



Newsletter

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Editor: Vidyut Bhagwat

Guest Editor: Medha Kotwal Lele

Editorial Board:

Pushpa Bhawe, Simrita Gopal Singh, Sharmila Rege, Sulabha Patole, Sadhana Natu, Ujwala Mehendale.

Editorial Support:

Anagha, Swati, Menaka,
Smita, Madhavi, Yogita, Archana

Editorial Office:

Women's Studies Centre,
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Bhavan,
University of Pune, Pune 411 007
Email: wsc@unipune.ernet.in

IAWS Central Office:

Lakshmi Lingam,
General Secretary,
Women's Studies Unit,
Tata Institute of Social Sciences,
P.O. Box 8313, Deonar,
Mumbai 400 088
Tel. Off: (022) 5567717
Email: laxmil@hotmail.com

Editor's Desk

Dear Friends,

This bulletin is reaching you at the dawn of 2002. The year 2001 ended on particularly disturbing notes due to the 11th September and the 13th December jolts. Terrorism in the name of religion has upset the power relations in the world. It has killed thousands of innocent people, women and children. Retaliating answers given by the US were equally destructive. In the aftermath of perhaps unnecessary wars, entire societies like Afghanistans appear to be going through a process of a forced reconstruction at the hands of the super power and its allies. In this cauldron of postwar rearrangement how does the gender issue fair? While the visual images of burkha clad women used by the media to drive home the exploitation and barbarism of societies being 'reformed' where and how will the gender issues find a place in the new scheme of things? These are the new concerns and reflections with which we are entering the new year.

This is a special issue on the theme of 'Indian Women in Political Process'. Dr. Medha Kotwal Lele as guest editor has focussed on this issue, with her insights on local studies as well as on a perspective at the national level.

We have also announced the forthcoming IAWS conference to be held in Orissa in October 2002. We look forward to your positive responses and creative suggestions.

Vidyut Bhagwat
Editor

The Indian Political Process and Women's Empowerment

Over the last decade, issues concerning political participation of women have acquired a central place on the agenda of the women's movement. Naturally, these issues have also figured to some extent on the agenda of women's studies. Debates have ranged from issues of participation in the electoral process, to quotas, reservations, theories of state, citizenship, justice, and even defining what is "political".

The most challenging task that is before us today, however, is to theorise on all these issues, through feminist perspectives.

Till recently, electoral politics has never been a serious preoccupation of the women's movement in India. Even within the Left parties that are involved in electoral politics, women's participation has not been seriously addressed. There are several reasons for this indifference. For one, the women's movement has looked at itself as a part of the process of "social transformation", which is to a large extent outside the formal electoral process. Secondly, the attitudes and perceptions of most women towards the "dirty business" of electoral politics have been negative – so the overwhelming reaction has been to stay away from it!

However, with the passing of the Panchayati Raj Bill (the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution) guaranteeing them one-third seats in local self government bodies, women were willy-nilly drawn into the vortex of electoral politics. These amendments have not only provided "institutional props" for women's entry into political institutions but also opened up a "legitimate space" for women to assert themselves.

Now, as more and more women occupy elected office, conflicts with established or entrenched interests of

patriarchy, class and caste are coming to the fore more sharply. Issues of contention are many, ranging from who will hoist the flag during the 15th August celebrations on the village school ground to who will be made a member of the Standing Committee or Public Works Committee in the Municipal Corporation.

These issues have brought women into open conflict with the men at various levels of governance. Those elected women who are more politically conscious have raised objections to the presence of "panch-pati" and succeeded in driving them out of the panchayat meetings. Dalit, ST or OBC women who came to power through reservation are finding it more difficult to survive in the non-cooperative, even hostile, environment.

The process of transforming *de jure* authority into *de facto* power is going to be a long struggle as entrenched interests will continue to resist the loss of first authority then power, be it in villages or cities.

History is testimony to women's capacities to innovate and create 'spaces' for themselves, for they have always had to survive in a domineering patriarchal world. Here once again, Indian women are beginning to search for a solution to this new problematic that has come in the wake of gender-reservation politics. They are doing this sometimes through dialogue and negotiations, and in other instances by worked out innovative alternatives to sidestep or confront the conflict.

Initially, the skepticism about seat reservation was as strong as the enthusiasm for it. The media was full of accounts of "proxy" sarpanchs and "biwi-beti" brigades. Public debate often ranged against the "33% reservation".

But today, these initial apprehensions and misgivings about the ability of women elected to the various local self government bodies is slowly giving way to concern for increasing their capacities and authority, as well as building women's networks that can support each other.

In short, instead of politely looking the gift horse in the face, as they had done initially, women are now beginning to ride the horse!

This issue of the "IAWS Newsletter" chronicles concrete experiences of activists and intellectuals who have been observing or working with elected women, so as to provide an insight into the possibilities that exist. The findings raise relevant issues that we need to think about and work on. The importance of building networks which are supportive to elected women is lucidly brought home by the experience of the Mahila Samakhya programme in Karnataka.

Reservations have proved to be a very helpful pro-woman arm in the execution of the Panchayati Raj. However, the bill for similar reservations in the parliament and the state legislatures has been repeatedly put in cold storage after heated debate. A kaleidoscope of opinions on this controversial bill have been presented in many forums. The Left parties and the Janata Dal groups have a clear position on this, against which there is strong criticism from the Bahujan Mahasangha and other OBC organisations. Both these have also been presented in this issue.

All in all, a promising menu.

Medha Kotwal Lele

Guest Editor

The Women's Movement loses a Strong Crusader

The year 2002 brought the sad news of the passing away of Pramila Dandavate on 31st December, 2001. Pramilatai was a pioneering political leader deeply rooted in Maharashtra's political and cultural milieu. She participated in the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement, Goa Liberation Movement and was a leading member of the 'rolling pin brigade', in the anti-price rise movement before the emergency. 1975 onwards her relentless efforts resulted in forming the National Commission for Women and it helped to bring the bill for 33% reservation for women in the Parliament to its present stage. Pramilatai's loss will be felt by the women's movement across the country for a long time.

Memorium

Sudesh Vaid, a scholar and activist in PUDR and Women's Movement passed away in December 2001. Sudesh's contribution to the several democratic, secular and feminist campaigns and to feminist historiography will always be remembered. Students will miss a teacher par excellence. All of us in Women's Studies and Women's Movement will always feel this loss.

Inclusion of Excluded Communities through Panchayati Raj Outline of a Study in Maharashtra*

B.S. Baviskar

After the creation of the unilingual state of Maharashtra with Bombay as the capital on 01 May 1960, the Congress party, which had suffered serious losses in the general elections of 1957, again emerged as the dominant party. The Congress party controlled not only the state government but also the PRIs and the cooperatives. The dominance of the Congress party coincided with the dominance of the Maratha Caste which enjoyed a decisive dominance in the state as a whole, largely due to its numerical strength, economic and political clout. Thus, the Congress party and its pre dominantly Maratha leadership continued to control the PRIs, coops and the state government until the early 1990s when the Shiv Sena and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) started challenging its position. They finally succeeded in ousting the Congress from power in the state and claimed a share in controlling PRIs and coops in some districts. This significantly changed the political scene in the state.

When the elections to PRIs were held in 1995 (soon after the passing of 73rd amendment) a fragmented picture emerged with control over PRIs being shared by the Congress, Nationalist Congress party (NCP), BJP and Shiv Sena. Moreover, the picture was further complicated because of the complexity introduced in the election process by the reservation system both for members and office bearers of PRIs.

The main objective of our research is to find out the extent to which the new provisions have enabled the hitherto excluded groups and categories such as SCs, STs and women to be included in the rural power structure. To what extent and in what way have they been empowered? and if not, why?

* Extracted from his long paper by the same title.

The Setting

Though the study covers three panchayats, we shall discuss only one 'Pilkhod' which is a very special case in many ways. It was able to resolve caste conflict in a very unique way. The three gram panchayats are: (1) Pilkhod with a male OBC sarpanch, (2) Mandurne with a female OBC sarpanch, and (3) Alwadi with a female SC sarpanch.

The presence of two OBCs and 2 women sarpanches deserves an explanation. The Sarpanch of Pilkhod is a Kunbi Patil recognised as OBC caste in Maharashtra. Earlier, he called himself a Maratha. After the implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations, most Marathas who did not enjoy OBC status declared themselves to be Kunabi Patils to claim that status.

The Malis are neither backward nor poor. In terms of socio-economic status, they are not very different from the Marathas. The main difference is in numerical strength. While the Marathas are estimated to be 35 to 40 per cent of the population, the Malis are supposed to be less than five per cent. This does not, however, mean that the Marathas are numerically dominant in every village or that the Malis are always in minority.

Both Mandurne and Alwadi have women as Sarpaches. While Mandurne has a Mali (OBC) woman as sarpanch, Alwadi has a Mahar (SC) woman as Sarpanch. In Mandurne it is a 'proxy' case, the husband doing most of the work and wife signing on the dotted line. The husband is a well to do farmer cultivating cash crops such as sugarcane and cotton, and running a large poultry in partnership with a close affinal relative.

Village Pilkhod

Pilkhod is located on the right bank of Girna river 24 kms from Chalisgaon, the taluka town. The road coming from Chalisgaon to Pilkhod connects itself to the national highway (Mumbai-Arga Road) at a distance of 30 kms near Melegaon town in Nashik district.

In 1991, the village had a population of 4,593. Currently it is estimated to be around 5,500. Out of a total of 2,999 voters, the following were the major caste groups and their strength among the voters.

Table 1: Caste Distribution of Voters in Pilkhod

Sr. No.	Caste	Reservation Category	No. of Voters
1.	Mali	OBC	827
2.	Maratha (Kunabi Patil)	OBC	801
3.	Bhil	ST	331
4.	Koli	ST	314
5.	Neo Buddhists (ex-Mahar)	SC	172
6.	Muslim	-	144
7.	Teli	OBC	83
8.	Wani	-	52
9.	Sonar	OBC	43
10.	Nhavi	OBC	31
Total			2798

Most of the land in the village is owned and cultivated by Malis and Marathas. Landownership among other caste groups is marginal. They depend for their livelihood on crafts and services in addition to agricultural labour.

Pilkhod as a whole has prospered since the 1970s with the introduction of electricity in the village which enabled many farmers to fix electric pumps on their wells to cultivate irrigated cash crops such as sugarcane, bananas and vegetables. With economic prosperity, there have come about other changes in the village. The village school has been upgraded upto XII standard. There are branches of two banks. More than 200 households have TV sets and over 50 have telephones. Frequent buses are available to travel in both the directions either to Chalisgaon or to

Malegaon. Everyday more than 450 copies of local newspapers are sold in Pilkhod and its neighbourhood. There is also an agricultural school and an Industrial Training Institute providing specialized vocational training to boys and girls from Pilkhod and surrounding villages.

Gram Panchayat in Pilkhod

The relationship between the Marathas and Malis in Pilkhod is marked by a subtle distrust and rivalry if not open hostility. Both the major groups are more or less balanced in terms of numerical strength, land ownership and social status. However, they differ in two respects. Traditionally the Marathas occupied positions of power in the village. They had the hereditary claim to the offices of Police Patil and Revenue Patil. (This is no longer the case now.) This gave them access to and contacts with government administration at the taluka and district levels. This also gave them the confidence of being superior to others as they were the rulers, so to say. When the democratic politics emerged and hereditary claims to power were abolished, with their improved economic condition the Malis started asserting claims to a legitimate share in village power structure.

The Gram panchayat elections in 1995 gave the indications of the intense rivalry between the Marathas and the Malis. Two panels of candidates were put up. One led by a Maratha and other led by a Mali candidate with representatives of some other castes. The elections created tremendous bitterness between the two groups. The results were mixed with Malis having an edge over the Marathas who felt out-manoeuvred and were bitter about it.

Unfortunately for both the dominant rival groups the post of Sarpanch was reserved for a woman of ST category. A Koli woman (the only ST female in the Panchayat) was elected Sarpanch. The Malis tried to control panchayat affairs through manipulation and backseat driving. The Sarpanch was poor and illiterate. Her husband was also illiterate. The Marathas also tried to take advantage of the situation. In the process, the rivalry between the Marathas and the Malis intensified to such an extent that for the first time in living memory of some there was a complete breakdown of social intercourse between the two. They stopped attending social events such as funeral and marriage in the homes of the rival caste members. This had

never happened in the past. The Malis were very unhappy when the Marathas stopped all social interactions with them. They decided to retaliate by boycotting the elections to the village cooperative credit society. When non-cooperation between the two caste groups reached extreme limits, it created unpleasantness all over, which led to some rethinking in both the camps.

The atmosphere of hostility and distrust had an adverse impact on the functioning of the panchayat. The gramsevak took advantage of the situation and misappropriated a sum of few lacks (the estimate varied from Rs. 4 to 6 lakhs) from funds received under Indira Awas Yojana and similar other development projects. The Gram Sevak could do this due to two reasons. The Sarpach was an illiterate poor woman belonging to Koli caste legally recognized as ST. Her husband was also illiterate. The gramsevak could pressurize her in giving her thumb impressions on cheques and other documents saying that it was government order, which she could not refuse. He also gave her some money from time to time to overcome her reluctance to cooperate. Perhaps one or two panchayat members were also involved. The gramsevak could indulge in such a big fraud because of lack of vigilance on the part of most members as they were engaged in fighting among themselves.

When the fraud came out, it opened the eyes of the panchayat members and other village leaders. Thus the leaders of the two dominant groups – Marathas and Malis came together and complained to the higher authorities about the fraud. The government sent a special audit team, which established the fraud and the gramsevak was suspended from service. Appropriate legal action against the gram sevak is in progress at the usual slow pace.

The panchayat members passed a no-confidence motion against the ST woman Sarpanch for being a party to the fraud. But she could not be removed from the post of Sarpanch as there was no other female panchayat member belonging to a scheduled tribe. So the Koli woman continued to function as Sarpanch till the end of the term although no-confidence motion was passed against her.

The events relating to Pikhod panchayat during 1995-2000 had far reaching consequences for the

village as a whole during the next elections. This time it was for the better. When the elections to panchayat approached in April 2000, the entire village community had a meeting to decided on a strategy. There was an overwhelming demand to have uncontested or unopposed elections. But how to reach a consensus among nearly 3,000 voters belonging to two religious communities (Hindu and Muslim) and more than 20 caste groups? And how to bring together two equally strong main contenders – Marathas and Malis?

It was agreed that the major caste groups in the village will nominate one member each irrespective of their individual numerical strength among the voters. Thus the top ten caste groups (in terms of their numbers) were to contribute one member each (see Table 1). The Muslims, irrespective of differences among them were treated as one caste group. The Bhils and Kolis, the only two ST groups, had three reserved seats. Bhils were allotted two seats and Kolis one, partly because Bhils were slightly larger in number as compared to the Kolis. Besides there was an element of anti-Koli feeling due to what had happened earlier. Thus, except the Bhils, all other caste groups including the Muslims got one seat each. Each caste group was given one seat irrespective of its numerical strength. Thus Malis and Marathas got only one seat each even though they had over 800 voters each. Similarly Sonar (Goldsmith) and Nhavi (Barber) also got one seat each even though they had less than 50 voters each. Koli, Neo-Buddhists, Muslim, Teli and Wani were also allotted one seat each. It means above a certain threshold all castes were considered equal in the distribution of power.

Conclusion

What has been the people's response to the process of inclusion of excluded communities? In other words, what is their reaction to the reservation of seats in panchayats and other bodies for the hitherto excluded categories such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Particularly how have the dominant caste groups adjusted to the changes in the local bodies? It is difficult to say anything with confidence on the basis of a brief visit. Even then I would like to record my tentative observations.

I did not notice any hostility or resentment against reservation of seats for Dalits (SCs and STs) and

women. People, including the members of the dominant castes, seem to accept it as a fate accomplished – something which is beyond their power to alter. They, therefore, follow the strategy of manipulating the situation to safeguard their own interests by supporting more amenable candidates from the excluded categories.

Talking about the case of ST woman Sarpanch of Pikhod, they did not think her being a Koli was in any way responsible for the fraud. It was due mainly to her lack of education. Being illiterate she was unable to understand what was going on and could be bullied into giving her thumb impressions. Being poor made her more vulnerable to pressures from the gram sevak. Let there be a condition of minimum education for becoming a sarpanch, some of them pleaded. As long as there are poor, illiterate women from weaker sections of the society in these positions, they will be exploited by dominant caste leaders and unscrupulous petty bureaucrats like the Pikhod gramsevak, some villagers observed.

The elections in gram panchayats bring out the centrality of caste. The elections are fought on caste lines when there is a strong contest, and the consensus is also reached on the basis of caste when they want to avoid elections. The granting of equality of representation to all castes irrespective of their numerical strength is something which goes against the very principle of division and hierarchy in the caste system. I would like to probe this further in greater depth.

Maharashtra has provided reservation for OBC castes in PRIs. I do not see any justification for this. It distorts. If not perverts, the very idea underlying reservation. Reservations are justified in order to help the poor, weak and deprived as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Why should the Marathas (now claiming to be Kunabis) and Malis who are often dominant in many villages, and are neither poor nor backward as compared to many others should enjoy the concessions under OBC label?

The very category of OBC has opened up opportunities for certain powerful groups to misuse the otherwise well-intentioned policies not only in Maharashtra but also in other states. Take for example the case of the Jats in north India. I would like to

investigate this matter, acquire necessary data, and arrive at logical conclusions.

There are several other fascinating questions one is likely to come across while in the field. I look forward to that experience. In the last analysis we have to relate our research to the objectives of 73rd amendment. Are they being fulfilled? There is no short cut to find answers to that question except to go to the field and observe the day-to-day functioning of panchayat bodies at the three levels.

Chandrabans Sosankhale
Member, Corporation of the Pune Municipal
Corporation
Party: Republican Party of India
Ward: Dapodi
Education: M.A. Ed.Ed.
Occupation: School Teacher

Chandrabans Sosankhale is a young party activist of the dalit movement. The ward which she represents is predominantly a dalit one. In contrast, the majority migrants from different parts of Maharashtra who came some 30 years ago when the city of Pune was a fast growing industrial town. These migrants have now settled down to make Dapodi their home. I thought the ward consist of workers who contribute to the industrial power of the city the ward has remained neglected. Basic amenities are not easily accessible. Chandrabans who keeps fighting in the corporation for these basic rights of her ward, has naturally emerged a popular leader.

Q: How did you decide to enter into politics?
A: In 1994, my father who was the representative of our ward, i.e. Dapodi suddenly died in an accident. He was to replace him that I was chosen unanimously by the people. And so I contested elections and became the corporation for this ward.

Congratulations

Ms. Vasavi is a noted journalist, who has been writing on Women's empowerment and development since 1987. In 1998-99 she received the Mac Arthur Foundation Population Innovation fellowship and in 2000-2001, the National Foundation for India Fellowship. She also received the Chameli Devi Award for an 'Outstanding Woman Journalist' in 1999. The IAWS Newsletter editorial Board congratulates her on her outstanding achievements!

Interview with Ms. Chandrakanta Sonkamble

Medha Kotwal Lele and Sulabha Patole

Chandrakanta Sonkamble
Elected Corporator of the Pune Municipal Corporation
Party: Republican Party of India.
Ward: Dapodi
Education: M.A. D.Ed.
Occupation: School Teacher

Chandrakanta Sonkamble is a young fiery activist of the dalit movement. The ward, which she represents, is predominantly a dalit one. Its citizens are mostly migrants, from different parts of Maharashtra, who came some 30 years ago when the city of Pune was a fast growing industrial town. These migrants have now settled down to make Dapodi their home. Though the ward consists of workers who contribute to the industrial power of the city the ward has remained neglected. Basic amenities are not easily sanctioned. Chandrakanta who keeps fighting in the corporation for these basic rights of her ward, has naturally emerged a popular leader.

Q. How did you decide to enter into politics?

A. In 1994, my father who was the representative of our ward, i.e. Dapodi suddenly died in an accident. It was to replace him that I was chosen unanimously by the people. And so I contested elections and became the corporator for this ward.

I have been exposed to politics since childhood for my father was an active member of the Republican Party of India (B.S. Kamble group). I was aware that he contested elections, right since the time I was in class V. I also remember that people with difficulties and problems came to our house to seek his help in resolving them – even their personal and domestic problems! Thus, our locality Siddharth Nagar, has been carrying forward the spirit of the Ambedkar movement. Public meetings, sabhas, processions celebrations what ever be the programme, we were



always present. By now we know the slogans and the demands by heart – 'the dalits must get their rights and the death report of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar must be made available!'

Q. Do you think women can play an effective role in politics?

A. Politics teaches many a lesson and women must learn to value these. Educated women must enter politics for they can do much. They are capable of speaking on any issue as well as men, both within the house and outside. They are capable of taking decisions. I have never encountered any difficulty in doing anything just because I am a woman. I have even gone to the police chowky to solve fights in the dead of the night. However, while doing this, I have always felt the need to take along a male from the party or the home. This holds true even today.

Q. As a woman then, do you think woman can play only a limited role? Do you think that their insecurities and fears like that of character assassination prevent them from playing an effective role in politics?

A. When a woman enters politics, the whole society is watching her. If she comes home late from attending a meeting, they will raise doubts about her – tongues will start wagging. But I appeal to women – do not be scared or intimidated by this. Come out and work with dedication and you can do a lot. Many men activists of course expect that women should always listen to them in matters of politics.

Q. How has your party supported you? How do they treat the other women in the party?

A. When I was selected to take the place of my father years ago, instead of my elder brother, I realised the trust and faith the party had put in me. I value that very much. Since I came into the party I have come

into close contact with many party leaders like B.C. Kamble, Namdeo Dhasal, Prakash Ambedkar, Prof. Jogendra Kavade and Ramdas Athavale. Currently I am with the Ramdas Athavale group of the RPI and I am the woman secretary of the state unit of the party. In my party, women are treated with respect. Their opinions are sought on all issues and they participate in the decision making process. The party also undertakes programmes for the development of women. Recently, after the murder of Phoolan Devi, we held several meetings, protests and noted our resentment in many ways. This helped us to mobilise women.

Q. What are your experiences as a representative of Dalit women? How do other parties look at you?

A. Everyone's eyes are focussed on me or other dalit women, to see how we perform. What issues do we talk about? Which issues do we raise? Can we survive in politics? These are the questions that are upper most in their minds. However, when one performs well, they do acknowledge the work. Comparison between the performance of men and women does take place. One finds however, that there simultaneously exists, a fear amongst the men that the women in the party may become more powerful, or go way ahead of men in politics.

Q. How do you cope with your personal and public life? Do you find that they are conflicting?

A. Yes. While working for the community and playing the role of a representative of the people, it is very difficult to give attention to the home. Your own personal needs are neglected or take a back seat. Your private life no longer remains private as such. In the process of attending to the day-to-day needs and problems of others one does not even realise when the day is over! One always wants to complete every task at the end of the day but you have to put an end to work, only because the night has descended and the working day is over.

Q. What is your daily routine after you have become an elected corporator?

A. I have a very hectic schedule. I arise at 5.30 a.m. and leave for school where I teach, by 7.30 a.m. After that I come home at 12.30 p.m. After a quick lunch I attend to the ward problems that people come with. At 3 or so I leave for the corporation and return

home by 7.30 p.m. After this, the whole time is spent in the ward – attending weddings, birthdays, meeting patients, old people, meetings with youth, women. Anything and everything that needs attention! My day ends only after midnight!

Q. How can women's participation in politics improve? What do you think they should do?

A. First of all women should become active on many fronts besides politics. They should not wait for the ward of their husbands to become reserved to get into politics. They should, on their own merit, contest open seats and get elected. This will be more empowering. I have always held that women as a whole of all the different castes should be given 50% of the seats in all local self government bodies. Just like no man is born an expert in political affairs and slowly becomes one, woman cannot be expected to become well versed in politics overnight. They too will learn their lessons. Men in the political parties must be patient and not run them down all the time.

Q. Please comment on the status of women in political parties as you have some experience on that front.

A. The experience of women corporators from other parties is also positive. However, if women make any criticism on male colleagues or leaders they are unable to digest it. They feel, how dare the women criticise us! This is true of all parties. In all parties the women are given a status according to that party ideology. In our party, which is based on the philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule, we are given due respect and an equal status.

Q. What has been your experience as a corporator? Would you contest elections again?

A. After being in politics for eight years, I want to tell all women, of all castes, that they must get into politics. They should, along with the men, run clean non-corrupt governments. Even though I was suddenly thrown into politics after the death of my father, I do not regret it. Instead I feel that I can by my own example convince others that politics need not be a bad thing. If more educated and committed young women come into politics then our country can make great advances. I am very hopeful about the future of India.

Experiences from the Field

Vidya Kulkarni



Karen Hayward

Recently a friend narrated her experience on returning from a training programme. She had visited a village to hold a meeting of women who were formally coming together for the first time in the village. Before the meeting, in the informal conversation, she asked the women whether anyone from the present group was a member of grampanchayat. Initially the women did not understand her question at all. Then after some discussion they came up with the answer that their grampanchayat had no woman members.

This was shocking for the 73rd amendment and the new Panchayat Raj act is being implemented in the state, for more than seven years now. Today, no grampanchayat can exist without women members. Still women in this village were confidently saying that they have no women members in panchayat!

Total ignorance about the provision of reservations in the local governing institutions is a bleak but only

one side of the reality. There is also another brighter side to this story. Reservations have provided a space for women's leadership in the village and women are beginning to participate enthusiastically in village governance.

In the grampanchayat elections held in June 2000, in Maharashtra, women in several villages actively mobilised the village, prior to elections, and chose 'their' candidate for the reserved seats. In some villages, women even contested from open seats and in exceptional cases women even initiated all-women-panels.

Clearly the provision provides a potential to build women's consciousness and make inroads into the present male dominated governance. Keeping aside one's gender biases, one can easily get a glimpse of the change-taking place in women's personal and social status due to their entry into grampanchayat.

One of the most common and oft heard criticisms against reservations was that women are mere puppets and it is the men who accompany their wives everywhere and tell her what to do are the real power holders. However, men's presence can also be positive. Their continued presence is what is undesirable. Here are a few narratives that speak for themselves.

Vimalabai, a sarpanch in Purandar taluka, was elected on a reserved seat - (OBC). The majority, upper caste community in the village harassed her in many ways - not giving her even a chair to sit, ignoring her in the meetings etc. Women from the majority community also disapproved her selection. In this hostile environment Vimalabai's literate husband became her support. He read out the GP rules and regulations to her and accompanied her to various offices. Soon Vimalabai gathered courage to

assert herself in the grampanchayat meetings and gradually the husband ceased accompanying her everywhere.

Most women entering in grampanchayat are novices in politics: illiterate, poorly informed about rules & regulations or functions of GP. This fact makes most women vulnerable to domination and manipulation. Therefore, support structures and assistance is essential for women to be able to work on their own. Women turn to family members, especially husbands or fellow GP members or the GP secretary or gram-sevaks for assistance.

They do help. However what happens in some cases is that, this assistance can prove to be destructive. As happened with Suman.

Suman a representative of OBCs was elected as a sarpanch in Maralnathur, Sangli district. Her husband, a shepherd, is out of the village most of the times. The deputy sarpanch extended a helping hand to Suman, which she readily accepted. The deputy sarpanch with panchayat secretary 'managed' the GP functioning, keeping her in the dark about the reality. It is only when the secretary was caught red handed manipulating panchayat money, that Suman realized the cost of their 'support'. Therefore, support at various levels, for women members to function effectively is vital but it has to be in their interest. In fact, an intervention is imperative, to make reservations an effective tool in the process of women's empowerment.

There are three critical areas where women need support:

1. As women's boundaries are clearly defined in a patriarchal set up, **they lack information to play the role as a member.**
2. **women lack skills essential for political functioning**, especially those that build confidence, self-esteem and apt negotiation skills.
3. **know-how about ground realities, of political dynamics or 'real politik'**

To address these needs, across the country, training and support initiatives have been undertaken, both by governmental and non-governmental organizations. Many of these address only the need

for information. Obviously participants find these very limited, boring and uninteresting. Before imposing technical information i.e. rules and regulations on newly elected women members, it is essential to prepare the ground for their accepting these inputs. Such efforts are rarely made. 'Now you have got the chance. Make use of the opportunity!', such remains the stance of many training inputs.

Women participants have often expressed that, 'such training is insensitive to our real needs. We want to overcome fear, we want to convince family members, we want to contribute in GP meetings, but are not able to do so because of multiple pressures. Training inputs should take into account these barriers.'

Information loaded inputs do not take into account that for so many years women were 'not allowed' to know. This is the basic reason for their lack of confidence. And that needs to be addressed urgently.

Many voluntary organizations have identified these gaps in the training inputs and have rectified their programs by emphasizing on gender perspective, skill building, confidence building along related information.

The third factor is related to women's understanding of political dynamics or the ground realities of power play. This learning takes place not in the training room but through experience in the real world. This factor is most critical to those who believe in value based political process and expect that the entry of women and marginalized sections will bring their needs forward and help intervene in the present anti-poor development process.

Here is an instance of women's participation in grampanchayat elections in Marathwada. Kushavarta, an activist from Devani, has mobilized over a hundred women through self-help groups. The group members decided to contest the grampanchayat elections. The women identified their own candidates. When they realized that it is difficult to win on their own, they decided to associate with other panels.

The women's unity and overall rapport with the community was their strength but a threat to other panels. When they successfully negotiated with one panel, the opposing panels expressed their displeasure

in several ways. Unsuccessful attempts were made to break the unity of women and to lure away the candidates. The opposition even went to the extent of attacking Kushavarta's husband in the marketplace. Kushavarta rushed to the scene and intervened effectively. She won the sympathy of the crowd and later on even got elected. Thus, in spite of the attempts of the opposition to break the spirit of the women and Kushavarta the women stuck together. Their first political lesson had been learnt – in unity lies strength.

It is also to be remembered that getting elected is not an end in itself. The perspective of elected members and their willingness to use their positions to facilitate social change are crucial.

Here is an experience that is heartening. Mangal got elected un-opposed due to her good rapport with the community. The sarpanch seat was reserved for a woman. The previous sarpanch gave the seat to a very shy woman in his panel, so that his control on the GP body would be intact. In the first meeting after election, the woman sarpanch was absent and her husband was present. Mangal raised an objection and did not let the meeting begin until the husband left the room and sent his wife for the meeting. Similarly at the flag-hoisting program Mangal lobbied successfully and made the woman sarpanch hoist the flag, against the wishes of some male members. Mangal is learning that the support of village women strengthens the position of elected women members. She is also attempting to widen the scope of women's involvement in local decision making processes by motivating them to participate in the gram sabhas, organized four times in a year. This strengthening of elected women members with support of women from the community, is going to be of great significance in mobilizing and forming collectives to address the varied issues of women.

In Maharashtra various networks and organizations are working to facilitate the process for effective implementation of Panchayat raj especially at grampanchayat level. The P.V. Mandlik Trust based in Mumbai has done pioneering work in the field of awareness on PRIs. Especially in the Kokan. Apart from their notable work in the field of training and information dissemination, the resource center they have set up called 'Panchayat Sakhi' – is a unique one. Through this center, an access to information, training

and other resources related to PRIs is made available to any woman seeking it.

Aalochana, Centre for Documentation center and Research on Women, Pune, has developed a resource kit and communication material with a gender perspective, through the active involvement of elected women. And at present it is engaged in training and evolving a network of voluntary organizations on PR.

At the state level a collective process – Mahila Rajasatta Aandolan (MRA) – with involvement of 150 organizations has been set into motion. And this is working towards strengthening women's role in governance. The Aandolan aims to create awareness on the PR act, its effective implementation and to enhance women's active participation in the decision-making processes. At present active in almost 1000 villages, MRA is also addressing the loopholes and the shortcomings in the state PR act and advocating for policy level changes.

These and other similar efforts are widely needed, as the general awareness on the new PR act is very low, among women as well as among men. The lack of information thus defeats the very purpose and the spirit of the new PR Act. Empowerment of local governing institutions through devolution of financial powers and more decentralisation of authority is necessary to make reservations effective for both women and marginalised sections of our society. Women need to build strong alliances amongst themselves and with other marginalised groups to bring about this required change.

■ ■

The Mahila Samakhya Experience: Towards Empowerment of Rural Women

(This is based on a paper presented by Revathi Narayanan State programme Director, Karnataka experience at Bangalore in June 2000 as well as other documents and papers available at Aalochana, Centre for Documentation and Research on Women, Pune)

The Mahila Samakhya Programme (MS) or the Empowerment of Women was a very innovative programme sponsored by the Govt. of India under the Dept. of Education and the Human Resource Development. It was launched initially only in a few states i.e. Karnataka, U.P. Gujarat in 1989. Later it was extended to Bihar in 1991, A.P. 1993, Assam and Kerala in 1996.

This programme visualised the empowerment of women through informal education and the formation of federations of women through village level collectives.

Karnataka was one of the first states to take up the challenge of fulfilling the vision of this programme. The success of this state is now well established and the MS has been able to provide a whole team of base line leaders. The Sangha women have through their various activities become assertive, articulate and confident. Even in 1992-93 when elections were held many of the Sangha women were able to contest elections to the various levels of Panchayat Raj and come out winners. Several of these were dalit women.

In the following years, the Sangha spread its area of work and scope of influence. In 2000 elections to the Panchayat Raj institutions the Sangha women contested elections in seven districts i.e. Koppal, Gulbarga, Raichur, Bellary, Bijapur, Bidar, and Mysore. The total number of women who contested were 384 out of which 225 won.

attended the training programmes conducted by the Mahila Samakhya. And had benefited greatly from these. After one training she suggested to the MS team that non-sangha EWRs be included in the training. It would then be easier, she said, to influence panchayat decisions in favour of women. Hanumavva realised the importance of networking all EWRs in her panchayat. These seven women (sangha and non-sangha EWR) have become an effective lobby group on women's issues. The community soon became conscious of Hanumavva's role in the panchayat.

As Revathi Narayanan states in her paper, "... though the number of candidates has not increased dramatically, the quality of participation has been very different and meaningful..." as compared to the earlier elections. Women were active as candidates, voters and campaigners. They involved the villagers in discussions with the candidates and by contesting elections to open seats drew the men in contest.

In order to provide support to all these activities relating to political participation of women, the programme has done some remarkable things:-a) built solidarity networks at the village, taluka and zilla levels. These support the Elected Women Representatives (EWR).

- a) they serve the very important function of keeping them accountable to the Sangha,
- b) of bringing women's issues on the agenda of the panchayat,
- c) and a training ground for women to perform their new roles as elected representatives.

After the elections, the Mahila Sangha team put in considerable effort into training victorious sangha women. The number of stories that have been documented of the experiences and perceptions of the Sangha women are many. We present a couple of them.

How Hanumavva Fought Gender & Caste Bias by Becoming a Panchayat Member

Hanumavva of Dhothihal village, Kushtagi taluka, Raichur district, is a poor Dalit sangha member who eked out a living selling firewood on the outskirts of her village. The turning point came when she contested and won gram panchayat elections. She had

attended the training programmes conducted by the Mahila Samakhya. And had benefitted greatly from these. After one training she suggested to the MS team that non sangha EWRs be included in the training. It would then be easier, she said, to influence panchayat decisions in favour of women. Hanumavva realised the importance of networking all EWRs in her panchayat. These seven women (sangha and non sangha EWR) have become an effective lobby group on women's issues. The community soon became conscious of Hanumavva's clout in the panchayat. Village families vie with each other to invite her to their houses—the same woman who sold firewood outside the main village. Hanumavva is role model in the Mahila Samkhya, Karnataka and is an inspiration to sangha women who want to contest the elections. She made a great impact on members of the new sanghas in Bellary district.

Demanding accountability from panchayat members and the community

Lakshimibai L. Maddar (member of the Beeraldinni panchayat, Bagewadi taluk, Bijapur district) is a sahayaki (sangha leader) and is unusual in that she has been educated up to class VII. The other unusual fact about this dalit woman is that she has won the elections from an open seat. There are seven women and five men in her panchayat. Two of the women are wives of wealthy Gowdas. All they did was come in cars every third meeting to sign the attendance register. It was their husbands who attended meetings in their stead until Lakshimibai pointed out that they were not supposed to. Not only was she able to allot IRDP loans to eight women from the sangha, she ensured that all these loans were repaid within 11 months – something unheard of in the history of the village. The bank manager was so pleased that he felicitated her at a public function. Values nurtured in the sangha have helped her become a respected member of the community.

■ ■

Lets Learn – the Ropes of Administration (Gheu Shikun Karbhar)

Lets all lend a hand
to change the face of our village,
Come friends, mothers, sisters and all,
lets learn the rules of administration!

We, the Village Women,
We are not stupid,
Lest you think so,
you'd better know –
We are a storehouse of wisdom,
We save and weave,
to keep our families' lives
So come friends |1|

Drop by Drop, a reservoir builds,
so small savings shall reap the benefits,
Lets try and make sense,
how do small savings work,
Come friends |2|

Laws and development schemes,
are for us – they say,
Yets the fruits of these,
always – others claim,

Laws and rules – we must know,
So that to best use – they be put,
Come friends |3|

Creches and equal wages,
safety at the place of work
are our demands,

All harrassed women – we shall support
Come friends |4|

Always the pains of scarcity,
Waters' scarce – the available is unclean too,
Women have not enough to eat,
Clean and adequate water,
Clean air and nutritious diet
These are our demands,
So come friends |5|

A woman worries sick,
for her household,
Yet neglects her own health and life,
This no longer will do,
We'll care for our bodies and our minds,
We'll spread the message of good health,
So come friends |6|

– Jyoti Mhapsekar

Status of Kerala Women in Politics

Usha Venkitakrishnan and Santhi Krishnan

This paper attempts to analyse the current status of the women of Kerala with regards to political participation as well as to identify the future trends and activities that would facilitate a better political presence.

Kerala enjoys a higher status among the other states of India primarily because of our stupendous achievements as revealed by the social development indicators. The higher literacy rate of women in Kerala is its asset leading to overall social development. But it is an irony that the state miserably fails in promoting the participation of women in public life, political process and political leadership.

Historically, women played a significant role in all the social and political struggles and movements in Kerala. But as is true in most endeavours, women became an unknown entity, the leadership remaining predominantly male, notwithstanding many of the outstanding women leaders. In a state where women enjoyed a higher status traditionally due to existence of matrilineal system, women should have come to the forefront in all fields. But for various reasons the contributions and involvement of women were sidelined and became out of focus, which continues even to the present times.

An analysis of the representation of women in Lok Sabha from Kerala, as well as the Legislative Assembly, shows that it is rather insignificant. Out of the eleven parliament elections held from 1957-98, only seven times have women from Kerala got elected and that too only one member each time (only in 1991 there were two women MPs). While at the national level the representation is meager, the position in the Legislative Assembly also is not very different.

Out of the total 140 seats, at present there are only eight women MLAs in the Assembly, attributing to

5.7%. The women representation has been very insignificant throughout, not reaching 10% even once. Out of the total 12 Assembly elections since the formation of Kerala state, there have been only 67 women MLAs. Another fact is that out of the 67 MLAs, only 46 women MLAs became ministers, but no woman has ever been the Chief Minister of Kerala so far. Kerala did not have in its history, a woman speaker either, but had four women deputy speakers. These would not be sufficient evidences to conclude that women have been relegated to a secondary status, but anyhow they are sure pointers to make us think along those lines.

The irony is that while 51.39% of votes are of women, the number of candidates contesting and winning elections are nowhere near it. Generally the low literacy rate of women is given as a reason for the invisibility of women in politics. But here in Kerala, even though female literacy rate is 87.9%, women's participation is not more than 5.7%; whereas, in Rajasthan, the female literacy level is 44.34% and women representation in legislature is 8%. What prevents the educated women of Kerala from actively participating in political process? This phenomenon needs to be studied further.

Kerala is a highly politicized state, male domination is prevalent and very much obvious and the doors to positions of power and responsibility have been virtually closed on women. Even within the political parties, women are not present in decision-making. The political differences of those few women in influential positions make it all the more difficult to find a common solution to these situations, as is evident from what happened to the reservation bill. Even if one did win the elections, the money and muscle power needed to pursue a political career would deter the most lion-hearted woman. Smt.

Gowriamma, a senior Kerala politician, was shunned out of the party amid much acrimony at a time when she was just about to challenge the male hegemony in the CPI(M) state unit.

As we have already seen, women's participation in politics has not been of significance at the national and state levels. But due to the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj and Nagarpalika institutions of local self-governance are reserved for women. As a result, several women have been elected are in a position to determine their future as well as of their entire constituency. The recent election of local bodies and panchayat in Kerala in the year 2000 proves that if given an opportunity, women are capable of assuming powerful positions and making meaningful decisions and implementing them too.

The total elected women representation in the local bodies in 1995, which was 5139, rose to 6489 in 2000, i.e. an increase of 2.2%. In 1995 it was 35.8% and in 2000 it became 28%. If we set aside 33.33% out of the 38% as per the reservation policy, still 5% of the women representation is from among the general seats – i.e. from more than 700 wards, women have come out with success in the general seats. Even the number of women presidents in the 14 district panchayats shows that in 1995 it was 42.85%, which rose to 50% in the 2000 elections. The following analysis of women

representation in each division of local bodies show that there is an increase in the representation of women in each category. (Table 1)

The election results in Trivandrum district also is a representative statistics of the greater presence of women in the local bodies is on the higher side. (Table 2)

The above analysis shows that women's participation in the grass root democratic process has improved with 33% of seats being reserved for women at the panchayat level. Though there was initially hesitation among women to come forward and contest in the elections, the scenario changed due to the efforts put in by the Planning Board, Government, NGOs and political parties in the form of training given at various levels to women.

The results of the local bodies and panchayat elections in the year 2000 clearly indicates that we can be optimistic about women breaking the quota barrier and entering the mainstream politics and decision-making actively.

However, a critical analysis shows that in reality, male domination still continues in the analysis of political field as an extension of the patriarchal structure in the society. The fact that the female representation is the highest (40.79%) in Block panchayats, which is

Table 1: Comparison of women representation in local bodies in the 1995 and 2000 elections

Name of local body	Total wards (1995)	Percentage of representation	Total wards (2000)	Percentage of representation
1. Grama panchayat	13259	36.21	13259	37.87
2. Block panchayat	1622	35.1	1638	40.79
3. District panchayat	307	34.7	307	38.11
4. Municipalities	1568	34.7	1597	36.88
5. Corporations	208	34.7	298	35.07
Total	17074	35.8	17099	38

(Source: Panchayati Rah Newsletter)

Table 2: Comparison of women representation in local bodies in Trivandrum district in the 1995 and 2000 elections

Name of the local body	No. of wards	Percentage of women representation (1995)	Percentage of women representation (2000)
1. District panchayats	25	28.00	40.00
2. Block panchayats	12	33.33	41.67
3. Grama panchayats	78	38.00	38.00
4. Corporations	81	34	35
5. Municipalities	3	66.66	33.33

(Source: Government offices)

the weakest link in the three-tier Panchayati Raj system, gives the cue that political parties are ready to share seats with women where power and positions are the least, or that women find it the easiest to enter at this level, which again may be attributed to power politics.

The justification of political parties (read male politician) for the under-representation of women is that there is dearth of able women candidates. But one can see through this naïve argument. The primary reason, as said before, is the reluctance to share power with women on an equal footing. In the recent Assembly elections of 2001, out of the total 672 candidates, only 51 were women, of whom 35 women contested, in party tickets. If party tickets were given to women, at least in one-third seats, if not half, a larger share of women MLAs would have been in the Assembly. It is worth mentioning here that those 16 candidates who contested independently did not even win one seat. Hence, Reservation Policy for Women in Assembly and Parliament would provide at least a greater opportunity for women to come into the mainstream of politics and thus pave a path to achieving greater empowerment.

At the same time, women should understand the fact that this is an era of competition; nobody will give up what they enjoy for others. They should realise the existence of power matrix and take upon themselves, the task of participating in public decision-making with a sense of challenge. Participation of women should not be restricted only to demonstrations and meetings; they should be extended to every sphere and should include every aspect. This change cannot be expected overnight, there will surely be challenges and problems. Studies show that women panchayat members and presidents are tortured by male members, though not allotting funds to women led panchayats, character assassination etc. There are even cases of women presidents and members having committed suicide. It is in fact true that women are facing enormous problems in trying to bring about a positive transformation in the power equation through acquiring more political presence and visibility and ensuring greater authority in decision-making. But this endeavour has to be continued and continued relentlessly and tirelessly.

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Aaditto Shen

“Sustainable Democracy: Challenges in the New Millennium”

X National Conference of Women's Studies

Organised by Indian Association for Women's Studies

Call for Sub-theme Proposals

The Preamble of the Indian Constitution affirms that India is a secular, socialist, democratic republic. These values are crucial to achieve equity, equality and global peace. The prospect of protecting and promoting human rights of women, children, minorities, dalits, adivasis and other vulnerable groups has more scope within a democratic framework, provided entitlements and rights are respected. Democracy in India instead of upholding equitable and sustainable economic and social development has got mired in growing corruption, criminalisation of politics, increasing communalism, fundamentalism, identity politics and the systematic rolling back of state as a result of globalisation.

Women's body is becoming a site for identity politics, ethnic cleansing and untrammelled consumer culture manifested in advertisements and other forms of media representations. The strides made over the years by the women's movements along with other progressive movements to promote equality and human rights are in danger of being reversed. The threats of “saffronization” of education pose fresh challenges to the secular fabric and plural character of Indian Society. In the pretext of protecting “the Indian culture”, critical voices, writings and struggles are more likely to be trampled upon and erased.

In the new millennium, India is entering a brave new world of science and technology that is reinforcing outmoded values and systems. The experiences of sex selective diagnostic techniques and sex pre-selection procedures highlight the dangers that are in store. The global advancements in science and technology need to be re-examined and interrogated from the perspective of human rights, class, caste and gender inequalities. Women's movement and many other democratic movements have responded to these challenges, however, such critical voices are in danger

of being muffled or co-opted. In this scenario women's movements and women's studies have special responsibility to not only expose these dangers but also provide corrective directions.

The Indian Association for Women's Studies, a registered body of repute with 1200 strong membership, intends to hold a National Conference in October 2002, to discuss the above mentioned issues threadbare and identify directions for future action and research.

This is to invite you to send a sub-theme proposal. Guidelines for sub-theme proposals:

- The proposals have to reflect some aspect of the conference theme; be original and innovative and bring together paper presenters from different regions in the country and diverse backgrounds.
- The proposal has to contain the title of the sub-theme, a 500 word abstract outlining the theme and the issues that would be dealt with and the proposed format of the sessions – oral presentations/audio visual/other.
- Enclose along with the proposal your name(s), a brief resumé, along with a complete mailing address, phone nos., email ID and title of sub-theme on a separate page.

Proposals by snail mail or email have to reach on or before March 15, 2002 at the address below:

Dr. Lakshmi Lingam, General Secretary,
Indian Association for Women's Studies,
Tata Institute of Social Sciences,
P.O. Box 8113, Deonar, Mumbai 400 088.
Phone: +91-22-5567717 (Dir), 5563290 (Extn. 431)
Fax: +91-22-5562912
Email: lakshmil@tiss.edu

Dalit Feminism: A Critique of Difference

Abridged Report of Western Region Workshop organised by IAWS and Unit for Women's Studies, TISS, Mumbai, August 1st and 2nd 2001.

Lakshmi Lingam and Pratima Bhandarkar

Prof. Pushpa Bhawe, Vice President, IAWS, introduced the workshop. This regional workshop has been organised by the IAWS in collaboration with the Unit for Women's Studies, TISS, Mumbai. The objective of this workshop is to discern the debate on Dalit women talking 'differently' with the combined views of activists and academicians.

Prof. Bhawe remarked, that historically, in Maharashtra, all women were labelled as dalits, thus collapsing all caste and class differences. However, such an approach is not fruitful either in theorising or in activism. Prof. Bhawe quoted Dr. Ambedkar's famous words: "Women are the gateway to the caste system". She understands that both Phule and Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy dealt with the management of women's sexuality by the high caste patriarchy. In Maharashtra around 1975 and 1985 the Dalit Panther and other movements emerged in spite of the opposition by the "higher caste" and the feudal set up in rural Maharashtra. They were mainly talking about the caste issue. However women in the Dalit Panther were oppressed in the patriarchal set up.

Prof. Bhawe after taking a review of contemporary situation concludes with the clarification that the women's movement is not against men, but against the oppression of the oppressed class/caste. Also organisations dealing with the implications of globalisation cannot turn a blind eye to the caste system, as the dalit women are further oppressed in the globalisation process.

The first session of the seminar was on Conceptualising Caste, Patriarchy and Gender and was chaired by Prof. Gopal Guru. Dr. Padma Velaskar of TISS, presented the paper in this session on "Theorising Dalit Women's Oppressions – Some Issues". She addressed some basic theoretical issues,

which are crucial to furthering our understanding of women's oppression. It is important to analyse the intersection of patriarchy with caste and class to illuminate the oppression of dalit women. A systematic historical, sociological and feminist examination is essential to understand the complex interplay between caste, class and patriarchy by focussing on institutions, cultural systems and ideologies associated with these structures. The speaker illustrated the implication of caste patriarchy for dalit women in traditional society. The attempt is to examine the relationship between the structure of caste and patriarchy with a view to understand the specificity of social subordination of dalit women. To build an Indian theory of patriarchy there is a need to accommodate the differences between women and to take cognisance of commonalities between men and women that bear upon gender power relations within low caste groups and see the impact of these on women's subjectivities.

Then she refers to the implications of structural changes for instance economic and social changes for dalit women. Dalit feminism must respond to the emerging salience of class in addition to the qualitative difference brought about by caste.

Prof. Jogdand of Mumbai University presented a paper on "Dr. Ambedkar's Views on Women's Emancipation". The speaker introduced Dr. Ambedkar as the first leader of the dalits who waged series of protests against the evil practices that existed in our society. Dr. Ambedkar was an 'emancipator' and 'liberator' of the weaker section (i.e. SC, ST and women) of our country. Dr. Ambedkar was deeply concerned about the problems of women. He emphasised the fact that caste system itself is responsible for women's subordination and exploitation. He wanted to liberate women from the clutches of

patriarchy and caste. In conclusion, the speaker expressed that Dr. Ambedkar's views are still relevant to address the complexities of caste and gender in the current scenario, and if Dr. Ambedkar's emancipatory agenda is supplemented to the feminist discourse then it will definitely lead to the emancipation of "all women" in our society.

Dr. Gopal Guru chairperson elaborated on the need for theory, theory building and pre-requisites for theorising. The chair compared dalit feminism with black feminism because of similar problems addressed in both movements.

In the second session, Ms. Usha Wagh of Dalit Mahila Forum, Pune, spoke on 'Dalit Politics and Women'. Ushatai Wagh highlighted certain assumptions in the women's movement's regarding understanding of Dalit politics like – Dalit politics implies the politics done by the dalits. In dalit politics, as in general politics, a woman is used as an instrument and is not respected as an individual in her own right. Sexual relations are always at the core of such politics. The speaker condemned the role of the state in the development of women because the decisions of the state were in the guise of Phule and Dr. Ambedkar, but they worked against their causes. The speaker criticises the mainstream women's movement attitude of 'we will give and they will receive', in the case of the Dalit cause.

Dr. Seema Sakhare of Nagpur presented on 'Patriarchy and Caste within Dalit Society'. The speaker began the presentation by calling, her experiences in advocating for the rights of Mathura. Earlier she had not essentialized caste.

The speaker emphasised that caste is a prominent factor causing the oppression and violence among dalit women. The reason given for violence against women is that they do not obey the order of the upper caste people or they raise their voices for their rights.

The speaker highlighted that Dalits are also not a homogenous category. In this set up, the violence on dalits by the dalits goes unnoticed. In the atrocities done on the dalits by other dalits, the worst victims are dalit women. Patriarchy in the dalit household was highlighted. The speaker strongly felt that while

the women's movement should recognise the caste-based discrimination and violence, the focus on differences among different castes and class groups, should be a priority.

On the second day in the first session Prof. Chhaya Datar of TISS presented a paper on 'Dalit Feminism: Need for Convergence'. She began her presentation by giving a brief of the evolution of Dalit women's movement that came into existence as a response to the brahminical overtones of the present women's movement. After scrutinising the articles published in newspapers over the last few years, it appears that caste difference among women active in the movement were contextualised within the framework of the "theory of difference" by Dalit men and later this framework was adopted by women theoreticians also. However, the theorisation acquired antagonistic stance claiming more radical position by adopting "Identity Politics". Identity politics, under the thesis of multiculturalism takes into account neither historicity of identities nor believes in the idea of necessary structural changes to achieve long term social justice. The core argument is that women are not a homogeneous group/community/class but are divided into several categories that are related to each other in a hierarchical manner. Hence there cannot be one women's movement but different women's movements. There is a need for Dalit women's movement to analyse the situation of Dalit women in the context of present reality in terms of socio-economic and politico-cultural aspects, which is fast changing under the stormy ethos of globalisation.

Lata P.M. of National Alliance for People's Movement (NAPM) presented a paper on 'Interrelationship of various movements'. She gave her experiences of working for the Narmada Bachao Andolon, which is in essence working for jal, jungle and jameen (water, forest and land) rights of the people. The presentation brought to the fore the effects of globalisation. Privatisation is not only about the upper caste people losing their jobs, but dalits and adivasis too bear the brunt by being displaced because of projects like MIDC and Enron. Development is at the cost of the dalits and adivasis. Intellectual property rights and rights of access to resources like food, fuel and fodder are the basis of all movements. The speaker focused on the threat of globalisation and the need to converge

concerns across movements while maintaining the specificity of each struggle/movement.

Gabriele Dietrich of Madhurai, presented a paper on 'Violence, Dalit Feminism and Healing of Fragmentation' The events that led to the writing of this paper were the state violence and caste violence interconnected with party politics in Tamil Nadu. Violence in general affects women and became visible through the women's movements. The speaker highlighted how the dalit movement gets fragmented with sub-castes and wondered whether dalit feminism can contribute in healing the fragmentation.

Dietrich recounted the election-related violence in February 1998 in a village near Kodaikanal, how the National Commission for Women raised objections against the scandalous behaviour of the police against women to show who controlled power. The women were quite outspoken about the atrocities.

The second round of election-related violence was in September 1999 because of the contradictions between the pariahs and pariachies which was a human rights violation on a large scale. However the dalit leader of the dalit movement in Tamil Nadu ignored the magnitude of the event In an alliance movement, it is important to take a stand and identify caste-based violence. One of the issues in the fragmentation of the women's movement in the context of global exploitation is the assault on agriculture and food security with the onslaught of mechanisation. Women's invisible labour under conditions of unspeakable violence and internal colonisation cannot be overlooked in the process.

In general the presentations in the seminar attempted to investigate the specific forms of oppression in the caste, class and patriarchal perspective, and to bring out the finer nuances of patriarchy. To discover the 'critique of difference', it is important to identify the sources of difference.

The presentations reflected that Dalits cannot be grouped into one homogenous category.

In politics women are generally used as proxy. It was felt that these women in politics do not seem to use this forum to pull up other women with similar backgrounds. It needs to be acknowledged that it is

difficult for one dalit woman to lift others in the circumstances described above. Reservation for dalit women in the political scenario needs to be considered within the 33% quota system allocated for women in politics. The reason being, while only the educated women and those with access to opportunities make it into the election process and ultimately get elected, dalit women tend to get left out because of hierarchical differences operating against them.

Presentations underlined how cultural practices derogatory to women originated or perpetuated in patriarchal feudal systems have to be examined in terms of what kind of power, spaces and controls do they give women over material resources and livelihood.

It emerged that dalit women would want to branch out not more out of a need for identity, but for a conceptual clarity and understanding of the issues encircling them, while at the same time remaining a part of the women's movement as a whole. It is strongly felt that efforts need to be made to involve dalit women in the women's movement. However the patriarchal hierarchy within the dalit community and structural hierarchy within the household cannot be ignored.

In conclusion, this western region seminar has brought out different caste complexities in Goa, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Acknowledging all the view points, opinions, and experiences shared by the speakers and the participants, the chairperson emphasized the fact that there was still a lot of work to be done, a lot of struggles to be involved in and a lot of successes to be achieved in the area of dalit feminism.

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Women's Reservation Bill

Pass the Bill as it is – The position of the Left Parties

All political parties had in their election manifestos promised, that they would support reservations in the Parliament and the State Legislatures. And yet when the bill was placed in the Lok Sabha, it could not be passed. Instead it was referred to a select committee. Who sabotaged the bill? The All India Democratic Women's Association has demanded that the bill should be passed as it is.

According to the AIDWA pamphlet, Uma Bharati's opposition to the bill who demanded reservation for OBC women was nothing but a gimmick to divert the whole issue onto caste lines. The demand for reservations for OBC cannot be equated with the dalit and adivasi reservations as they have never been outside the varna system as such. In some states they are well off and form part of the ruling class. In Bihar and U.P. they are in power. They occupy nearly two thirds of the Lok Sabha seats. From all this it does appear that they do not need reservations.

Therefore, OBC men are not claiming reservations for OBCs as such, but under the women's reservations they are staking a claim for OBC women. This means that it is not a question of caste discrimination as such but instead a question of discrimination between men and women.

We must recognize the true intention of the men who under this accusation of caste discrimination are in reality denying the women their democratic rights to equality. Therefore, without any further delay, the reservation bill must be passed.

(Fight for the Reservation Bill – AIDWA pamphlets English and Marathi)

No Bill till OBC Reservations included

Even after the Joint Parliamentary Committee approved the Women's Reservation Bill, the point about reservation for OBC and minority women remained controversial. The JPC reiterated that the constitution does not recommend reservation for OBC.

Not just OBC men but also women MPs have demanded caste-based reservations. Hence the allegation that this is a patriarchal demand is proved false. Secondly, the upper caste women are uttering a refrain that it is the OBC men's responsibility to promote OBC women. This position is highly objectionable and insensitive. It is a presumptuous assumption that they (upper caste women) are the sole saviours of OBC women.

When the exploited classes protest there is an attempt to suppress their voices by making baseless allegations. Even the newspapers/press are playing a partisan role. This unholy alliance of the press, journalists and leftist men and women will only strengthen the 'Manuvadi tradition'.

The only way to break the impasse over the Women's Reservation bill will be to implement Dr. Rammohan Lohia's advice "A new policy can be implemented only if the traditionally powerful class is ready to forego its special rights and does not think that a new policy will impinge on their stakes".

[Extracted from and Article by Rekha Thakur on 33% Reservation. She is an official of Bhaujan Mahasangh, Maharashtra.]

EC Members

Dr. Zarina Bhatti
President
17, Zakir Bagh
Okhla Road
New Delhi 110 025
Tel: 011-6843503
Fax: 011-6850808
Email: bhatti@nde.vsnl.net.in
Prof. Pushpa Bhawe
Vice President
Radha Mandir
6/213 Sir Bhalchandra Road, Matunga
Mumbai 400 019
Tel: Res: 022-4141136; Off: 022-4362474

Dr. Lakshmi Lingam
General Secretary
c/o Women's Studies Unit
Tata Institute of Social Sciences
P.B. No. 8313, Deonar
Sion Trombay Road
Mumbai 400 088
Tel: Res: 022-7701742; Off: 022-5567717
Email: lakshmil@tiss.edu; laxmil@hotmail.com

Ms. Rameshwari Varma
No. 46, 1st Main Road
Jayalakshmiapuram
Mysore 570 012
Karnataka
Tel: 0821-510071
Email: rvarma21@yahoo.com

Ms. Vasavi
Journalist Janasatta
H. B. Road, Jharpakhna
Ranchi 834 001
Jharkhand
Tel: Off & Res: 0651-309573; Fax: 0651-544006
Email vasavi@dte.vsnl.net.in

Dr. Jasodhara Bagchi
428, Jodhpur Park
Calcutta 700 068
Office Address:
School of Women's Studies
Jadaupur University, Calcutta
Tel: Res: 033-4732796; Off: 033-4728531
Email: bagchiak@vsnl.net

Dr. Kumud Sharma
Centre for Women's Development Studies
25, Bhai Vir Singh Marg
New Delhi 110 001
Tel: Res: 011-6941247; Off: 011-3345530/3365541
Email: cwdslib@alpha.nic.in; cwdslib@sansad.nic.in

Dr. Seema Sakhare
B-204, Pannase Ganesh Apts.
Khamala Sq. Ring Road
Nagpur 440 022
Office Address:
Stree Atyachar Virodhi Parishad
44, Justice Kotwal Nagar
Pratap Nagar Sq. Ring Rd
Tel: Res. 268306; Off: 268306
Email: suhasini@nagpur.dot.net.in

Ms. Jarjum Ete
Jt. Secretary
EPH Building
Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Soc.
Bank Tinahi, Tadar Tand Marg
Itanagar 791 111 Arunachal Pradesh
Tel: Res: 0360-215605; Off: 0360-212313/214559/214560
Email: jarjume@yahoo.com

Dr. Gabriel Dietrich
Centre for Social Analysis
37 Janaki Narayanan Street
S. S. Colony, Madurai 625010
Home: TTS Arasaradi
Madurai 625010
Tel: 0452-605134/602352; Fax: 0452-601424
Email: csatts@md5.vsnl.net.in; dr@md5.vsnl.net.in

Dr.Vidyut Bhagwat
Unit for Women's Studies
University of Pune, Ganeshkhind
Pune 411 007
Email: vidyutbhagwat@hotmail.com;
vidyutbhagwat@rediffmail.com

Ms. Anjali Bhagwat
7, Anuvee Apartments
55, Dahanukar Colony
Kothrud, Pune 411 029
Email: bhagwatanjali@hotmail.com

Ms. Surekha Dalvi
Krishna Kunj
36, Shivaji Park
M.B. Raut Marg, Dadar
Mumbai 400 028
Tel: 4458489 (Saturday night)
Pgr: 9628-288169

Dr. Kalpana Kannabiran
Asmita Resource Centre for Women
10-3-96, Plot 283, 4th Floor
Street 6, Teachers Colony
East Maredpally
Secunderabad 500 026
Tel: Off: 040-7733251/7733229; Res: 040-7800348
Email: kalpana@hd1.vsnl.net.in

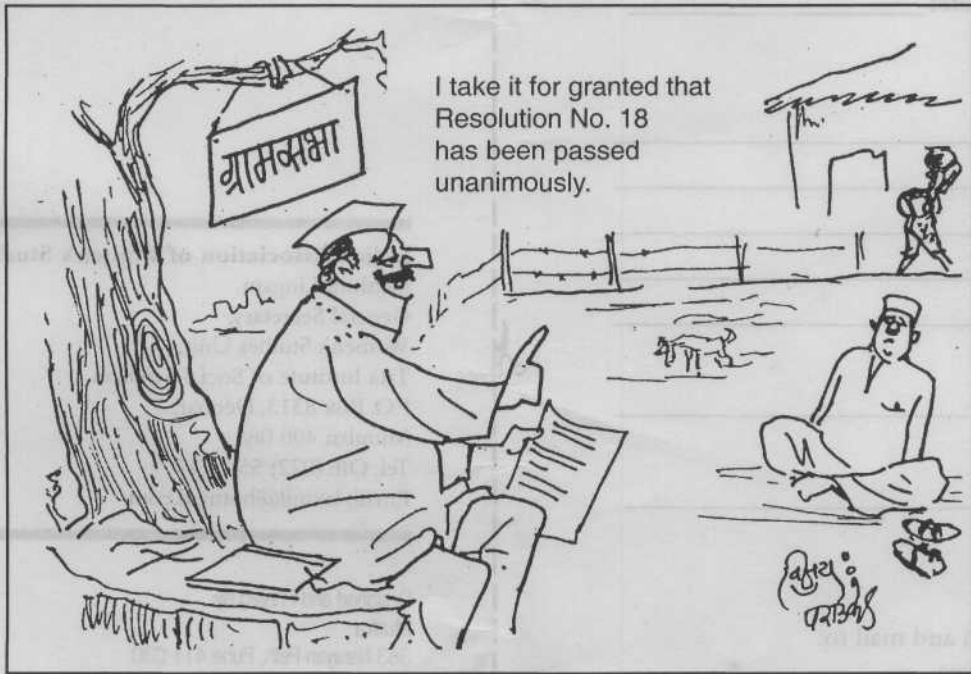
Dr.Vina Mazumdar
Centre for Women's Studies
25, Bhai Vir Singh Road
New Delhi 110 001
Email: cwdslib@alpha.nic.in; cwdslib@sansad.nic.in

Dr. Smita Ghosh
Centre for Women's Studies
25, Bhai Vir Singh Road
New Delhi 110 001
Tel: Res: 011-2611117; Off: 011-2611117
Email: smita@cwdslib.nic.in

Dr. Smita Ghosh
President
17, Sakinaka
Okhla Road
New Delhi 110 025
Tel: 011-2611117
Fax: 011-2611117
Email: smita@cwdslib.nic.in

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Indian Association of Women's Studies,
Lakshmi Lingam,
General Secretary,
Women's Studies Unit,
Tata Institute of Social Sciences,
P.O. Box 8313, Deonar,
Mumbai 400 088
Tel. Off: (022) 5567717
Email: laxmil@hotmail.com

Designed and Printed by:
Mudra
383 Narayan Peth, Pune 411 030
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