

I entered politics imagining I would be able to influence policy for the better. Perhaps I thought that I would make the little corner of India which is my constituency a little more hopeful. But I have not understood the function of Parliament as yet. People don't ask questions, they shout about twenty things at once and the executive never gives any answers. All the questions that I have asked in writing never get any answers that tell me what I want to know. For instance, the Sanghi Cement Company has built a jetty illegally on government land to bring their coal into Gujarat. This jetty has been functional for a year. I asked the Environment Ministry whether they had given permission to the jetty and they replied that it had not been built because permission was still pending. They could get away with telling a blatant lie on the floor of the House. So I feel that Parliament is really powerless. It is a great game invented to keep 545 vociferous, power-hungry people busy making a noise, travelling in junkets, and enjoying feeling important while doing nothing. No issues are seen through — we are like butterflies flitting from issue to issue on a daily basis, swiping at each other but seeing nothing through to the logical end.

For instance, the Standing Committees have the power to look into the budget of the Ministry that they are in charge of but they are not allowed to recommend any cuts in the allocation. I am on the Environment Ministry Standing Committee. After a long and intensive grilling, we discovered 50 percent of everything that the Ministry was asking for was mythical. For example, Project Elephant and Project Fire Control are non-existent, yet crores have been spent on them. Now all we can do is to give them a small ticking off and they

## And the One Who Differs . . .

### Maneka Gandhi on the Women's Reservation Bill

continue to get the money. They spent 1.1 crore on foreign travel last year, which means that roughly 300 trips abroad were made last year by 20 officials. Now they want their travel allowance doubled for this year. We can't even stop that.

The Parliament has no power. The only power you derive as an MP comes



from the one-to-one relationship between MPs and ministers outside of Parliament. It seems a waste to give even one day of one's life to such meaninglessness, to the wisecracks and witticisms that qualify a person as a good parliamentarian, whether or not you have said anything sensible or meaningful about the issues at hand.

The United Front has brought forward the bill for women's reservation in Parliament and legislative assemblies, but it is just a populist measure of a government that has no intention of seeing it through. I don't think men want to give up 130 odd seats in perpetuity. So it will go to a committee and then the government will change, and a new set of people will renege on it. This is standard procedure, even for those bills that have already been passed. Since everyone in Parliament knows it is not going through, the women are happy making a lot of noise to get it passed so that we can tell the women in our country that we tried. The men commit themselves daily but say it is very complicated. It is like the promise to make Uttarakhand into a separate state. That will also never come through, yet they go on making these kind of promises because if you are a knee-jerk government held together by the sticky tape of wanting to make money, then you need to throw a few pieces of bread to the hungry. Since you do not even know why people are hungry you clutch at any straw. After all, what are the values or commitments of this government? Since it has none, it clutches at any straws that come to hand.

The BJP, the CPM and all the other parties have endorsed the reservation bill because its politically correct. Privately they don't want it and will work overtime to see it is not

implemented but they cannot openly go against it. In any case the bill has gone to a committee and it will be diluted and further diluted till you have a law that says that you can have your one third reservation for women provided they have pink hair, are totally backward, completely unheard of in any political arena...

The women MPs are so vociferous about the bill because it ensures them tickets for life. If it passes they won't have to fight against a man for a ticket. And if your ticket is going to another woman anyway then the party might as well just keep you. A lot of women come in as widows of MPs the first time around, or as wives and relatives. With reservations for women, they hope to be able to hang around there forever. And they don't have to specialise in anything.

Look at the reservation for women in the *panchayats*. Speaking for my own area, it isn't working at all. When I go to a village I see a man pushing a woman in a veil to the front saying, "she is the *sarpanch*." She has eight children, is uneducated and hasn't the faintest idea of what being a *sarpanch* means. When the *panchayat* meets I doubt if she even attends. Her husband or her father is the one who continues to make the decisions. But now there is far more corruption with the *panchayati* money since the *sarpanch's* male relatives don't have to answer for anything. She puts her thumbprint on the allocation for this or that project and when the money disappears, the administration and politicians cannot take any action against her because it isn't politically or morally right. Even if her own husband is involved in the misuse of funds, she probably doesn't have a clue and in any case she is not the beneficiary. We have *zilla parishad* members and chiefs who are exactly the same. It is always someone's wife

or daughter, never a woman in her own right who knows her own mind about what she wants for her area.

What in the history of Parliament would allow me to assume that similar kinds of women won't get elected as MPs after the 33 percent quota is introduced? How many women are there now because they are tough and determined? How many are specialists in any field? Women of ability are a threat: it is the Geraldine Ferraro syndrome — as long as she seemed to be a nonentity, it was alright to let her be the candidate. But the moment she

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showed any signs of independence, the establishment got rid of her very efficiently.

I personally don't fight elections either as a woman or as a member of the Gandhi family. I work and talk only about my own areas of interest: environmental management, farm and forest management, power management, etc. I never talk either in my constituency or otherwise regarding vote division, castes, transfers, who needs to do what to whom, reservations, etc. I really don't care very much about politics. I don't care who becomes the MLA in my area as long as she or he is honest and hardworking. I am really like a technician or a mechanic — someone who likes putting things right. I see

politics as just another forum to be used for social and environmental awareness and change. Even during my election campaigns I continue to do things I do when I am not running for office. I pick up animals, help put out forest fires, plant things, and meet people I find interesting who have a deep interest in what they do. Sometimes I succeed and sometimes I fail.

Women don't carry much clout in Parliament because very few manage to secure tickets to contest elections and still fewer manage to win. Most of our women MPs are of the statutory variety. They don't bother to specialise or get seriously involved in any issues. I put my time, my energy, and my life into every issue I raise. That in itself gives power. There are a few women like that in Parliament and they have power as individuals because they outgrow their gender and become people. The others give their mouths to an issue but not their brains. Any man or woman prepared to educate themselves about the country and to pursue a matter logically and to its culmination has a lot to offer and is taken seriously. But if you spend a large amount of time, as most MPs do, worrying about their TA/DA (travel allowance/daily allowance), travel passes, committee junkets, your food in Central Hall, then no one takes you seriously on any issue. This applies equally to the women in Parliament, for they do this as much as the men do.

Women MPs have not come together on any issue except for the reservation bill because there is nothing that unifies them except that they are women and they are in Parliament. And they want to be in Parliament again and again. That is a strong cementing factor. Perhaps I am overly critical because I expected so much more sense and strength to

emanate from them. This is my first term as a parliamentarian. When I was a Minister I never went to Parliament at all except for once a week for a half an hour to answer questions. So when I started coming to Parliament I really expected to find an intelligent body of men and women seriously interested in making policy.

The reservation bill was debated in Parliament like all the others, with great wit (or what passes for wit) and little wisdom. I would be happy if a third of our MPs were women because I think that they would change the quality of Parliament provided they looked deeper, acted saner, quarrelled less and argued more, worried about not making fools of themselves before the country, and tried to instill meaning into what has degenerated into a purposeless institution. But the women you are likely to get will not be coming on their own strength. Men



**Maneka Gandhi addressing a rally**

will still have the power to dole out the tickets and they will certainly not give them to someone who threatens them or makes them look bad. So they will

be even more careful in choosing those that will just be a token presence. All you will get is more relatives, more royalty, more lady friends. □

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