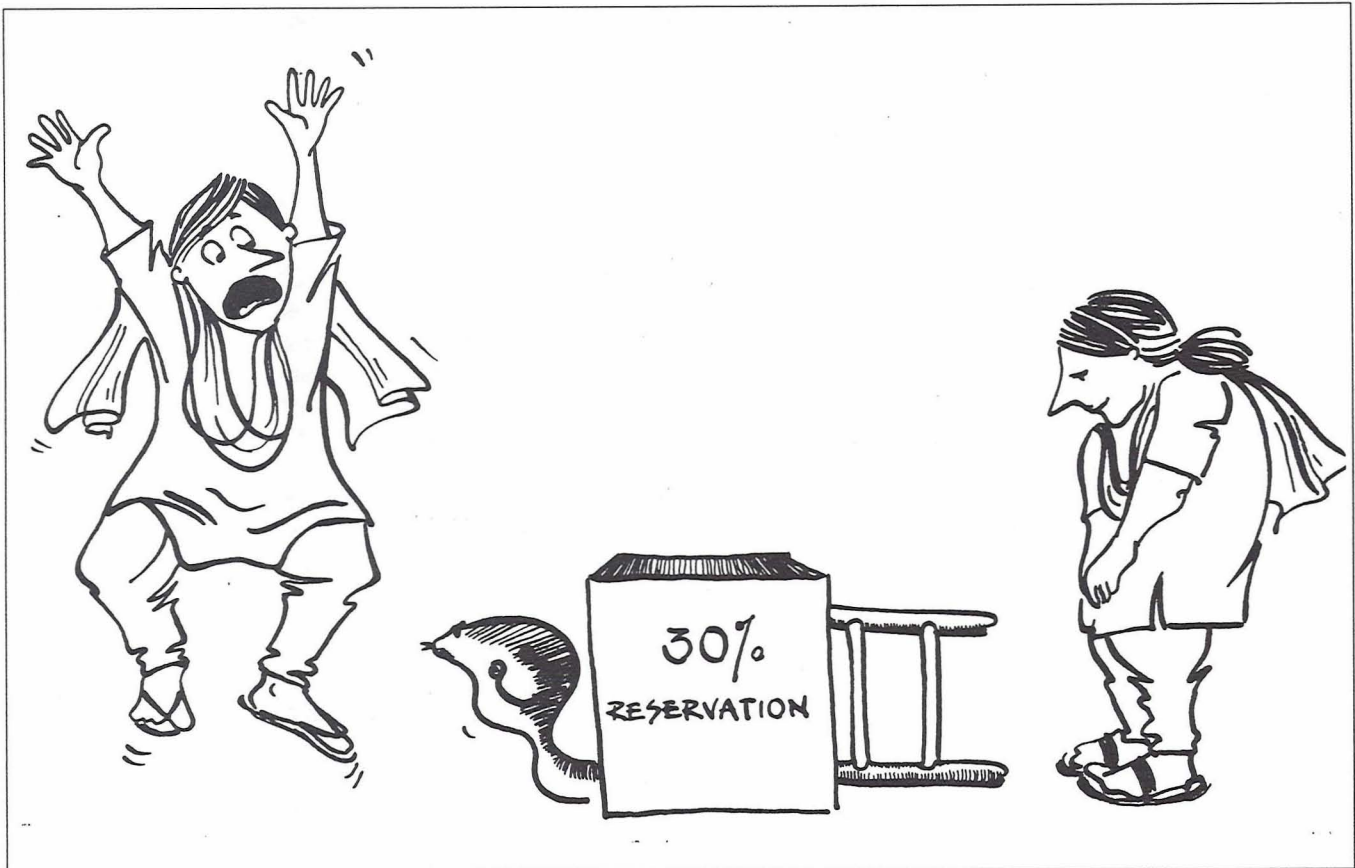


The Protest and the Power

Reserved Electoral Seats for Women

By Nandita Shah & Nandita Gandhi



Les groupes de femmes devraient-elles appuyer l'idée de réserver des sièges aux femmes dans les organes des gouvernements locaux? En tant que membres de tels organes, les femmes seront-elles en mesure d'aider le mouvement? L'article fait une analyse minutieuse de la question, documente certains des arguments pour et contre et suggère un plan stratégique.

The women's movement in Maharashtra was quite taken aback when the Chief Minister suddenly announced 30 per cent reservation of electoral seats in all local self governmental bodies in March 1990. It meant that some 3000 women would be represented in these decision-making organizations. A variety of reactions surfaced and with it the old debate—should the women's movement demand/accept reservations in the electoral process? This debate needs to be documented as it has relevance beyond the boundaries of Maharashtra. Other states like Karnataka

and Kerala have already introduced it and West Bengal is seriously considering it.

The need for reservations

Women of the Left have expressed concern at the declining numbers of women candidates. Only a handful of women from the generation of freedom fighters are still active in politics. This trend is confirmed by electoral statistics. Women politicians put the blame for this on their parties who had promised to field 30 per cent women as their candidates, but did not fulfill their promises.

Why are parties reluctant to put forward women candidates? They claim that few women have the time and capacity to be seriously interested in politics, and they do not question the notion of women's primary role and duty as a wife and mother.

Women are seen to be inexperienced and resourceless, needing the support of a "godfather" or family clout. They may be given difficult constituencies where there is little chance of winning or asked to step down during electoral adjustments.

Character assassination is used to destroy a woman politician's progress. Women have to keep disproving rumours of affairs, secret marriages or relationships. Political parties are not so squeamish in fielding men who are wife beaters, rapists or molesters as their candidates. These moral double standards hamper women in yet another way. Unlike men, they have to be more careful in taking on confrontational struggles as a way to get political prominence. For men, courting arrest, stints in jail and fights with authorities are 'sacrifices' which lead to greater political prominence.

Men from a lower class and caste background, with little education, have been able to move upwards from local bodies and organizations to occupy high national level positions of leadership. It is nearly impossible for a woman with a similar background to do so.

It is argued that if women enter the corridors of power they would be able to deal with women's issues within State structures and also effect changes in the party and local bodies. They would have access to State resources which can support women's groups and provide services to them. Their positions and actions would legitimize the women's cause in the eyes of the people and political parties.

Just a political gimmick

On the other side are the opposition parties which are against reservations, but not on the grounds of principle or equality. They have raised issues such as the fact that they, unlike the ruling (Congress) party, do not have many women members to field for elections. They also suggest that male leaders will put up female relatives for one term only and regain the seat later.

Many of the newer women's groups, including some Marxist Leninist affiliated groups, are wary of the electoral process and the State, as well as the motivations of the political parties. The State continues to play an important role in the perpetuation of the unequal relations between men and women through its development policies, half-hearted legislation, and its appropriation of the language and demands of militant movements.

Voices of opposition in the *Committee for the Status of Women Report* put forward another reason. Reservations, even as a transitory measure, will only help a few women from the upper

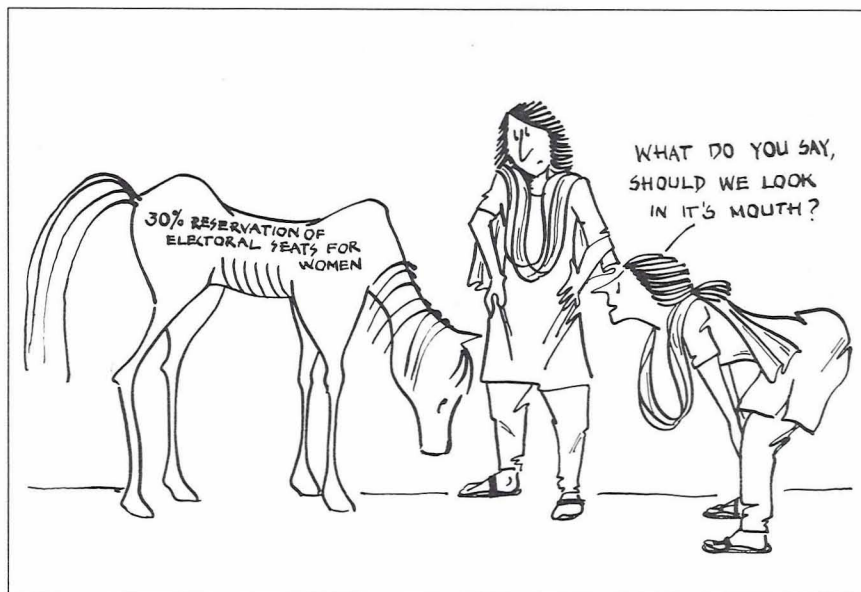
class and caste who are already in a privileged position. Instead, women should be made conscious of their rights. They should be educated to take responsibilities and generate public opinion in favour of their increased political participation.

Women's interests, though different in some ways from men's, cannot be isolated from the economic, social, and political interests of the rest of society. Furthermore, there is a danger of portraying women only as women's leaders and ghettoizing women's issues.

The concept of reservations implies that women will automatically be interested in raising women's issues. In the context of rising fundamentalism and right wing conservatism, there is a greater likelihood that the women of these parties will win. Perhaps, some women argue, it might be better to have sympathetic socialist-minded men in power than right wing women.

The question which concerns women's organizations is: can we gauge the efficacy and strengths which the movement might derive from women seizing positions of power? Should women's organizations actively encourage women to enter the formal political process?

By entering the electoral process, women accept the already set hierarchical pattern between the electors and the elected with little hope of being able to change it. They will have to cater to the wider mass of the electorate; bear the burden of council matters at the expense of other programs; and be extremely careful in raising controversial issues. Most women politicians will become trapped between party requirements and the



marginalization of women's issues, women's groups and the objectives of the movement.

Raising some questions

We, as members of social organizations and women's groups, need to reflect on the ideological base from which we draw our arguments and our strategy for the women's movement. The declining number of women politicians can only be part of the reason for extending support to 30 per cent reservations. No doubt, more women in the party and state bodies will mean the entry of women into a primarily male dominated field. It will begin processes of change in language and decorum and will give confidence to the candidates and women in general. It would be easier for women to join hands across party lines in case of extreme atrocities and to demand basic services for women.

However, the main reason for encouraging women to enter the political world is not so they can advocate services for women or

that they will 'humanize' or 'clean up' politics. Their presence will herald the erosion of one area of the sexual division of labour between men and women in society—between men in public world and women in the private world of the home. It will challenge the cliché that politics is no place for women. And the acceptance of women as leaders will, in the long run, change to some degree the prevalent condescending attitude towards women in general.

30 per cent reservations provides an opportunity to widen the base of individuals participating in the electoral process. It can begin a process of democratization which will introduce different women from various socio-economic backgrounds to politics, instead of the few middle or upper caste women who now hold positions in elected bodies. Further, these women, together with the women's movement, can create new relationships of accountability and responsibility with the electorate which can be put forward as an alternative to the existing distanced and once-a-term contact.

Reservations have been criticized for not having the potential to effect fundamental changes. Perhaps here we need to reflect on what we mean by reforms and revolution. We should be aware that it is impossible to label any one issue as reformist or revolutionary. What we have to concern ourselves with is how it can help in furthering the objectives of the movement. We have to evaluate each issue in relation to changing societal forces, the strength of the movement, opposition to it, State intervention and linkages with other movements. Each issue has the potential to be part of the broad strategy of the women's movement. 30 per cent reservations cannot be called a reformist issue because no one considers it an end in itself or a panacea for women's oppression. Neither is it a revolutionary issue because it involves working from within state bodies.

The demand of 30 per cent reservation will have to be seen in the context of our understanding of the goals and strategies of the women's movement. We in the women's movement are struggling to transform unequal and oppressive relations between women and men, between castes, classes and races. We want to work towards a world in which resources are not used for power and destruction but for growth and nurturing; where women and men share in the decision-making in a decentralized democracy and where all forms of poverty, violence, and intolerance are eliminated.

Though there is no single common strategy adopted by the diverse women's groups within the movement, they believe that all structures have to be challenged from both outside and inside, creating a collective consciousness and strong lobby groups. Our immediate priority is to ensure that survival needs and basic amenities are met through access to and control over the means of production, through the prevention of violence and atrocities against women, and through a challenge to deep rooted patriarchal notions and beliefs.

In the wide range of inter-related long and short-term strategies, reservation of electoral seats for women is only one. It is of importance because it combines possibilities of struggling from within with the provision of services which will strengthen women's ability to survive. The women's movement can support elected candidates in raising issues, exposing manipulation and creating a new relationship of accountability to the women

electorate. The creation of such vigilance and genuine responsibility is not an easy task but it could be the beginning of a democratization of the electoral process. We feel that the women's movement should accept 30 per cent reservations and work towards making them effective. We should limit reservations to local levels and review their efficacy after 15 years. Such a review should take place in the form of public debate where women's organizations, academics, and social organizations take a leading role. It is only after such a review that we should decide to continue reservations at local level and/or to extend them to Assembly and Parliament.

What can we do to make reservations work

When local government elections are declared we can:

- Find out which constituencies are reserved for women and identify the likely women candidates from each party.
- Appeal to all political parties not to put forward dummy candidates. Gather information about the backgrounds and political careers of each candidate and make sure that they are genuine candidates
- Organize public meetings and dialogue with women candidates about their responsibility to the women's movement and women in the electorate.
- Support independent women who are sympathetic to the plight of women and who seek to make favorable changes for poor women. For example, we could campaign for them and distribute propaganda.
- Conduct a negative propaganda campaign against those candidates, women and men, who have taken anti-woman positions or have been accused of perpetuating crimes against women. They can be exposed in pamphlets, door to door propaganda or street theatre.
- Put forward our expectations in the form of demands for services required by women in distress and for survival needs. For example, elected women can play a vital role in seeing that women are given preference in the issuance of hawking licences, in having special police cells established for women, in creating shelter homes in each ward, and equipping municipal clinics and hospitals with female wards.
- Provide a public forum for all women candidates in their constituency and women voters, party members, activists and the public to debate issues.
- Demand that the elected women candidates are given positions of power within the local bodies in standing committees or as deputies.
- Create structures of accountability in each ward by forming women voters vigilance committees. These could meet every few months for debate and reporting.

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