



Women in Politics

The Biology Factor

○ Mohinder Singh

The Women's Reservation Bill, pending for four years, seems to be going nowhere. The simple suggestion of the Election Commission that each political party be required to apportion a fixed percentage of tickets to women as an alternative to the 33 per cent reservation provided in the Bill hasn't drawn an encouraging response. Whereas major political parties find it politically expedient to voice support for the Bill, they aren't truly enthusiastic about binding themselves. They wouldn't want reservation of seats for women even if a lower percentage was arrived at though compromise.

Critics dub the strategy of the political parties as hypocrisy. But their dilemma is obvious. Whatever may be the moral justification for having more women in legislatures, there is always an intense pressure for tickets from men. And the chances of women candidates winning are commonly rated lower than that of men.

The phenomenon of women not rising as high as men in politics should cause no surprise; this is the position prevalent world-wide. Even in countries like the USA where women have otherwise made impressive gains vis-à-vis men in the job market, they are lagging far behind men in politics. The real inhibiting factor, it seems, is biology itself, not so much gender

bias. Men and women are biologically different, and the culture of politics, as it currently obtains, affords a definite edge to "manly" characteristics. Many feminists make out that there is no substantive physical or mental difference between men and women. But to rest the case for equality of women on the physical and psychological equivalence of the sexes would be resting it on a shaky foundation. The main reason is that on an average, men produce more than ten times as much testosterone as women. And this chemical does profoundly affect physique and behaviour, mood and temper. At conception, every embryo is female. But a surge of testosterone, coming around six weeks after conception, turns a little over half of the embryos into males, the rest remaining female. The second major surge of testosterone comes to boys at puberty.

Effect of Testosterone

Testosterone affects both the body and the mind. The body differences that the chemical causes are the obvious ones—effects on the genitals, body hair, the ratio of muscle to fat, and so on. On the mental side, it engenders combativeness, an urge for dominance and power, even aggression. An overwhelming majority of those involved in rash or drunken driving, brawls and violent

crimes are men. This is largely due to their much higher levels of testosterone.

It is this sharp difference in the levels of testosterone between men and women which makes men engage in more risky ventures than women. That is why activities such as military duty, wrestling, boxing, hazardous exploration, and gambling tend to be disproportionately male activities. Male presence is also more pronounced in professions such as venture capitalism and speculating on the share market.

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Politics is a very combative calling, with never ending power struggles. It is saturated with ego, conflict and risk. To secure political power and to retain it, practically no holds are barred. Little wonder, after a century of adult franchise, that even though women form nearly half the electorate, the number of female politicians remains disappointingly small in most democracies.

Mahatma Gandhi led a uniquely civilized campaign for this country's independence, a campaign with no

parallel in history for its humanity and transparency. This encouraged many an Indian woman to enter the political arena. But this unrealistically high moral tone of politics could not be sustained for long. Indeed our politics has been steadily degenerating into the unprincipled, with the intensification of the scramble for power and scarce resources. The creeping in of corruption and criminality is making matters worse.

To Reserve or Merge?

How well do women fit in this scenario? Can they match men in this sort of game? Or, as in sports, should they have their separate competition? Actually, women are good at governance. The qualities associated with low testosterone— sympathy, cooperation, conciliation, risk aversion— boost good governance. However, the problem is that women have to climb the grisly ladder of politics, and here the average woman is handicapped biologically vis-à-vis her male counterpart. Women leaders like Mrs Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, or the Bangladesh Begums were differently situated because of their family histories.

Admittedly, low participation of women in politics may not be universal. It has more to do with the culture of politics. In countries like Sweden or Iceland women's political participation is considerable, and could well reach parity levels in the foreseeable future. But such an achievement calls for a transformation of the culture of politics. It's rather a hen-and-egg situation: larger women's participation should usher in a more forebearant politics, but you can't



have larger women's participation without politics itself becoming less brutal and corrupt.

In this context, the Bill to reserve a third of all seats for women in Parliament and state assemblies is a move in the right direction. More women in our legislatures would be a welcome influence. Already women's

reservation in *panchayats* is having a salutary effect, besides providing women with much needed political training. But stakes in *panchayats* are not as high as in the legislatures, and it is easy for influential men to manage dependent, vulnerable women as puppets. Stakes in Parliament and state assemblies are far too high for men to withdraw in favour of women or go for proxies.

Apparently the Bill erred in incorporating too ambitious a target for reservation, though on strict moral and humane grounds even parity can be justified. A lower percentage, say 10 per cent— introduced more as an experimental measure— has brighter prospects of becoming law. MANUSHI's suggestion of requiring a fixed percentage of tickets to be given to women by political parties, if agreed to, would mark a welcome breakthrough. □

Mohinder Singh, IAS, retired as Secretary to the Government of India. He is now a freelance journalist who writes on gender issues.

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