



Readers' Forum



***Maiti*: An Ecological Movement**

During a recent visit to the beautiful Garhwal hills, I was very impressed to find women dedicated to conservation, working hard to save our environment from the rampant and gross exploitation we have subjected it to. It is noteworthy that this significant, through relatively simple effort, has been motivated by Kalyan Singh Rawat, a humble and unassuming Biology teacher of the area. Besides teaching at the Government Inter College at Gwaldam, Chamoli district of Garhwal, he has been leading a unique forestation movement called *Maiti*, involving school and college students, with the focus being on the active participation of girls.

The word *Maiti* is widely used in Uttarakhand. *Maiti* means mother's home. Thus, the village in which a girl is born, becomes her *Maiti*. Every girl wants her home and village to be prosperous. A rich forest cover provides a natural basis for prosperity. It not only provides fuel, fodder and fruits for the villagers but also maintains conditions conducive to adequate rainfall and soil fertility. The *Maiti* movement reinforces this environmental consciousness in each girl of the village. All the girls of the village get together and form a *Maiti* association, which comprises mainly school and college girls, whose level of awareness regarding their environment has been enhanced by their education. The leadership of this association is entrusted to a girl capable of shouldering group responsibility and guiding others. Under the guidance of their group leader, every girl of the village prepares saplings. The geographical conditions and needs of each village are taken into account. Fruit bearing seeds are given priority but fodder and fuel-providing trees are also planted.

Whenever a girl's marriage is fixed, the *Maiti* group of the village gets into action. They dig a part of the ground in the girl's home, manure it and select a sapling.

The girl's father makes it a point to mention the tree-plantation ceremony in the wedding invitation card. This gives publicity to the *Maiti* movement and also adds cultural value to it. The *Maiti* sisters prepare their own welcome banner to welcome the groom's party. After the main rituals of the marriage, they take the bride and the groom to the plantation site where the bride presents the sapling to the groom. Then the bride and bridegroom together plant the sapling and water it while the presiding



priest offers prayers to the sapling and blesses the newly-wed couple. The bridegroom presents a token amount of money for the care of the sapling to the *Maiti* sisters who deposit the amount in their local bank as a fund for the welfare of under-privileged girls of the village.

This way, every girl at the time of the her marriage plants a sapling as a gesture of gratitude towards her parental home and village. When she leaves for her husband's, home the sapling remains behind as a living symbol of her, and is lovingly nurtured by her siblings and parents. It is interesting to note that the movement focuses on girls because of the belief that, as would-be mothers, they will be the ones inculcating values and *sanskars* in the coming generations. As daughters-in-law, wives and mothers, women are the custodians of tradition and culture. Since the *Maiti* ritual in every marriage is becoming a part of the local tradition, it is sure to be safeguarded with devotion by Garhwali women. The idea behind the *Maiti* movement is to emotionally motivate local citizens and to make afforestation a vibrant people's movement.

It is remarkable that this humble movement, initiated by an unassuming person, rather than by the District Forest Department or a well-funded NGO, has spread to 400 villages of Uttarakhand and is poised to become a major ecological revolution throughout the U.P. hills.

Many of us in the plains, who pay lip-service to environmental causes, sitting in air-conditioned seminar rooms, would do well to get into real action. Banning polythene bags from every day use on our own rather than waiting for a napping government to enforce a ban, checking our automobiles to save our atmosphere from worsening pollution, managing rain-water on a domestic basis rather than waiting for *sarkari* solutions to drought, refraining from the use of loud-speakers during religious festivals or marriages to curb noise pollution, are some of the ways in which we, as citizens, can exercise control over the quality of our environment. Like *Maiti* in Uttarakhand, each one of us can initiate a people's movement at the local level to exercise control over, and improve the state of, our environment.

Dr. Vijay Prakash Singh, Lucknow.

Democracy: On My Plate

Democracy, as it is today, should be seen as nothing but a restaurant! A manager sitting at the counter, controlling waiters, and the waiter going from table to table, from customer to customer, holding a menu, with a flattering smile, but cunning, sharp eyes, saying, "Sirs/Madams, can I be of some service to you? I have, in my menu, the Narmada dam, the Cauvery water projects, disinvestments, and what not."

The customers are enraged, 'No, no! No projects! We want that the Rs. 179.20 maintenance allowance of Shah Bano should be withdrawn!'

"OK Sir." Done. The waiter knows he will get a tip. He goes to the butler, "Prepare an amendment and cook Muslim Women's Rights on the hearth of Islam."

Now some more customers get enraged. "Aiee..You appeaser! And what about that mosque? Who built it? Why? Was it his father's place? Didn't he know that Lord Ramchandra, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu himself, was born there? And he was the creator of the universe? Then?"

"Sirs, I have in my menu, a key that will open the gates!" Done.

Sometimes, when I go to Nirulas in Connaught Place...No, no, not Connaught Place, but Rajiv Chowk, I see the pizzas-burgers with a different perception. I hear health practitioners preaching on TV that pizza-burgers cause heart problems and I get worried about the restaurant owner. What will he sell when people stop eating pizza-burgers? I feel then good sense suddenly prevail upon me and it occurs to me that the restaurant owner sells only what is demanded of him. If people start eating stones, he will sell stones!

Then comes to me the idea of people's representatives! Will a donkey not be the best representative of donkeys? For he who knows not the troubles of donkeys, how can he be their representative? And horses? Only a horse can represent horses! For he who knows not the troubles of horses cannot represent horses. So if the people of a state elect a chief minister who has not studied beyond class 3, as their representative, will she not be the most suitable representative of the illiterates of that state?

Pandit Nehru said in his *Glimpses of World History* that "Ordinary men and women are not usually heroic. They think of their daily bread and butter, of their children, of their household worries and the like. But a time comes, when a whole people become full of faith for a great cause and then even simple, ordinary men and women become heroes, and history becomes stirring and epoch making!"

Shall we then blame the waiters? Are they not a part of the same society to which we ourselves belong? Are the Advanis and Umas not our own reflection? Shall we not then listen to the health preachers and throw away old menus and hand over new menus to them, so they can serve us Infotech, Narmada dam, highways, infrastructures and what not? It is the customers, that is the people of a nation, who run the restaurants, the pizza-burger restaurants or the ghee-dipped-chapatti selling *Tera Hotels*. The people of a nation, have to firmly declare Equality and Fraternity, their basic rights and march

collectively towards a literate state, a temple-free state, an info-ful state, a water abundant state an extortion-free state, a drought-free state, and above all, a terrorism-free, and hijacker-free state, and not towards a hate-soaked state, in which unhealthy minds do nothing other than hit out at each other.

P.C. Sahajwala, New Delhi

Women Politicians

The elections to the thirteenth Lok Sabha saw more women elected to the Lower House than in any previous election. Today there are 47 women in a House of 543 members, which is four more than in the last election. Interestingly, the percentage of women winning elections is also going up. Last year out of the 274 women who contested elections, 43 won, which means 15.7 percent won. This year 277 women contested and 47 were elected, that is 16.96 percent success rate. In comparison, last year, 4476 men contested elections and 500 won registering an 11.2 percent success rate. While this year 3977 men contended and 490 were elected, registering a 12.83 percent success rate.

The total number of women ever elected has never gone beyond 8.6 percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha. But there is a steady progress and this must be noted.

However, the imagery used by the two main parties — the BJP and the Congress (I) — to get votes for women candidates, was entirely negative. In her election campaign in Bellary, Sushma Swaraj overdid the *videshi bahu* vs. *swadeshi beti* number. To counter the “foreigner” label, Sonia Gandhi stuck to her *bahu* tune throughout her campaign and it worked well in the rural areas, especially in Amethi. So far as women are concerned, the overall thrust of such imagery is hardly positive. The belief that a woman’s identity is obliterated once she enters the marital home has been at the root of

so many problems faced by Indian women. Should women politicians, particularly of the post-Independence generation, project the same imagery? Should not they use the opportunity of being in the public sphere to project a woman’s strength and the positive contribution she can make in public life? On this score, in the recent elections, most of the women who stood for election and won were a disappointment.

The question is, are women finally carving a niche for themselves in politics? We can say that in some ways they are. Today, several women members are actively playing important public roles for their respective parties. They can be seen articulating their party positions on television debates and talk shows. Just five years ago, nobody could have comprehended this. Thus, Jaya Jaitely of the Samata Party, Jayanti Natarajan of the Tamil Manila Congress, Mayawati of the Bahujan Samaj Party, Mamata Bannerjee of the Trinamul Congress or Sushma Swaraj of the BJP, have become familiar faces. Unfortunately, the left parties are lagging far behind in this respect. Not only were they unwilling to let Jyoti Basu retire, but there is also no sign of any women emerging as a spokesperson for these parties.

Although none of the women mentioned above necessarily demonstrates a distinct political style, collectively they represent a new generation of men and women in politics. And barring the Congress (I), which is still stuck in the dynastic mould, the other parties seem to be attracting women who are not only wives or widows, or daughters of powerful male leaders but are politicians in their own right.

Whether their number in parliament increase or not, whether this parliament passes the Women’s Reservation Bill or not, the fact that women have become an integral part of our political scenario, from the panchayats to the Lok Sabha, is very important and cannot be brushed aside easily.

Dr. P.B. Rathod, Gulbarga, Karnataka

Among Others, MANUSHI is Available from the Following

The Book Shop Khan Market, New Delhi	Jawahar Book Centre J.N.U Campus, New Delhi	Empire Book Depot 74 Main Market, Janpath, New Delhi	Alter Media Utility Building, Nehru Bazar, Thrissur
People’s Book House 15, Cawasji Patel Street, Fort, Mumbai	People Tree Regal Building, Cannaught Place, New Delhi	EBS News Agency 1701, Sector 22-B, Chandigarh	Syed Anwar Owais 11, Karal Sangri, Srinagar, J&K
Geetanjali Luz Ginza, 140 Royapeth High Road, Chennai, Tamil Nadu	Prajasakti Book House 5, A.G.K Complex, Gandhi Road Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh	Ms Taposi Das Shantibon, Panigaon, Nagaon, Assam	Prajasakti Book House Karl Marx Road, Vijayawada