the results have been salutary. For instance, elected women leaders in Tumkur, Karnataka, volunteered to undertake a five-phase intensive training programme of four-days each, spread over two years for women members elected in December 1993. With each phase of the training, the women seemed more independent.

Many women who have been thrown into the rough and tumble of Panchayati Raj politics have emerged that much stronger from the experience. Take 45-year-old Bisahin Bai, from Raipura, in the Chhatisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. She is an elected panch, belonging to the Kumhar (potter) caste. A woman who has had no experience of political life, who had studied only up to class two, today speaks about village development and



health facilities. Although she feels the need for more practical guidance, she does not perceive a contradiction between her economic, familial and political roles. To many of these women, political involvements are just an extension of their roles as caretakers of their families.

Yet despite the promise there are numerous problems as well. Perhaps the most formidable of these is the fact that Panchayati Raj institutions have to function within the reality of social life in India which has always functioned along casteist, feudal and patriarchal lines. There is a genuine fear that it will not be possible for so many women to contest elections—and those who do, make it as dummy candidates for locally influential families. The fact that rural Indian women are illiterate, politically inactive and are viewed by society as being subservient to men makes the task of empowering them politically more difficult.

According to one survey conducted in September-December 1994, by S.Radha of IMG, Thiruvananthapuram, in 21 panchayats in Kerala, it was discovered that even in that highly literate state, the majority of women did not even know that such an Act existed. There was the general feel that the existing women members were mere proxies and attended panchayat committee meetings just to claim their travel allowance. The majority of women had no formal training in decision-making. They were dominated by the male members especially the president. For instance, they were not entrusted with money—only the president had control over the funds. And another study based on interviews with 143 women members of panchayat samitis and zilla parishads in Maharashtra revealed that women of upper castes, wives of big land owners and politically influential persons, tend to predominate in the positions reserved for women. In Orissa, a study conducted in 1994 revealed that the high castes, namely the Karanas and Khandaits, had captured 66 per cent of the

total seats in the panchayats, whereas Harijans had secured only 21 per cent of the seats.

In this context, women panchayat leaders find themselves being manipulated by forces much more powerful than themselves. Examples of this are numerous. For instance, in Himachal Pradesh, politicians provide cash incentives to Gram Panchayats on liquor sales. The use of common lands have often been based on financial motives, and there have been instances where in spite of the local community's desire to obtain fuel and fodder from local forests and degraded land, the Gram Panchayats had insisted on commercialising these common resources.

The case of Chabutai Bhosale, a sarpanch of Bhosalewadi village near Pune is all too common. She was approached to sign some papers that would, ostensibly, help the village solve its water problem. Later it was revealed that the signature was required for clinching a contract that a local contractor had worked out for his own benefit.

Another serious problem that PRIs constantly face is a severe shortage of funds. Despite the fact that planning from below has been recognised for a long time as an important strategy, little progress has been made by state governments in developing on this concept. The general apathy at the administrative and political levels towards strengthening these bodies—and the fact that elections to PRIs have been routinely postponed testifies to this. Women have argued for the need to decentralise centrally sponsored schemes, so that local bodies can be facilitated to use the funds properly.

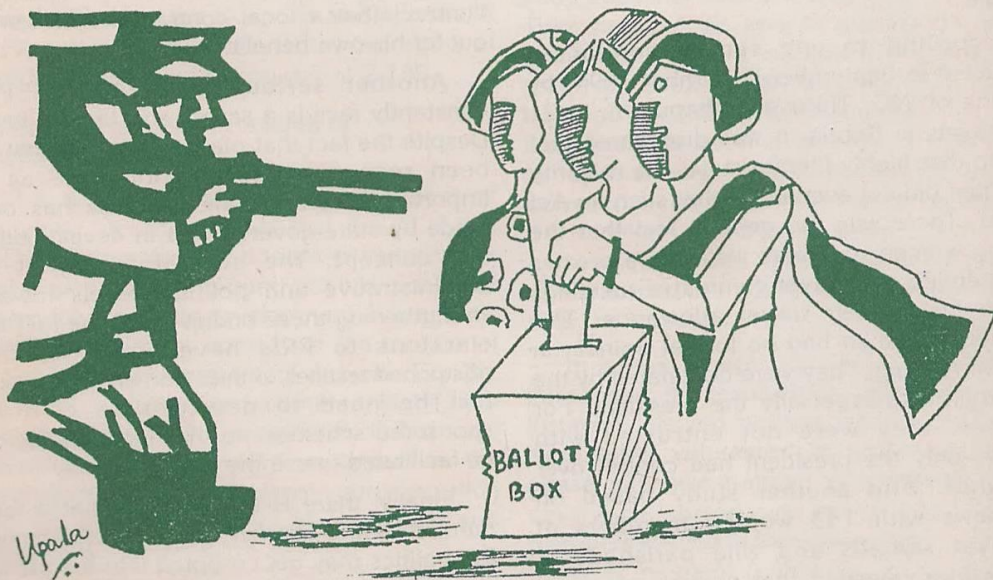
Finally, there is the concern that a large number of the women who enter Panchayati Raj politics may get co-opted into the present corrupt political structures. If this happens, then of course the very purpose for which these initiatives were made in the first place would be defeated—i.e., to provide another paradigm of political participation that seeks to empower not just the leaders but the most marginalised within society.

## Criminalisation and Politics

The nexus between crime and politics is well known. Jalgaon, where local political bigwigs were involved in blackmailing young women into performing pornographic acts or the 1995 Bihar elections where the rule of naked muscle power was in full view or even the behaviour of Shiv Sena goons in Bombay and Youth Congress "Leaders" in Delhi, demonstrate well enough that the political arena is rife with criminal activity. The Vohra Committee, which was set up in July 1993 to look into the issue and which came out with its report in August 1995, quoted a director of the Intelligence Bureau as saying: "In certain States...these gangs enjoy the patronage of

influence to make the task of investigating and prosecuting agencies extremely difficult; even the members of the judicial system have not escaped the embrace of the mafia.

This is the reality that women entering the arena of electoral politics have to contend with. In a seminar on the 'Criminalisation of Politics and Political Participation of Women', conducted by the Nagpur-based Stree Atyachar Virodhi Parisad, 60 elected representatives from local bodies described their experiences. Their responses reveal at least some of the problems that women politicians face. When asked if they were afraid of the criminalization of politics when they entered politics, 42 of the 60



local-level politicians, cutting across party lines and the protection of Government functionaries. Some political leaders become the leaders of these gangs and over the years get elected themselves to local bodies, State Assemblies and national Parliament". The director also stated that international criminal syndicates have acquired substantial financial and muscle power and social respectability and have successfully corrupted the government machinery at all levels and wield enough

answered that they were. When asked to elaborate on the nature of their fears, 42 stated character defamation as a fear; 40 cited the prospect of having to face assaults and disruptions of meetings, as incidents that frighten them, 10 expressed the fear of being accused of corruption, 38 feared that rivals would use corrupt means to fight elections, 6 stated rape as a constant fear while 22 cited abduction as a possibility.

When asked whether they actually suffered

from political crime after they stood for elections, 56 out of the 60 stated that they had—32 had experienced assaults; 19 had to face injury perpetrated on workers, 21 experienced character defamation—and almost everyone had to contend with corruption and manipulation of votes.

Ironically enough, the very area in which women contributed actively in creating a spontaneous political resurgence—ie, anti-liquor struggles—is one dominated by the presence of a mafia. The murder of woman activist Erendi Nayak, who was shot in a scuffle with illicit liquor dealers in a Oriya village, is just one instance of the numerous and sometimes insurmountable hurdles that lie in the path of women political activists.

### The Anti-liquor Movement

Liquor consumption is not just a social problem, it is a very political one, thanks to the close nexus between politicians and the liquor industry. It is a relationship of self-help. Funds flow into the coffers of political parties from the liquor industry, and the industry, in turn, gets lucrative licences and contracts through contacts in government. Not surprisingly then, almost every election fought in this country, from the gram panchayati to the parliamentary level, has witnessed the nexus between the liquor lobby and politicians. That the relationship has brought commercial benefits can be gauged by increased sales. In some instances, poli-

ticians themselves run liquor businesses and liquor barons contest elections and win them. In Maharashtra alone, liquor sales increased from Rs 3,000 crore in 1992 to Rs 4,500 in 1995 according to a report in 'Prerak Lalakari' of March, 1995.

It is in this context, that one should view the women's campaign against liquor. It is by no means a recent struggle; for years women have got together and broken liquor pots in a bid to check the rising tide of alcoholism that was destroying their lives and that of their families. But it is the Nellore campaign that has come to be regarded as the most effective political campaign that women have mounted on this issue in recent years.

### The Nellore Initiative

The National Adult Literacy Programme acted as a catalyst to this movement. According to reports, the anti-arrack agitation was sparked



off in Dubagunta village in Nellore district after women attending literacy classes, read a story about Seethamma, the wife of a alcoholic who committed suicide after failing to reform her husband. This led to an articulation of private histories and a realisation of the need to take action against the evil habit.

Village committees were formed by the predominantly poor agriculture labourers of Dalit households. They were aided by organisations like the Jana Vigyan Vedika, the Progressive Organisation of Women and the Dalit Mahasabha. The groups pressurised men to stop drinking, often physically restraining them from visiting arrack dens. Women squads were formed which went round the villages attacking liquor shops and setting liquor barrels and sachets ablaze. Drunkards were dragged into the streets, their heads clean-shaved and liquor dealers were brought out and garlanded with chappals. Women traced the links between the police and arrack contractors and spoke of how it destroyed homes through wall graffiti, street plays, rallies, and door-to-door campaigns.

In a particularly effective action, on September 9, 1992, they demonstrated in front of the Nellore Collector's office and forced the arrack auction to be postponed and finally abandoned. Landlords who paid labourers wages in the form of tokens to be exchanged for arrack sachets were also fought. The methods used were entirely evolved by the activists themselves who earned the fear and wrath of the local goondas as well as the label "Kalikadevis" or Kalis.

Nellore acted like a green signal for women all over the state to come out against liquor consumption. For instance, in Kurnool, which happens to be the home district of the then chief minister, Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, as a spillover of the Nellore liquor movement, on October 16, 21 and 23, 1992, there were dharnas and human road blocks to stop the collector and the SP from reaching the place where a liquor auction was to take place.

Thanks to their commitment to their cause, the women of Andhra Pradesh were able to make liquor consumption a highly political issue. Political parties rushed to take credit for

it and the Vijay Bhaskar Reddy government immediately announced a state-wide ban on the sale of arrack with effect from October 1, 1993. The Telugu Desam leader, N.T.Rama Rao (who during his earlier stint as chief minister had actually introduced liquor sachets known as 'Varuna Vahini' into Andhra villages) won the 1994 state assembly elections on the promise of total prohibition and cheap rice.

Of course, this struggle has had its share of reversals and hurdles. Often the activists had to fob off the determined bid by the state, particularly the police, the contractor's goondas and political parties, to break the back of the movement. In Kurnool, a liquor baron, Rajaskhekar Reddy sent his drunken thugs to disrobe women campaigning against liquor at Bangla near his village. These women had to face rods, lathis, boots and rifle butts. They were at the receiving end of vulgar abuse and threats of molestation. Some of them were beaten at home. Contractors even attempted to bribe the activists. But the women stood firm.

Similar anti-liquor movements have been launched in several parts of the country—from the tribal district of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra to Gumla district in Bihar. These movements have succeeded in building up village level resistance in a militant fashion. It attempts to assert the mother's right to protect her family and, by extension, the society in which she lives from the evils of alcoholism. Illiterate village activists now saw the connections between private profit of the liquor trader and the growing immiseration of the poor. What was most heartening of all was that it built strong women cadres and leaders capable of making important political interventions in the future.

However, this is a long-term struggle from all evidence. Prohibition is viewed as anti-development and the loss to government revenues provides a constant handle to beat the movement with. The important point to bear in mind is that social judgements will have to set limits to the influence of markets. Whether the women's movement can influence social judgements in the future will depend a great deal on how it progresses as a political movement.

## The Communalisation of Politics

Since women are regarded as the repository of a community's identity, it's not surprising that sharp conflicts arise between a woman's right to equality and the rights of a community to freely practise its religion. The Roop Kanwar sati and subsequent deification and the passions aroused by the Shah Bano case illustrate this as do the rapes of women in Seelampuri in Delhi and Surat.

But one of the most disturbing features of the recent history of this country has been rising communalisation of society. Women are also drawn into the vortex of such an ideology. A Sadhvi Ritambara distributing katars or knives in black sheaths to members of the Durga Vahini (the women's wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and enjoining them to "ensure that your katars taste blood" if the situation warrants it, may be an exception but the recent past has seen women participating in riots, looting shops and voicing diatribes against other communities. Whether it is in Kashmir or on the streets of Bombay the sight of thousands of militant women shouting slogans is now almost passe, yet more often than not they derive their power not from their own equal status in society but because they are instigated by the male power-wielders in their communities.

But women by and large also realise that riots destroy lives. After the 1992-93 riots in Bombay, women's groups worked towards establishing peace and initiating a dialogue between the Hindus and Muslims. It was found that women—even those who had undergone the most horrendous personal experiences—were more than willing to put the past behind them and get along with their lives. For them basic economic issues that affect the well-being of their families are ultimately far more important than power struggles waged in the name of religion. The question really is, can political initiatives from women build bridges and fight the nascent hostility that characterises Hindu-Muslim relations in the post-Babri Masjid demolition India.

**WOMEN'S MOVEMENT WANTS THE  
DELINKAGE OF RELIGION FROM POLITICS**



## Women And Work

Women's emergence in the political arena is linked inextricably to their emergence in other areas like trade unions, the administration and the judiciary, the corporate sector and in the bodies of higher education.

### Trade Unions

Only 8 per cent of the total female work force in India are in the organised sector. The rest are in the unorganised and informal sector. This means that the overwhelming majority of working women in this country are deprived of social security benefits.

Given this situation, one of the strong recommendations put forward by the Indian women's movement is that the trade union movement must encourage the evolution and growth of trade unions with sole or majority women's participation. With structural adjustment policies tending to drive more and more women out of the organised sector, the number of women workers in home-leased or unorganised sectors is bound to increase and strategies need to be evolved to organise them in trade unions in order to protect their rights and interests.

Unfortunately, even in the organised sector, women have not been a force to reckon with. Notes Amarjeet Kaur, secretary, AITUC: "During actions, agitations, dharnas, processions, women will be seen as being mobilised in large numbers. But when it comes to leadership, and entering decision-making positions within trade unions; they are poorly represented and sometimes not there at all." She points out that at the top level in the central trade unions, there are no women leaders to speak of—just one or two among the 50-odd national executive members. A similar situation prevails in the state bodies and sector-based trade unions as well.

Women have played a part in building trade unions in the country and have been sincere and dedicated fighters of workers' rights. Yet Kaur feels that the trade union leadership failed in organising women workers and training them in decision-making roles. There was a refusal to address specific gender demands on a consistent basis. The difficulties that women workers face at home and at the work place was never the topic of serious discussions in trade union fora.

<i>Name of Trade Union</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>INTUC</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>4.76</i>
<i>BMS</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>11.11</i>
<i>CITU</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>—</i>
<i>AITUC</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>8.00</i>

If women are to come to the forefront of trade unionism in this country, it is vital to consider issues like flexibility in the form of activity undertaken, in the timings of meetings, and so on. It is important that women's concerns are articulated and met. If a woman has to be a successful trade unionist, supportive structures both with regard to her domestic and work responsibilities will have to be put in place. None of this will come

about unless women themselves push their concerns on to the agenda of trade unions at every level.

Women have the potential to emerge as a powerful lobbying force to critique structural adjustment programmes (SAP) and fight and counter the deleterious effects of SAP once they are aware of their own strength in numbers and commitment.



## Women in the Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy can be an important instrument of change. The participation of various social groups in the bureaucratic process is vital for expediting policies for the promotion of the development of these sections. It follows from this that the participation of women in administration in appreciable numbers at the level of decision making and enforcement will not merely symbolise the emergence of women in a democracy but also help promote that development.

Indian women had and have occupied important administrative positions. We have had a woman secretary to the prime minister and currently the chairperson of the Union Public Service and the University Grants Commission are women. The Supreme Court and the High Courts of the country have a few women judges.

Among the 75 secretaries (the topmost post in the bureaucracy) we have only one woman—Sarala Gopalan, in the Department of Women and Child Development. At the level below this—that of additional secretary—there are 16 women to 293 men. Among joint secretaries there are 155 women officers to 1,114 men and at the level of directors there are 57 women holding that position as against 562 men.

The percentage of women in India at the decision-making levels is low even when compared with the total number of women employed at all levels in various ministries. According to the figures of 1992, only 2.44 per cent of the total women employees were in senior positions. A recent study undertaken by the Indian Institute of Public Administration pointed out this imbalance. In some ministries like Commerce, Finance, Industry, Information and Broadcasting and Defence, women at the decision-making level form less than 3 per cent.

Besides this, there seems to be a practice of gender stereotyping women in the allocation of functions and ministries. Women administrators are invariably allotted subjects

like social welfare, health, education, women and child development, and so on. In fact, as was pointed out earlier, the only woman secretary the country happens to be in the Department of Women and Child Development. According to 1992 figures, women's participation in ministries of Industry and Defence is only 1.34 per cent and 1.89 per cent respectively, while their presence in the Health ministry is 23.09 per cent. Together with this, there are more women in the lower levels of the ministries—resulting in the phenomenon of “women bunching”.

The Punjab cadre women IAS officials is a case in point. They recently stated in the press that they were being calculatedly discriminated against for postings in the districts. It was found that in the past 25 years, none of them was posted as deputy commissioner in any of the districts in the state. Yet in bureaucratic circles it is vital for an officer to serve as a deputy commissioner in the early stages of his or her career. While all male IAS officers get the coveted posting, their female counterparts hardly ever get called. Even on the rare occasion of women being posted as deputy commissioners, they are more often than not sent to areas which are considered “easy” or small in terms of area. In many states certain districts have become “women's districts”—like Dewas in Madhya Pradesh, Madras in Tamil Nadu, Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala and Tonk in Rajasthan.

This situation compares poorly with that prevailing in even some South Asian countries like the Maldives and Sri Lanka. And when compared to the West, it is abysmal. In the UK, for instance, the proportion of women in senior positions and middle management levels had doubled between 1984 and 1993.

The situation is just as bad in the judiciary, in universities and the corporate world. In the Supreme Court, there is only one woman judge in a group that numbers 21 or so. According to 1993 data, among the 419 High Court judges, only 14 are women. In higher



education, there were only 8 women vice chancellors out of 210 and 3 women registrars among 215. In other words, women account for less than 4 per cent of the top echelons of university administration. Finally, at the corporate level too, things are not much better. In the year 1985 there was only 2.1 per cent of women in top managerial positions, by 1991 the figure had risen, but was still abysmally low at 3.2 per cent.

The importance of having women

administrators and judges cannot be stressed enough. Not only is it socially just to enable them to assume senior positions in various agencies, they also bring a social concern and commitment to their jobs. The bureaucracy, administrative and judicial structures are not just male dominated, they work within a male-dominated mindset. This can only change if consolidated moves are made to encourage and facilitate the emergence of women into the top-levels of administrative decision-making in the country.

#### DALIT WOMEN'S CONCERNS

The Dalit meeting called for mainstreaming the dalit women's issues in the national debate. The need to launch a federation and write status paper on dalit women came up as key objectives of the meet. Also, there is a lack of clarity and definitional difficulties w.r.t dalits. That they are landless, alienated, indigenous peoples constituting nearly half the population in the rural areas makes a case for recognising the dalit voices.

To take the slogan "crimes against dalits are crimes against humanity" taken at the Tirupathi national women's conference in early 1994, forward and struggle for emancipation of dalit women as a special group of women.

In each of the southern states, the issues were varied and organising around local issues was suggested as the first platform for the federation, the fact that sharing of experiences would be possible, the dalit women's federation idea gained momentum at this meeting.

With its 18 point aims and objectives already drawn up, the meeting also called for more dalit literature to be documented. They also decided to critique policies from a dalit perspective. They also recommended that these inputs be added to the India country paper being prepared for the fourth world conference on women by Government of India.

The founding conference for the launch of the National Federation of Dalit Women was held on 11th August, 1995 in New Delhi. The launch was done by a Devadasi woman, a dalit woman who is symbolic of the oppression and subjugation of her community. The federation will take up all issues related to Dalit women as these women suffer triple subjugation due to caste, class and gender. A major effort of this movement would be to work towards building dalit unity.

## Recommendations

### Mainstream Political Participation

- ⇒ Since political participation requires social and economic empowerment, women's groups should press for establishing women's de facto inheritance rights in land—first by establishing the social legitimacy of such claims and, second, by enhancing women's ability to claim and keep control over their rightful inheritance and strengthening land claims through channels other than inheritance. A National Plan for Women's Employment could also be conceptualised and demanded.
- ⇒ Press for implementation of 33 per cent representation of women at all levels, including Parliament. This can be replaced in time by a demand for 50 per cent reservation.
- ⇒ Legal and political awareness be consciously promoted as part of literacy and other social campaigns. Political resource centres for women in every district should be put in place.
- ⇒ Information and training for women to be undertaken on a nationwide scale so that women can be educated to exercise their political rights as voters and political candidates.
- ⇒ Women should be encouraged to take leadership positions in political parties and support structures must be set up so that their family and other social responsibilities are met.
- ⇒ The women's movement should monitor and lobby for representation of women in decision making bodies like legislatures, ministries, judiciary, boards and commissions, government delegations, higher levels of administration and so on. This should go beyond tokenism but constitute at least one-third of these bodies.
- ⇒ Political leaders should be sensitised to the issue of the adequate representation and participation of women in political decision making and to the problems they face in the process. This must be done with the view to mainstream gender concerns and perspectives.
- ⇒ Election campaigns must be made more safe and inexpensive with serious government initiatives to curb expenditure, corruption, violence and malpractices. The criminalization and communalization of politics have to be firmly checked. In fact, electoral reform to achieve this must be conceived and introduced in a holistic manner.
- ⇒ A conscious effort must be made to bring women from marginalized communities like Dalits, tribals and the minorities, into mainstream politics so that the interests of their communities can be voiced.
- ⇒ The media should help in the dissemination of values of equality and the projection of women's contributions in nation building.
- ⇒ A comprehensive National Policy on Women must emerge which will provide a blueprint for time-bound action on gender issues.
- ⇒ There is a need to form a Women's Collective Lobby to expedite action on these issues.

### Panchayati Raj

- ⇒ There is an acute dearth of information at the grassroots levels. NGOs should be involved in launching sustained education campaigns and training that supports women's collectives and struggles in the political and development process. Networks should be set up.
- ⇒ Regional newspapers, the radio and TV should be used to publicise women's participation. This will encourage more women to enter the field.
- ⇒ Workshops should be organised to evolve strategies and allow capacity building of elected women members and groups at the

village, taluka and district levels. A constant and healthy exchange of perspectives and experiences through such workshops will go a long way in getting women more involved and involving more women.

- ☞ Opportunities must be provided for women to dialogue with concerned officials to assess state and district development schemes. Local women leaders, NGOs and elected representatives must be provided opportunities to brainstorm on key issues like Land, Water, Forest, Employment, Infrastructure. This will provide the much needed awareness building inputs at the local level. For instance, the crucial issue of self-sustaining financing for social and political activities at the local level could be considered through such dialoguing.

#### **Women in Trade Unions and Administration**

- ☞ Encourage the presence of women in trade union activity by providing encouragement and support services for domestic responsibilities.
- ☞ Make the trade union leadership sensitive to women's issues and to the need to have women in leadership positions within their organizations.
- ☞ Encourage the growth and evolution of trade unions with sole or majority female participation.
- ☞ Unionize workers, particularly women, who are unorganized because very often it is these workers who have to bear the adverse impact of structural adjustment programmes.

- ☞ Work towards a 50 per cent participation of women in administration—particularly so at the decision-making level.
- ☞ Gender stereotyping of administrative staff should not take place and women should be equally represented in departments involving the country's security like defence or which have to do with law and order, like the police.
- ☞ Women at lower levels of administration must be trained to improve their administrative skills and communication abilities and be given promotional opportunities.
- ☞ There must be an immediate updating of data on the extent, level and nature of women's participation in all government services and the judiciary.
- ☞ A body, similar to the Equal Opportunities Commission of the UK, could be formed to act both as a monitoring as well as a grievance machinery for all government departments, PSUs, semi-governmental agencies, the judiciary and the private sector. It should have the powers to identify the needed support systems and recommend legislative and policy actions to bring them about.
- ☞ The women's movement should launch an affirmative action programme to monitor and lobby for representation of women in bodies like legislatures, ministries, the judiciary, boards and commissions, government delegations and higher levels of administration.

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