

Women In Parliament

by Rita Manchanda

THEY come on the shoulders of their menfolk, the women in parliament, and faithfully echo the interests of their menfolk, the considerations of caste, class, feudal and family status all of which are derived from patriarchal forces that work against women.

A Jayanti Patnaik (Cong) will raise her voice every other day in the Lok Sabha on this or that local issue in Orissa, well briefed by her husband, the chief minister J.B. Patnaik's office. Even the far more sophisticated and intelligent Jayanti Natrajan (Cong) who is often given to denouncing a patriarchal system which keeps women in the country oppressed, will be seen taking up cudgels for prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's "genuine" concern for the plight of women in his move to reduce the price of *sindoor* in the current budget. She for one does wear *sindoor* and the gesture is certainly well appreciated by her, whatever the opposition may say.

These are not trail blazers. For the most part they but reinforce existing stereotypes, the decorative Chandresh Kumaris and Vijayanti Balls, the mute Usha Vermas and Indubala Kadias and the viragos, the Saroj Karpades and Renuka Choudharys. But they all pale into insignificance before Mamta Banerjee who has made the caricature of a screeching fishwife peculiarly her own. To think that she actually defeated the CPI(M) stalwart Somnath Chatterjee in the Jadhavpur constituency ! Her piercing voice easily cuts across the cacophonous clamour in the Lok Sabha But in vain would you look for coherence. That after all is not her task ; sheer lung-power to drown the opposition is

Yet, why should we expect the women in parliament to be any better or worse than the men ? Cross the floor to the side of the

opposition and here even the visibility of women practically disappears. With nostalgia, the days of the Janata women Pramila Dandavate and Mrinal Gore are recalled. Through dogged strength of will, they made themselves heard in parliament, although with little assistance from the party. Today, such members as Sarojini Mahishi occasionally find a voice in the debates on women's issues but are completely sidelined when it comes to issues of national importance.

Even among the left parties veteran members like Geeta Mukerjee (CPJ) and

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Bibha Ghosh Goswami (CPI-M) are essentially fielded on women related issues. It would be unthinkable for them to participate in a debate on Punjab or Bofors. Geeta Mukerjee has made her presence felt through questions and special mentions on subjects related to the jute industry and the Haldia plant.

In all, there are few women members from the left parties. Curiously, a state like Kerala with high political literacy and politically mobilised women has not sent a single woman member to the eighth Lok Sabha. In contrast, UP, with a low record of female literacy and political mobilisation has about 10 women members in parliament.

The Telugu Desam has three women members of whom Renuka Choudhary is the only one who has made any impact. In recent months, however, her participation has dwindled to a heckling match with

Jayanti Natrajan, readily fitting the stereotype of two viragos swinging at each other. While it is the men of Telugu Desam, the P. Upendras and the Madhav Reddys who dominate the debates, Renuka Choudhary does make use of "special mentions" to draw attention to issues like the rocket attack on the CRPF post. But regrettably her references do not lead beyond the facts already disclosed in press reports. She herself has no information to contribute nor expertise with the rule book to challenge the government.

It is only when the issue has been defined as a "women's issue" that the women members are encouraged to find a voice. And it is difficult not to balk at the condescending generosity of the chairperson during one of the early debates on the Deorala Sati. She declared that since it was an issue that touched women more than men, she would allow the women more time to make their presentations ; the men, she was sure, wouldn't mind, if their time was given to the women. Yet even on these "women's issues" it is not uncommon for the men to have done more homework than the women. During the general discussion on atrocities against women in the wake of the incidents of gang rape in Bihar and Assam, it was Lok Dal member Ram Avdesh Sinha who had actually been to Padaria, Bihar, and bothered to investigate the incident for himself.

In parliament or indeed in other political decision making organisations, including trade unions, women are marginalised and the issues of concern to them dismissed as also marginal except where they challenge basic patriarchal concepts of property rights and communal identity. Take the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill. An

impressive array of women members was marshalled forth, from Begum Abida Ahmed, Rajendra Kumari Bajpai and Shiela Dixit to Najma Heptullah. If from the opposition ranks there were only Geeta Mukerjee, Renuka Choudhary and Kanak Mukerjee, this was more a reflection on the relatively few women members from the opposition, although some, like Janata member Sarojini Mahishi, were not fielded by the party.

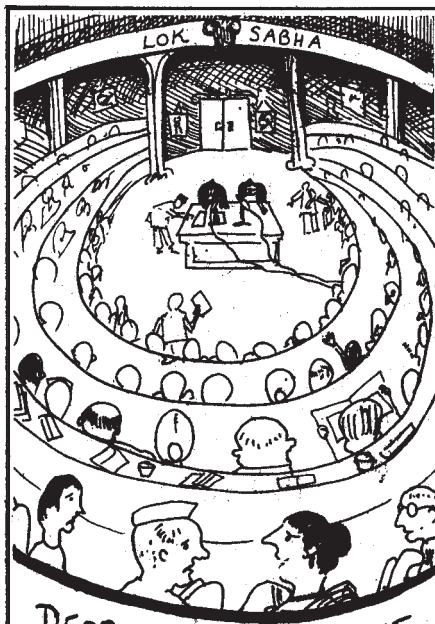
Begum Abida Ahmed was brought out from the shadows of oblivion to trot out the party line in support of the Bill. With the nodding approval of the men backing her she took a swipe at the Shah Bano judgement. "Why a self-respecting woman will go to a person who has divorced her and thrown her out to beg maintenance for herself", the Begum was at a loss to understand. Instead, she should "beg" from her maternal relatives or the Waqf Board.

If one was expecting some of the more ambivalent complexities around the Shah Bano judgement and the Muslim Women's Bill to be explored by the impressive array of women (and men) speakers, disappointment was inevitable. The familiar grooves of secularism, obscurantism, uniform civil code versus personal law and minority sensitivity were trodden and retrodden. Just as the most effective espousal of the Shah Bano judgement came from the minister of state for home, Arif Mohammad Khan, the defence of the Muslim Women's Bill was considered too serious an affair to be left only to the women of the party. Even from the opposition benches, it was the speech of Saifuddin Chowdhary (CPI-M) which lingered in the mind and not that of Geeta Mukerjee.

In the case of the Muslim Women's Bill, the political stakes were too high to permit any possibility of women members on both sides of the house rising above their political party affiliations to make common cause on gender justice. Yst what of other issues like crimes against women, in connection with the incidents of police-abetted gang rape of women in Bihar and Assam or the Sati Bill ?

During the debate last March on atrocities against women, Mukerjee referred nostalgically to the time when the women in parliament like Pramila Dandavate and Mrinal Gore were able to reach out across party lines and work together to pass legislation like the Anti Dowry (Amendment) Act. But whether it is Jayznti Natrajan on the treasury benches or Renuka Choudhary from the opposition, it is all too easy to succumb to the temptation of garnering short term political gains. Even on the Sati Bill debate where division was far more containable, Renuka Choudhary could not resist cheaply politicising the issue.

It was in the discussion on the Sati Bill that nominated member Ela Bhatt (SEWA)



"Is this a Burning Issue or a Women's Issue"

for the first time in parliament made a noticeable intervention. Recognising that Sati was a property motivated evil she urged that specific provisions be made by which women's property is protected in an effort to curb the evil practice.

Whether it was the active lobbying of women's organisations with some parliamentarians or media exposure of the Deorala incident, the debate on the Bill saw women like Bibha Goswami (CPI-M) Geeta Mukerjee (CPI; and Sarojini Mahishi

(Janata) come into their own. Of course, there was a temptation to pillory the prime minister for his delayed response to the Deorala Sati and to contrast it with the haste with which the Sati Bill was being rushed through parliament. But most were able to go beyond this to seriously address themselves to the flaws in the Bill which, while it rejects the concept of a voluntary Sati, yet treats the woman who is coerced to commit Sati as the first accused liable to six months imprisonment. While many members including those from the ruling party criticised the cruel injustice of this, hardly anyone was able to steer the debate into demanding why the act was being treated as suicide rather than as murder pure and simple. Margaret Alva, the minister of state for women's welfare then could not have taken refuge in the argument : "Unless we are prepared to punish an attempt to commit a crime, I can't ask you to punish those who abet the crime."

There was of course no question of the flawed Bill not being hustled through—the brute majority of the ruling party assured that. What difference did it make that eight percent of the membership in parliament consisted of women or that at that time there were 28 women in a union cabinet of 60 persons. Did it make Rajiv react any more quickly to the Deorala incident ?

Rajendra Kumari Bajpai and Najma Heptullah have been general secretaries of the Congress party, Pratibha Patil, deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha. But have Saroj Karpade (minister of state for health) or Mohsina Kidwai, the sole woman cabinet minister, risen to 3 their present eminence on the sheer strength of their capabilities ? As an administrator, Saroj Karpade has done little to recommend herself, embroiled as she has been in the last six months in arbitrary transfers of senior bureaucrats in the ministry. It is not competence but sycophancy that is more often than not the criterion, indeed, it is possible to identify essentially two types of women ministers — those who belong to the tradition of freedom fighter families and

others who are the parvenu sycophants.

Does the fault lie with there being too few women in parliament and the overall structure of political decision making bodies ? In the 1984 elections 59 percent of women voted as against 68 percent of men, but the Lok Sabha has 46 women members, constituting a little less than 10 percent of the total membership. In the Rajya Sabha there are 28 women members (1988) as against 215 men. In the state legislatures there are 1973 women members. Despite the fact that more women than ever are turning out to vote in the general elections, political parties are fielding even fewer women candidates.

This trend is sought to be reversed by proposing that panacea for removing discrimination—reservations. The Draft National Perspective Plan for Women recommends 30 percent reservation of seats in state legislatures and parliament for women. It has also suggested that political parties must ensure that at least 30 percent of the candidates fielded for

elections and 50 percent of all grassroots functionaries are women.

Evidently, many of these women candidates would be little more than adjuncts to the male politicians of the family.

It is not that political parties have not created formal “political space” in the form of women’s wings to the main party. Yet parties like the Janata have been loath to give to the Manila Dakshata Samiti, the women’s front of the party, space in the party office. Even so formidable a political worker as Mrinal Gore has not been considered worthy of a party general secretaryship. Maneka Gandhi has recently been appointed a general secretary of the party but the circumstances around her appointment only confirm the implicit discrimination against women in political life.

The Draft Plan, however, is confident that numbers is the essence of the problem. It makes a much more positive assessment of the performance of the women MPs in

parliament. It claims that it is because women now constitute about 10 percent of the membership of the Lok Sabha that the government has been able to usher through such progressive legislation as the Family Courts Act, the Anti Dowry (Amendment) Act, the Equal Remuneration (Amendment) Act, Prevention of Obscenity Act.

But empowerment of women is not to be achieved by hastily introduced legislation that often proves counterproductive.

The empowerment that the political process brings has eluded women who are numerically half of the electorate. Beyond the periodic exercise of their franchise women have been marginal in political decision making bodies. Would legally sanctioned reservations for women in all elected bodies work to give women a real share in political decision making ? Or will we have but a repetition of the pattern of more women coming in on the shoulders of their menfolk ? □