



OUR ALARMING SILENCE

WOMEN, POLITICS AND THE RECENT ELECTIONS

THE seventh Lok Sabha will have only 17 women members including Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This is an all-time low. However, the proportion of women in the Lok Sabha has never gone beyond 5 percent. The Hindustan Times reported this decline with almost sinister satisfaction in its headline: "Women's lib gets a battering." There is no doubt that this decline is a definite indicator of the declining participation of women in the political decision making process but the real "battering" is taking place in more important ways and more crucial areas.

Independence had brought with it fanciful promises of equality and social justice, but in reality ever since Independence, the life conditions of the mass of Indian working class women, urban and rural, has been steadily deteriorating. "Between 1951 and 1971, the employment of women in agriculture declined from 31 million to 25 million, while that of men workers increased by 34.3 million." During the same period, the proportion of women in the total work force declined from 408 per 1000 males in 1951 to 210 per 1000 men in 1971. The proportion of females to males in the country's population has been steadily declining through the decades, widening the gap between the two sexes from 3.4 million in 1901 to nearly 20 million in 1971.

It was expected that this gap would be bridged in the years after Independence. Instead, it increased even more sharply between 1951 and 1971 whereby the number of females per 1000 males decreased from 946 to 930. The difference in mortality begins from early childhood—infant mortality among girl babies being 30 to 60 percent higher than among boys.

The growing gap between the literacy rates of men and women, the increase in the prevalence of dowry and dowry

murders, prostitution, familial and social violence against women indicate a systematic neglect, denigration and oppression of women in our society. All this and much more led the Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1975, to reach the distressing conclusion that "though women do not constitute a minority numerically, they are acquiring the features of one by the inequality of class, status and political power". All this in the era which claimed to provide us equal social, economic and political rights!

The fact of having a woman Prime Minister, which was used by the mass media to proclaim that Indian women had made great progress, did not improve the life conditions of the mass of women. There is good evidence to show that the steady deterioration in women's life conditions was accelerated during this period. Alarming as these facts are, even more alarming is our silence as an oppressed group, particularly during the recent elections.

The spokesmen of all the organized sections and classes of our society tried to convert what they saw as their own specific issues into national, election issues. Bonus and trade union rights were projected as working class issues, personal law and reservations as minority issues, "law and order" for the propertied classes, "public sector versus private sector" for big business interests, "urban versus rural development" for middle and rich farmers, and abolition of sales tax for traders.

While it is true that most of these so called "popular" issues are cynically used by those in the power game of parliamentary democracy to manipulate votes and evade the real issues, yet the more organized and articulate sections of society do manage to have a few crumbs thrown their way.

WE REMAIN PERIPHERAL

Women's own issues, as usual, remained unarticulated during the elections because women, whether of the working class or of the educated middle class, remain unorganized, fragmented. A few whimpering attempts were made to put women's issues on the agenda. But they began and ended with a couple of press statements issued by middle class women's organizations or wives of ministers, asking for 15 to 20 percent reservation of seats in parliament and similar concessions. This appeal went unheeded.

And women's participation (except as voters) remained peripheral to the whole affair.

The handful of women who were able to secure party nominations were nearly all wives or relatives of prominent male politicians. Hardly any of them have a political base of their own. Here is a sample: Kamaljit Kaur (Jagjivan Ram's daughter-in-law), Kamala Bahuguna (H.N. Bahuguna's wife), Gayatri Devi (Charan Singh's wife), Mrs. Bhinder (DIG Bhinder's wife), Pramila Dandavate (ex-railway minister Madhu Dandavate's wife), Shalini Patil (Vasantdada Patil's wife), Kamala Prasad (Jayprakash Narayan's sister-in-law), Gurbinder Kaur Brar (ex-governor of Haryana Mr. Brar's wife); Gita Mukherjee (CPI-leader Biswanath Mukherjee's wife), Kamalleshwari Misra (ex-railway minister L.N. Misra's widow). Even when a woman candidate like Susheela Gopalan is a political activist in her own right, the newspapers, including left newspapers like Patriot never let us forget that she is the wife of the late A.K. Gopalan, the CPI (M) leader. Most women are allowed entry into political institutions only when patronised by men in power. To survive, they must, on the one hand, make themselves like the stereotyped male — aggressive, competitive, ruthless, authoritarian, and on

the other, continue to play the “good woman” role — with covered head and smiling sweetness accept the Social Welfare portfolio!

This handful of women kindly allowed to enter male-dominated power structures can no longer afford to remember that they are oppressed as women. They cannot speak for women’s interests because the logic of such an attitude would mean expulsion from these structures. Is this why the women in the Lok Sabha do not work unitedly for women’s interests?

WOMEN AS AN AFTER THOUGHT

No wonder then, that in spite of their widely differing ideologies, all the parties have the same few sentences and similar platitudes somewhere in the last pages of their manifestos to dismiss the women’s question:

“Congress will initiate action to ameliorate the status and condition of women — such as equal remuneration for equal work, equal minimum wages, special educational opportunities on a larger scale to make up the existing deficiency, increased representation in various avenues of public activity, special measures to prevent and punish abuse of harijan and adivasi women...” (Congress I).

“Equal status for women in society; job and other opportunities for them; guarantee of equal wages in agriculture; industry and services... adequate health and maternity services, especially in tea gardens, creches to help working mothers.” (Communist Party of India — Marxist).

“Legal guarantees for equal wage for equal work; opportunities and social status of women; maternity and childcare centres, including creches for all working mothers, provision for trained midwives

in every village and wards of towns and also for drinking water and toilet facilities in all villages.” (Communist Party of India).

Isn’t the similarity of sentiments remarkable? Is it not remarkable that the Communist Parties which identify the Congress (I) as authoritarian and see themselves as harbingers of radical change who stand “unflinchingly and consistently by the oppressed and exploited” have no concrete analysis to offer of the specific oppression of women in society and the family, no programme for that doubly exploited half of the working force which is also potentially the most radical force for change?

The Lok Dal with its reactionary base in the rich peasant castes would like to further drown women in household drudgery. Therefore it offers us “provision of smokeless fuel, improvement in traditional chulhas, *sulabh shauchalayas* and other facilities.” The Lok Dal leader Charan Singh is well known for his antipathy to women in public life. In June 1970, when he was Chief Minister of UP, he had a letter sent on behalf of the State Government to the Government of India, stating that women officers should not be admitted to the Indian Administrative Service and if such a ban was not possible, then at least they should not be sent to UP.

The Janata party manifesto has slightly more sophisticated jargon:

“The party’s policy is to strengthen women’s capability to contribute to the national life, and to that end to provide special support to them as a) mothers and home-makers, b) breadwinners for the family, c) decision makers in the community” And since women themselves are the best guardians of the rights of

women...the party will continue to make greater efforts to draw women in greater numbers into the mainstream of opinion-building and decision-making”

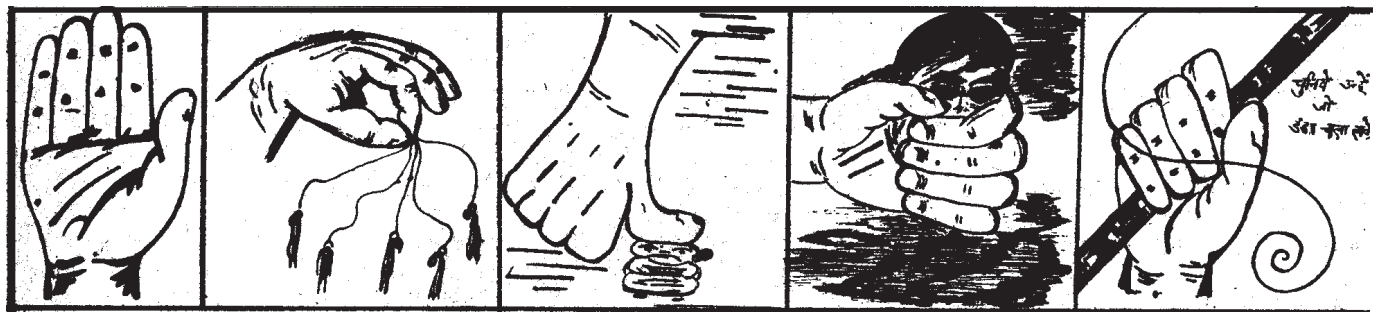
This “greater effort” was well displayed when within days of announcing that 20 percent of its candidates would be women, the party included only 20 women in its final list.

It is no coincidence that the Janata party sees women first as mothers and home-makers. After all, the same leaders who hand us these fancy promises, also specialize in making public statements which openly attack women. Here is Jagjivam’s Ram’s comment on women in politics: “Women have ruled from inside the house and from outside the house and now we are trying to protect ourselves from them.” (Statesman, December 30). Or, even more revealing: “Indian women are very obedient and they look after their husbands when they return home from work. But this is not true of Mrs. Gandhi...” to which Morarji Desai added his punchline about Mrs. Gandhi not knowing the significance of the *mangalsutra*.

These “great leaders” might talk of “expanding employment opportunities” and decision-making roles for women, but in their minds they have already decided once and for all that our place is in the kitchen. This is only to be expected, especially since the dominant group in the Janata party after the split is the RSS-Jan Sangh, whose vision of *Ram Rajya* has place for women only as Sitas meekly submitting to fire ordeals, and Sati Savitris following their husbands to the death.

PARTY SYMBOLS SPEAK

The fact that we are invisible to political parties is even evident in their symbols. We are that half of the agricultural labour force (paid or unpaid family



-Deepti & R.V.

workers) who figure nowhere in the Janata and Lok Dal peasant symbols; we are those workers of the world, half of whose labour is domestic- unpaid, unrecognised; we are those who will be most brutally crushed by that *tantric* masculine hand, which, ironically, is the symbol of a woman and only shows her ultimate subordination to a system she only seems to control.

STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY

“Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation.”

(*Gandhi in 'Young India'*, 1929)

The nineteenth century social reform movements initiated the process of treating “women’s uplift” as a major task of national regeneration. But a real change in attitudes towards women took place during the national movement. Women from different communities, particularly middle class women, came forward to join the struggle for independence. They worked as political campaigners, leaders of protest marches, fighters against all other forms of oppression such as untouchability. Gandhi encouraged women to merge their cause with the cause of nationalism and the participation of women increased. The Civil Disobedience and Salt Satyagraha movements saw women in the forefront, breaking forest laws, picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops, getting beaten up by the police, courting arrest and serving long prison terms. The entry of large numbers of women into the Satyagraha movement facilitated the acceptance by the nationalists of the need for some improvement in women’s status.

This kind of participation in public and political life gave middle class women greater confidence and enlarged their horizons. As a recognition of their role, in 1947 the Indian Constitution granted formal political equality to women. During the fifties, urban middle class women reaped the fruits of this struggle when they began entering the administrative and other professions where they were supposed to be equals of men. But the characteristic feature of the Gandhian movement was that the entry of women in

public life was permitted without women having waged an autonomous struggle for their rights. The way their participation was guided by Gandhi during the national movement set a trend for sponsored, patronised participation of urban middle class women in the political life of the country. This perhaps accounts for the lack of sufficient militancy in the women’s movement in India and the fact that women have constantly tried to accommodate their demands within the male-dominated power structures.

These few victories of the urban, middle class women increased the visibility of women in public and social life and created the illusion that women’s status had been “revolutionized” though in fact the life conditions of the vast majority of women continued to deteriorate.

DISTANCE FROM DECISIONS

The present political structures keep the people at a distance from decision-making. In a system based on economic and other inequalities, the vote can become a mere ritual whereby the rule of the economically powerful few over the dispossessed majority acquires the sanction of law. By claiming to represent the people, the Government and the parties contending for power replace and substitute for them.

We are told to put power into the hands of the all-powerful leader of the nation and assured that if we do this, all our problems will be magically solved: “*Indira lao, desh bachao*”. The pattern of the leader and the led, the few who give orders and the many who obey them is a feature common to all areas of our social, political, and family life. As students what we learn has seldom any relevance to our requirements and is rigidly pre-determined. As workers, the few of us who are lucky enough to get jobs find ourselves making things which have no relation to our own or people’s needs. As women we are the worst losers—we lose control even over our own bodies. The powers that be make laws to decide when and under what circumstances children born of us are “legitimate” or “illegitimate”. For women, this passivity and silence are dual — not just in the national, political life but within

the family, in our daily lives too. From the family to the *Mohalla* committee, panchayat, trade union, political party and parliament — everywhere we are the most excluded, the least in control, even of decisions that closely affect us.

For us, authoritarianism does not come only through political parties and Emergency regimes — every day of our lives, we are taught to blindly hand over our destiny to father, husband, son.

A CRUEL ILLUSION

It seems from the trend of voting in these elections that women have voted in an even bigger way than men have, for Indira Gandhi. How is it that many women see in her a champion?

No woman could be more alienated from her sex than she is. She repeatedly claims that she was brought up to be a boy, that she has never felt different from a man, that there is no such thing as discrimination, that she thinks it a compliment when she is referred to as the “only man in her cabinet” and that “certain qualities are associated with men, such as decision- making” (*Eve’s Weekly*, 27 Oct.— 2, Nov., 1979). Not surprisingly, during her regime as Prime Minister, women began losing whatever little ground they had won. Even in politics, most prominent women suffered total eclipse and she never let a new generation of women politicians emerge. The first list of ministers just announced by her does not include a single woman. It is possible that one or two women will be later inducted, but they are not likely to be given important portfolios. Why then do many women see in her a hope for themselves?

Suffering degradation and humiliation, do the women of this country unconsciously identify with her as the symbol of independent, assertive womanhood? Does she— “better than any man”—seem to them their vengeance on the male-dominated system?

If so, this is the most cruel of illusions. Because the women in the power game do not see themselves as representing women’s interests. They are there on men’s terms and for their survival they have to forget that they are women, and that as women they are unequal.

STABILITY OR STATUS QUO

The two major issues on which Indira Gandhi came to power are restoration of “law and order” and the promise of a “stable” Government. And she spared no opportunity to link the question of women’s safety with the maintenance of “law and order”. This sudden concern over law and order has erupted after the recent spate of robberies and chain-snatchings in cities. Do we not need to ask whether a few gold chains snatched in big cities are the vital problem for most of us as women? How is it that the entire mass media goes berserk, splashing such incidents on the front pages of newspapers, while dowry deaths have been once more reduced to three-line news-items on the third page in the City News column? Why is it that gang rapes by political hoodlums are always successfully hushed up?

The sexual exploitation of poor and dalit women, and of nurses, office workers, domestic servants, by landlords, employers, policemen, is part of their daily lives. This has never become a “law and order” issue!

How is it that those who are so concerned about law and order dare not face the fact that increasing unemployment, drought and starvation in the countryside might have something to do with more and more people being forced to resort to “crime” in urban areas?

Let us not make the mistake of thinking that women’s lack of security is uppermost in the minds of those who appeal to us for support and promise us safety on the streets. It is the safety of property that matters! Because when these same women are routinely molested in buses, beaten, tortured or burnt to death for dowry in their own homes, the guardians of “law and order” are usually found protecting the criminals. The promise of “stability” under the shadow of the fearful *tantric* hand, means maintaining the status quo. The status quo in our country means an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor and “law and order” means brutal repression of any attempt by the poor to alter this situation. For women the status quo means perpetuation of the authoritarian family structure which legislates for us a life of ‘dowry’, which

keeps women divided from each other.

Therefore, what we need is more questions, more defiance of male domination, more social protest.

Perhaps the first battle begins when we realize that no meaningful change can come from above, that we need to have greater control over our own lives—beginning here and now. One way in which we lose control over our lives is when we are taught to think of politics as the special concern of a handful of people who are caught up in the personal power game—in parliament, in municipalities, in trade unions, in panchayats. But politics is not just the power tussle which takes place at the national, state or district level within established institutions. Politics is woven into the fabric of our daily life. Most of our relationships at home and at work are unequal, are relationships of domination and therefore they are assertions of power—they are political relationships. They force us to choose. Either we must accept exploitation in the name of security or we must struggle against the inequality of these relationships and make our own decisions on how to live our lives.

POLITICIZE THE PERSONAL

The hold of traditional culture and values is very strong in our country because 80 percent of the population still lives in villages and even the urban population retains strong roots in villages. The patriarchal, male headed family structure, therefore, is the predominant form of family structure in India. And this patriarchal family structure (joint or nuclear) gives rise to various restrictions and disabilities imposed on women. Even while it might provide valuable support, the pressures of the family tend to withdraw women from the social, political mainstream. As workers we cannot participate in trade unions, as students we remain peripheral to university life, as professionals we find it difficult to hold our own because of the burden of house-keeping and child-care.

And yet we are taught to see our problems as “personal” problems springing from a specific and unique family situation—my hot-tempered father, her drunken husband, another woman’s

domineering mother-in-law. We are not allowed to realise that the patriarchal family and relationships in it have inequality built into them. And since these power relationships are common to all families, they are the problems of all women. Our problems are social, political problems. They can be changed not by a change of heart in individuals but by a change in the kind of relationships and family structure which gives rise to them. And as soon as we start trying collectively to bring about such change, we are engaged in political activity, political organization.

It is only during phases of intense upheaval in the course of mass movements that the hold of family restrictions begins to loosen and women are able to come out in large numbers. History shows that women, bringing with them their experience of oppression and their anger, also bring a new militance into any movement. In the course of the struggle they inevitably come to raise their own issues and create their own separate organizations. This happened during the national movement and also in various peasant and working class movements such as the Tebhaga movement in Bengal, the Chipko movement in the UP hills, the struggle of landless labour and rural poor in parts of Andhra and Maharashtra.

However, as these movements begin to subside, hierarchical organizations begin to get imposed and substitute for the self-activity generated within mass struggles. And the logic of hierarchical organizations is to exclude popular involvement, particularly that of women, from decision-making.

As the self-activity of women’s organizations is replaced by guidance from above, the pressure of household responsibilities tends to withdraw women from public life. Their organizations either die or drag on a meaningless existence.

BEGIN HERE AND NOW

Many readers of **Manushi** write to us saying that they feel isolated and ask us to help them get in touch with women’s organizations in their cities. It is true that the existence of a city-level organization can be a source of strength, but the real isolation of women from other women is

right where we live and work. We are separated by invisible barriers from other women in our families, in our neighbourhoods, in our workplaces.

We may smile and greet each other, even talk over our problems, but how many of us would jointly go to the rescue of a neighbour who is being beaten by her husband? How many of us would get together and organize legal, medical, emotional help for a rape victim? Or would openly take a stand to sympathise with, help and support a woman who is socially ostracised because she has done something the community disapproves of? Would not that be the beginning of organization—a small but definite beginning?

The starting point for any such action is of course very difficult because the powerlessness of women gives them a sense of helpless despair and it is dinned into our heads that our suffering, our problems are not unjust, that “this is the way the world is, has always been and will always be, that we can do nothing about it”. So even before we start, we are overcome with doubt, despair, diffidence. Our first thought is: “What can I do alone? It is impossible to change society. After all, one has to live in this society, one has to adjust to it”. This is one of the oldest arguments against change. Even, when we may see another woman doing what we thought was impossible for women to do, our usual reaction is: “She can do it. I can’t. She is different. Her circumstances are different.”

As long as a few women are forced to look for and find purely personal, half-way solutions for themselves, as long as other women keep seeing them as “different” or “extraordinary”, the lack of communication and sisterhood between women only grows. When fighting alone, it is so much easier to be defeated. But when we realise that every woman, no matter how confident she may have grown to be, begins with doubts, fears, hesitations, and that in our society, no woman’s freedom can be complete, then we also begin to see that what one woman could achieve alone and another cannot because her situation may be more oppressive, can be achieved by both, by many women—much better, much

easier, when they get together. And that the solutions which emerge from collective action will not be personal, temporary solutions but social, long-term solutions. Of course, the process of getting together is in some ways a much slower, more painful process than trying to find an individual solution. It is difficult because we all live and work in small family units. The family structure isolates us from each other. Only by gathering together to fight this isolation can we find the real solutions at both levels, social and personal.

Beginning with our own lives, we can try to combat the humiliation we suffer as women. Instead of seeing it as a virtue to be self-sacrificing, we can refuse to destroy our own desires, aspirations and decisions. We can assert ourselves more, both in small and big ways. We can stop keeping *Vratas* for the long lives of our husbands which implies that we wish to die *Suhagins*, that we wish to die before our husbands and that as women, our lives have no value apart from the lives of men. We can pledge that we would rather live alone than suffer the degradation of a dowry marriage. We can organize women’s boycotts of marriages where dowry is given, in this way forcing our families and friends to think seriously about the issue and begin questioning it. Within the family, we can stop perpetuating our own oppression by imposing “don’ts” on daughters, daughters-in-law, younger sisters. It is we who pass on to our daughters the ideology of self-denial, passive submission. It is we alone who can challenge and break the hold of this ideology. We can stop being silent spectators when our mothers are bullied, our sisters confined to the house or sisters-in-law beaten up by our brothers. And this process begins with changing our own way of looking at people and relationships, with realising how women are divided against each other in the family, because they are dependent on men and forced to compete for male favour.

OUR STRUGGLE, OUR STRENGTH

We fear to intervene in situations. This is another sign of our loss of control and grip over life. Even in buses, we rarely

protest when another woman is being molested or when we ourselves are being molested. This fear is implanted in our minds by society, by our families, to make us obedient and submissive. But it is also true that we have good reason to feel afraid, living as we do in a society so contemptuous of, so hostile and so brutally violent to women. Part of our fear to be on the streets after dark springs from our false view of ourselves as incompetent weaklings but there is no doubt that the streets are dangerous for us as women.

But should we just accept the fact that reality is dangerous and that we fear it? Could not a collective breaking down of our fears be one answer? Why could not five, ten, fifteen or more women go together into areas considered unsafe at times of the day or night when women are not on the streets? After all, the only way to reclaim the public places of this country for ourselves is by seeing to it that women begin to emerge in large numbers so that a lone woman straying out does not become such an easy target for attack. Such a collective action would be not just an open challenge to the norms which forbid a respectable woman to be out at night or in certain areas, but would also be a positive experience for the women participating in it and have a demonstrative effect for other women, would make them feel that it is possible.

It is thus gradually that lower level political action by women can grow into a widespread movement strong enough to attack the roots of our oppression. But the movement will not come to us and sweep us along. The movement must be begun by each of us, with each other. Wherever women have made the “impossible” or the “improbable” a reality for themselves through collective action, other women can learn from that experience, can be inspired, encouraged by it. It is this hope, this determination to make change possible that we must now begin to give each other. Women have always wept on each others’ shoulders, shared their sorrow and despair. Now we must begin to share our struggles, our strength, and our joy in the struggle.

—Manushi Collective