CHAPTER – III

WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS

Politics is essentially an art of acquiring and exercising power the power to effectively influence the decision making processes and policies, to reverse the existing situation wherever they are disadvantageous and to bring about the necessary social changes. A participation in this exercise of power is very much a necessity, particularly for the disadvantaged group, in this instance, the women. But then, politics is also about power relations. Every social arrangement be it in the public, professional sphere or in the private space of domestic sphere, is an instance of power relationship. Thereby whether it is the family, religion, caste or public institutions, they are all political institutions. Their mutual interaction thus becomes a political relationship and hence involves a modicum of power.

Women’s studies and women’s movement, hence, has a close linkage with the political processes. The broader political operations and the nature of political ideology in the public sphere, have its corresponding implications and impact for the women in the domestic and private relations.

The present works thus concerns itself with the participation of women in the formal political institutions. Such a participation is very much a condition and indication of women’s own present power and status; it is also a requirement for influencing the decisions in the future for promoting women’s rights and development. Direct and visible participation helps to enlarge the freedom of the social group and accelerate the pace of its advancement. The lack of sufficient participation of women in politics and at the decision making
levels, are themselves the results of their poor social and domestic status and their exclusion from certain positions and levels of power.

However, mere physical participation in the formal political institutions like elections or political parties, social movements or demonstrations is not enough. Even an enlarged participation by way of numbers or percentages may not lead to the advancement of the cause of the social group. Many a study on the participation of women in the electoral process, by way of voting or candidature seem to mainly concern themselves with this type of a statistical package. Equally simplistic have been the studies which deal with the participation of women in the executive, administrative, judicial and local governmental (Panchayati Raj) machineries. Obviously, the theoretical premise of these studies is that women would promote women, would be able to understand, feel and empathise with their problems and aspirations, would be easily approachable and would better help in formulating and implementing policies for women.¹ This may not be, however, true always. Equally significant is the level of political consciousness, in this case also gender consciousness. It is necessary to ask the question as to whose benefit is this participation directed. What impact has this participation made on the policies and the system over a period? Above all, to what extent has this visible participation acted as a role model and a fillip for others to come forward? For effecting this impact, it is equally necessary to assess as to the levels at which this participation is taking place. Once again, mere number is not enough; it has to be situated at levels which are significant and effective for exercising power. Massive mobilization and numerically impressive participation in the political processes-formal and informal, are not goals in themselves. They are a means
and a strategy for achieving something more fundamental, which the group can
do only when its participation touches at the structure of politics itself. One has
to, therefore, identify the broader processes of the political structure and the
way power is arranged in a particular society. The ideology of the state, the
interrelationship between the important components in its structure, like class,
caste and gender and its basic developmental goals are essential in
understanding the repercussions of participation.¹ Often a vastly expanded
participation and a wide mobilization of a socially weak community in this
context women has led to the strengthening of the present pattern of
development rather than directing this pattern to their own development. Even
values like equality (constitutional, political and economic), rights (property,
access to resources) etc. may be meaningful only when women possess and
exercise them consciously for bringing about a change in their own position as
well as of the society; otherwise they will merely add up to strengthening and
reinforcing the existing social system by operating within the framework of
patriarchy. Values like equality and rights, concepts like participation and
mobilization need to constantly keep before them, the objectives of the client
group; above all it should be related to and tested against another equally
important value justice.²

Any assessment of the political participation of women in India, then, has
to start by asking questions like whether such participation has led to bringing
about or moving towards improving the quality of life for them or even simply of
making it more liveable for women. Whether such participation by women,
either as individuals or as a group, has meant developing alternate strategies
for development as well as structures of power? Whether the political
interventions which women seek to make, start with women as points of
departure or merely help women to infiltrate systematically in the existing
hierarchies of power, thereby lending themselves to becoming women
performers or even worse, careerists? If increasing political participation has to
have any meaning for women, such participation should be based on a
widespread and well orchestrated mobilization of women on the central issue of
women’s oppression and subordinate status in the society and family.  

Any analysis of political participation of women in India hence, would
have to combine a few components like.

a) The extent, level and nature of women’s participation in the political
processes of India, by way of both formal and non-formal institutions.
b) The impact and significance of such participation for women’s rights and
living conditions.
c) The types of feminist issues (that were) raised in the course of this
participation.

It is equally important to remember that the participation of women in
politics is very much circumscribed by many vital factors. The nature of the
state, its stage of development, mode of production etc., are contextual factors
that control the participation of common people in politics, women being the
more affected. It is commonly believed that capitalism enables people to
develop and attain equality, by unleashing their talents and rewarding it suitably
and that in the case of women, it helps them to move from private space into
public sphere. It is, however, doubtful that such a mobility and equality have
really been facilitated either by capitalism or even socialism presence. The
living examples of the western capitalist countries or socialist nations have not
been much of a solace. This only confirms that the struggle against patriarchy and its state sponsorship, is a much more prolonged and complicated struggle, calling for persistent vigilance and strong mobilization.

In India, there has been a combination of many modes of production, co-existing and reinforcing one another. The two strong feudal and capitalist modes have overlapped and exploited each other. This had been differently described as semi-feudalism, pre-capitalism or declining feudalism. To this have been added the efforts of a state operated public sector often with its ideal of being an alternate pattern of development, and a modern employer, the cultural heritage of ancient philosophical model of self sufficient villages and hand based industries that Mahatma Gandhi so keenly emphasized. The context of the colonial rule, superimposed on an ancient civilization of an old society, has made India both peculiar and somewhat complicated. A multi-structured economy intervened by a multi-religious and caste divided society—all arranged on a hierarchical model it is difficult to classify India either as a capitalist or feudal, modern or ancient, equal or hierarchical. Its villages society is collective with a strong individualistic trait, defiant but ready to play subordinate role, economically productive but still socially undeveloped. Such a combination has its consequences for the equality and rights of individuals, for the democratic operations of the polity and the modernized development of the economy. Of late, however, capitalism has taken much stronger roots and is seeking multi-national alliances and operations. As it does so, the pre-modern factors in the Indian society and culture have increasingly played their role to heighten their exploitation of the common people. Its implications for women are even more far-reaching, since often feudalism takes on the additional
feature of patriarchy the domination of men over women. The nature of the state is an alliance between feudalism, capitalism and patriarchy. The anti-feudal and anti-patriarchal struggles, then, have to be combined for the liberation of women. It the same time, the prevailing patriarchal values precisely prevent such a combined struggle. Often it is left to only women to stage the struggles for their survival and liberation and to closely link their participation in political struggles of the day.

The present volume carries quite a few articles wherein the women’s studies specialists have attempted to delve deep into the nature of the Indian state and its operations. While M. Bharati’s paper focuses on the nature of the state from the vantage point of women, Sadhana Arya’s contribution brings out clearly this close linkage between the patriarchal nature of the state and women’s participation.5

There is, hence, the need for a close reasoning between the status of women and the social order and values. As true political consciousness of women, hence, has to go beyond gender dichotomies and simple patriarchal institutions, says Manu Bhaskar, into the class nature of the state.

One can assess the participation of women in democratic process, under these various socio-cultural, historical and political-economic context, by citing one or two formal institutions in the Indian polity. The liberal, egalitarian legacy of the Indian National Movement had led to the Constitution of free India granting a position of equality of women by way of political rights. The provision of Fundamental Rights, particularly the Right to Vote to all women, it was assumed, would automatically take care of the various issues that had been
bedeviling women for centuries and pave the way for their development much in the same way as it was viewed earlier that women’s upliftment would come once freedom was achieved.

Has this right to vote been an effective means of achieving true equality and justice for women? As the paramount right, has this right led to other rights for women? To assess this, one would have to know whether and to what extent have the women exercised the right to vote and participated in the formal political processes. In a thoughtful mood, Bhavani like many others, questions the very validity of this formal process.

Many studies believe that

i) Women are not independent voters.

ii) That a majority of them are illiterate.

iii) That a majority of them make their choice on the basis of suggestions from male members of the family husband and sons.

iv) That women lack information and political awareness.

v) Women are not politically conscious.

However, these studies define the words political participation very narrowly. Despite these limitations, one may make a general analysis of the voting pattern of women. A quick glance at their participation in elections over the past four decades will confirm the initial hopes placed by the founders of the Constitution. The extent, nature and level of Indian women’s participation is much greater than in many other countries developed or developing, except possibly in the countries that were going through radical revolutionary wars. A certain cultural background as well as the freedom struggle could be the
main reasons for this. This participation has been more or less steadily expanding over the years, through the various elections by way of voting, as candidates and by participation in campaigning etc. The gap in the turnout between the men and the women is getting more and more narrowed. The number of women getting elected to the representative bodies is steadily increasing.

This increase in the turnout of women voters, particularly of the lower class and castes, may be attributed to a high degree of mobilization, rather than of one’s own political consciousness. In India, one can talk in general of high level of awareness of the value of vote, which is possessed and cast eagerly by the poor and the scheduled castes, at times very pragmatically and rationally. They are politically sensitive, well aware of their interests and even the political issues. But this awareness, in order to be translated into a political exercise like voting, needs tremendous mobilization. This is all the more in the case of women, as poverty and daily work, household work and care, patriarchal and family norms act as great disincentives. Distance of booths, possibility of violence, health and other factors further discourage them. The linkage between the ‘personal’ and ‘public’ is missing, and women do not feel automatically impelled.

The increase in the number of women voters since independence, and their eager participation in voting, has made almost all the political parties pay special attention to organizing them, campaigning among them, and choosing them to contest elections. Definitely in the earlier years such campaigning among women and soliciting their votes was done rather casually. Mobilization in the past have been mainly at the time of elections in the form of ad hoc
promises, made on populistic and opportunistic short term basis, rather than on long term goals of a social change for women. However, to the extent there was any correlation between the campaign promises and voting support, it also reflected on the low impact that the women’s movement had made in educating the women, as well as in making a dent on the patriarchal politicians. More recently the parties have organized regular party forums, cells and front organizations specially for women. These women’s cells not merely mobilize and campaign among women, seek their support and membership for the party’s issues during elections as well as normal period, but also quite often take up issues concerning women of late, the parties are, also taking a stand on women’s issues, organizing rallies and demonstrations, passing resolutions, lobbying with and pressurizing the government for specific policies. Women are participating in them in great numbers and have even courted arrest on issues like Sati, Muslim Women’s Right to Maintenance, rape incidents, violence, police excesses on women, etc.\(^7\)

But there are many important questions to be asked in this context. In view of the extent of the recognition of the need for women’s support both for image building as well as electoral successes, how many women have been able to occupy important positions in the party? There have been many important political personalities among women at the helm of various parties. There have been a number of women who were members of the highest executive committees of their parties and have functioned as office bearers. The Congress Party, particularly has taken care to give representation to women among its office bearers. In fact, it has almost become axiomatic in India that the highest decision making bodies of the various parties need to
have definitely at least one or two women members. It is, however, necessary to ask the question whether it is a mere tokenism. Such representation by being very limited in number, as well as often occupied by weak and colourless personalities does become more a symbolism rather than real power wielding. There are of course some exceptions to this.

Despite the increase in the number of women contesting the election women still constitute only 1 to 2 per cent. Even where seats are reserved as in the Panchayats, they do not come forward so easily. Out of these contestants, the ones who get elected constitute still smaller percentage. While those who belong to the major political parties stand a better chance of success, the non-party candidates and those who belong to minor political parties, are hardly successful. Despite this many women contest as independents. This perhaps implies that the political parties are, by and large, reluctant to chose women as candidates, the maximum number of candidates being from the Congress Party. But even this party allotted only 3% of seats in 1977 to women. Obviously this is much more in the nature of tokenism rather than an acceptance of women's equality or capability. Often women candidates are viewed as depriving men of their chances. Even the small number of women who contest gain, their candidature by their birth and close relationship with already established party leaders. Almost all the women who figure in electoral politics seem to be invariably someone's wife, daughter, daughter-in-law or other close relations.⁸ There are only few exceptions of women with the background of working with women or in politics. Most of these women thus come from urban, middle class, educated elite background and cannot claim a stage-by-stage growth or participation in their political career. Apparently, there
is no correlation between female population and voting percentage with their number in the elected legislatures. The subordinate position of the ‘ordinary’ women in the families, their routine and normal duties of looking after the family, bringing up children, performing both the unpaid and paid work, do not allow them much scope to participate freely in the public political activities. To this must be added the economic factor. Elections in India as in all other modern democracies, have become very complicate, violent, dirty and expensive, inviting thereby very many legitimate and not so legitimate ways of finding and managing them. Women cannot obviously fit into this matrix of election. The participation costs in formal politics is at present too high for women. Political participation of women, by the conventional and formal yardstick, thus is low, and lower than men of even weaker sections. In the case of scheduled castes and tribes, due to the reservation of constituencies, the number of representatives is proportionate to the population. But it is ironic, if not cruel that only one or two of these seats had gone to women. No study has yet been undertaken on an all India basis, of the nature and extent of women’s participation in the legislative business. In the early years after independence the Parliament did witness many women like Renuka Ray participating vigorously in the Hindu Code Bill, etc. More recently many women MPs belonging to all the parties are drawing attention to issues like atrocities against women, women’s rights, statutory women’s commission as well a social crimes like sati, dowry, rape, etc., Still by and large such participation is confined repeatedly to a few women. A majority of them are silent on many issues, particularly on the general, political concerns. On the whole it looks like those who are good and articulate are very good and participate often. Others are dormant, invisible and silent on most of the issues. Hence, mere presence of
women in the Parliament even if of a greater number, will mean very little by way of women’s development.

Participation of women in Panchayati Raj (Local Government) has been another area of great interest in India. Being mainly at the grassroots level and operating in the context of rural women, the participation in the local government has been viewed as essential in promoting women’s consciousness and development at the local level as well as in training them for participation in the wider politics.\textsuperscript{11}

In the 1960s when many States enacted legislation for the representation of women in Panchayats, women’s participation, consciousness and impact had emerged as crucial issues. The inclusion of women, by co-option and nomination if necessary, in the elected bodies, it was believed, would lead to a greater participation of women in the local political processes and thereby promote women’s development through empowerment. Even though the experiment had not been totally satisfactory partly due to the small number of women (two women members out of the total roughly ten members) and partly because of lack of political consciousness, the Gram Panchayts and Mahila Mandals have been performing their roles moderately and working as training grounds. Many women in Maharashtra had even become Sarpanches. The whole experiment is considered as conducive, in the long run, for a democratic decentralization wherein political power can devolve to women. In order that such participation on local government can bring about a change in the decision-making process as well as the nature of decisions, it is necessary that women’s representation should be more.
The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women published in 1974 pleaded for provision of special opportunities for representation in local government and recommended the establishment of Statutory Women’s Panchayat. Both the CSWI as well as the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (1978) suggested increase in number of women and even all women panchayats with autonomy and resources of their own, thus making women themselves responsible for their development. Apart from participating actively in making decisions, this would help in breaking the traditional attitudes towards women, as well as of women towards public participation. Quite a few studies by scholars and social activists have sought to assess the nature, extent and level of this participation, and the benefits they could derive out of the Panchayti Raj System, particularly in the light of their participation. The major issue in these debates is the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Such a participation, in turn, has been dealt with at two levels, namely.

1) The representation of women (along with Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the three being clubbed together of late as the weaker sections) in the Panchayati Raj Institutions either as members or as functionaries, and

2) The substance and effectiveness of such representation.

The studies have found that the co-option as a principle, is highly questionable both in theory and practice. Not merely is it undemocratic but also smacks of a protectionism based on the view of women as being weaker and incapable of fighting the elections. In practice, the co-option or nomination had meant sheer patronage of the dominant political or social group, and the women who got nominated had practically no experience in or inclination
towards working for women and children. The Women’s representation became one of the tokenism and ended as a near total failure. Many states have hence given up nomination or co-option and resorted to reservation as the only way of making sure that women are represented in the Panchyati Raj. One would, however, need more studies to show the total background of these women and the actual process of elections, (unanimous, nominated or contested) forces in operation etc. before one can talk about the democratic efficacy of this representative principle. There are, however, studies which point to instances where the women who have been elected to the Panchayats on this principle, have emerged as powerful spokespersons for the weaker sections.\(^{13}\)

Three of our contributors have taken up the experiments in the grassroots democracy carried out in Maharashtra and Punjab for detailed analysis. The limitations – social and personal – have been highlighted to point out that we still have to go a long way before the rural poor women can participate freely and boldly and take initiative in making decisions and monitoring the programmes for women’s rights.\(^{14}\) Also possibly a token representation of one or two women cannot overcome the patriarchal and high class/castes oriented Panchayats way of arriving at decisions. Further, women can partake only when there are collective organizations like Mahila Mandals and NGOs existing in the rural society, articulating women’s opinion and demands. There are, however, instances when women have already felt some impact by way of consciousness and empowerment, particularly where there are all women Panchayats. The ground trend is one of loosening of rigid postures and greater acceptance of the idea of women’s entry in political activities. Not merely women of lower castes and classes, but even women of
upper classes, informed and articulate are participating. With more political training of rural women, with more success for projects like DWACRA emphasizing collective action, and legal literacy camps disseminating women’s rights, one can hope for greater participation of women in local level democracy. The number of women sarpanches also needs to be increased.\textsuperscript{15}

As we talk of the participation of women in politics, an important issue that keeps cropping up is the relationship of women’s movement with other political movements of general nature, as well as the major political institutions of the day like political parties. This is both a theoretical as well as applied issue, as it is one which very many women’s organizations face in their actual functioning. Should a women’s organization treat itself as exclusively women oriented and non-political and thereby, as often, end as a welfare organization? Should it believe that women’s issues are ‘political’ issues as they involve power-relations within and outside home, and hence view itself as a political activist group? In the latter case, should it join some of the existing political parties or politically oriented groups and work through them or remain an ‘autonomous’ political group. In the second instance, it might help to be a lobby or pressure group that acts on one and all, but in the process loose out on political support and become isolated and marginalized, or even become dependent on one or the other when faced with challenges or survival.\textsuperscript{16}

Closely related to this, and in fact, influencing it is the deeper question of the linkages between women’s issues and the general issues of the society and the political system. Are the issues of women’s rights, equality, justice, and social status removed from the general nature of the socio-economic, cultural and political issues of the day? Can women’s question be pursued independent
of, and at times contrary to, the developments in the broader sphere? Can isolation and aloofness ensure women’s issues, their strength to survive and pursue their goals? In the past, during the Independence Movement this has been proved impossible. A strong current of nationalism then and some other equally strong current during our times can co-opt or sweep the women’s issues and consciousness. Communalism and religious revivalism is one such current and involves participation of increasing number of women. Possibly the women’s movement can stand on its own if it is strong enough not merely to steer clear in its own course, but even to intervene in the major trends of the day. This is perhaps why, women’s issues, women’s organizations and women’s movement far from being isolated, perceive their role to be an active and interventionist one, as the conscience keepers of the society. This however, would immediately mean a linkage, and not isolationism, from other political organizations and movements.\textsuperscript{17}

Closely related to this is the participation of women in other social movements and activities of the day. Participation in trade union and peasant movement, in the reservation (anti-or-pro) agitations, anti-price rise demonstrations are some of the instances. The issues fought may not be women’s issues; they may be general issues that concern women and men. But the participation of women not merely make the women ‘visible’ but also strengthens the movement and gives it publicity. Further their participation helps to steer the movement in certain directions, often away from sexism and violence. In fact, women’s participation in such wider social movements and agitations have been the more common and earlier ways of the participation of women in politics. The anti-price rise agitation in Bombay in 1972 witnessed
widespread participation of women. These have been well chronicled for us by Mrinal Goe, Nandita Gandhi, Usha Mehta and Usha Thakkar. In the next years we have witnessed many such movements like the J.P. Movement, anti-communal agitations, anti/pro-reservation agitations, etc. It would be, however, worthy of women’s participation if they could have, in the course of the agitations and struggles at least, paid attention to the women’s issues, the rights of women as women and taken specific steps to facilitate increasing participation of women both as members as well as at the decision making levels. It is also possible, as Sujata Patel points out, that there may be times when the interests and rights of women may clash with the objective and methodology of the wider movements. What should be the attitude and policy direction of the participating women or the wider women’s movement and organizations at such times? It has been the experience of any number of politically active women that at such times, the women question is totally subordinated to the wider question – ideological or power oriented it may be. All the political parties are guilty of such a sacrifice of women’s issues and perceptions; to them participation of women is secondary, dispensable and opportunistic and has to be reconciled with the interests of the party. No wonder Chhaya Datar goes hammer and tongs at them for neglecting the mobilization and organization of women on their special issues. Her attack is particularly against the Left Parties which in the seventies seemed to have specially opposed the feminist perspective.18

The parties have, since then moved much further by way of mobilization of women, organization of party wings as well as articulation of women’s issues. However, the basic critique is still valid viz. women’s issues and
women's participation are encouraged only within certain parameters and are constrained by the basic objectives and interests of the parties, that being the capturing of political power and survival of the government, once captured. A deeper empathy and gender sensitization of politicians, political institutions, and in general in the public life, are woefully lacking. Women's participation and rights, thereby, move one step forward and two steps backward. Real gender equality, justice and rights are still cry.

A glance at the pre-independence political movements in this country will reveal that a vast field of activities was opened up for women in this country during the various non-cooperation movements launched under Gandhiji’s leadership. Larger and larger number of women came forward to participate in these non-violent satyagrahas such as the agitations against unjust forest laws, boycott of foreign cloth, picketing at liquor shops, the salt satyagraha etc. The share of the educated middle class women in these agitations was also on the increase. In fact, participation of women in these struggles resulted in many cases unprecedented identification of entire families with the national liberation movement. A number of young girls became bold enough to go around remote villages propagating Gandhiji’s message among the rural folk, organizing bonfires of foreign cloth and popularizing the “Khadi Cult”. The movement infused a new spirit of adventure among. Gandhiji laboured restlessly for attracting the country’s attention to problems of women and to secure for them a place of honour in the society. He could enlist thereby the participation of women in distant villages in the national movement side by side with their educated counterparts in urban India.
It is unfortunately true that Gandhiji did not succeed in equal measure in involving the women folk of the socially backward communities in his national campaigns because of Dr. Ambedkar’s unquestioned sway over their minds. Nonetheless the participation of this section of women in the various movements launched by Dr. Ambedkar is notable. Dr. Ambedkar’s movement subsequently suffered a number of fissures within its ranks.

It is possible to cite many more agitations which took place on various issues in the post-independence era in this country. The agitation for Samyukta Maharashtra during 1956-60 is one such example. The share of women in the numerous meetings, morchas and satyagrahas organized during this agitation was sizeable and it changed the entire face of the movement. This spectacle was repeated during the Nav Nirmal Agitation in Gujarat during the seventies. The women participants in Gujarat struggle invented entirely new forms of Gandhian non-violent resistance. You can imagine the courage of these women resolutely answering the police bayonets with garlands in their hands! No wonder that their example generated a new awakening in the length and breadth of Gujarat. The anti-corruption movement in Bihar under Jayaprakashji’s leadership also saw growing participation of the women and generated an hitherto unknown wave of enthusiasm in the otherwise socially backward and uneducated women folk of Bihar. It is necessary in this connection to mention the glorious example of the ‘Chipko’ agitation in 1980, in the mountainous Tehri Garhwal district of U.P. launched by the noted Gandhian Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna against the wanton destruction of valuable forestry in this region being carried on by the vested commercial interests. The rural women embraced unflinchingly the trees being felled by the contractor’s men in
the impenetrable jungles in the region and successfully stalled their efforts to cut down the valuable woods which were the life nerve of the hill people. While the valiant women offered themselves to be axed first before the trees were cut down, they sang in chorus.

The women were simultaneously demonstrating their indomitable love for the green foliage and also their unmatched organizational capabilities. The resolve shown by these unlettered women, never even remotely associated with the so called “politics” was astonishing. In early eighties the Assamese women also showed their vigour in similarly equal measure. In a way historically speaking in the entire North-Eastern Sector of Assam, the Naga and Mizo women have always shown more social consciousness and activity. Thousands of housewives squatting in the streets for endless hours in the Assam Agitation and braving the shower of police lathis and bullets was no ordinary event. This defiance had been the backbone of the relentless agitation carried on by the Assamese students for so long. A number of instances can be found to prove that massive women participation in struggles against injustices is possible if the struggles are based on the Gandhian non-violent techniques.

While on the subject please permit me to place before you two more sagas of women’s valiant successful struggles in Maharashtra. Both the movements relate to the period 1972 to 1974. Maharashtra was then facing the severest famine conditions. The consequences were two-fold. On the one hand, draught affected farmers, farm labourers and their families in the rural areas were literally starving and on the other, the urban population was experiencing the worst ever scarcity and phenomenally rising prices of essential commodities. The proverbially thick-skinned government Refused to
act to arrest this deteriorating situation. Large number of rural women folk then
desperately took up cudgels against the district officers, gheraoed them
frequently demanding work and lively-hood. Finally the Government had to
yield and had to pass the legislation known as the Employment Guarantee
Scheme. The fact that Maharashtra was the first state to pass such a legislation
amply proves the intensity of the struggle launched by these women. The
success was due to the joint efforts of the alert people’s representatives within
the legislatures and the equally alert people without. It must also be admitted
that the government was more responsive to popular agitations then than they
are at present.¹⁹

The other story of the struggle relates to the sustained agitations
launched by women in Maharashtra, particularly in Bombay against rising
prices and scarcity of essential commodities under the banner of the “Anti-Price
Rise Women’s Committee” and its symbol the “Rolling Pin”. Although the
Committee was formed by all the women’s fronts of the opposition political
parties it soon became truly representative of women in all walks of life fighting
for their cause single-mindedly. The movement soon acquired a popular basis.
It never lost its intensity during its course because of the new techniques it
employed in its methods of agitations. Before it took up any issue it always did
adequate homework regarding the problem then decided on the form of
agitation. The result was, it always achieved its precise targets and never
appeared to undertake token fights only for the popular applause. The very fact
that women workers of political parties otherwise fighting amongst themselves
had come together to fight for a common cause, was fascinating enough to
catch the imagination of the working class women and the middle class
housewives alike. Every housewife had a feeling that the Committee was fighting for her day-to-day problems and was achieving concrete results. It provided her the right forum to ventilate her suppressed wrath against the insolent rulers. The movement thus become truly non-political and yet immensely popular. It reached its peak when the Committee’s call for the evening Thali (metallic dinner plates) Beating protest evoked such wide response in Bombay that even the housewives of the staff in the Raj Bhavan participated in this novel form of protest. The Rolling Pin Morcha the token “Chaff Weighing of Chief Minister” (To protest against the uncleaned articles being distributed through the ration shops), the “invasion” of Mantralaya, beating empty oil tins, all these proved effective weapons for redressing the immediate grievances. The Rolling Pin Morcha secured increased supply of edible oil, sugar etc. for the Diwali festival; the “invasion” of the Mantralaya resulted in increased supply of kerosene and the “Chaff Weighing of the Chief Minister” (KACHARA TULA) compelled the government to arrange for the cleaning of the rationed articles prior to supply through the ration shops. The “Thali Beating” almost rocked the government which in utter panic even resorted to police firing in some places.

The national and regional press widely covered these agitations with the result that these agitations had their echo in more than 100 villages in Maharashtra. The well designed posters taken out by the committee were truly educative besides being attractive for housewives who had never come out in the streets to solve their problems. The movement instilled a new confidence among women that they can ct to redress their grievances. In turn, this self-
confidence among the women earned them the respect they deserved in greater measure in the society.

It is rightly said that respect, after all, has to be earned and not merely demanded and the women of Maharashtra under the banner of the ANTI-PRICE RISE COMMITTEE did exactly this. It had clearly established the truth that the woman cannot get her due status in the society only through conferences and resolutions. Her active participation in the various public activities concerning social problems is absolutely necessary if she is to get a due place of honour in the society.\textsuperscript{20}

It is noteworthy that during the International Women’s Year celebrations in 1975 this great movement in Maharashtra was not even cursorily mentioned during the lengthy debates on women’s emancipation. The reason is obvious. Most of the leaders of the ‘Rolling Pin Morcha’ then were behind the bars and any public mention of their names would have meant some what ‘dangerous consequences’ to the speakers in these conferences. This silence however, has done incalculable harm to the process of associating the common women-folk with the social and political movements in the country. If the movement for women’s emancipation is to be looked upon as an inseparable part of the wider movement for the uplift of the downtrodden then it is inevitable that women are not kept away from the social and political activities and deliberate efforts are made to ensure that larger and larger number of women join the main stream of social political upheavals in the country.

I most specially mention that the 1977 uprising for Restoration of Democracy once again saw the participation of the women on a notable scale.
It was somewhat reminiscent of the Kutch Satyagrah (offered to protest against the India-Pakistan Agreement over the Disputed Desert Territory in West Gujarat). In the post-Emergency General Election in 1977 too the women played a major role. They used to attend all public meetings at any odd hour of the day and night casting off all their traditional barriers. It can be incontestably stated that women’s participation in any movement at once changes the very texture of the agitation. It is heartening to see educated middle-class women fighting shoulder to shoulder with the uneducated poor housewives. The will and the capacity of the ordinary people to participate in politics are the necessary pre-requisites of democracy and participation by women in politics further lends vitality to the democratic way of life.

**IN ELECTORAL POLITICS**

We have so far made a running survey of women’s participation in politics in general. It would only be proper in this connection to have a look at the extent of women’s participation in electoral politics and to examine whether their share in this sphere too is satisfactory. (See the chart given below giving the number of women candidates and the number of women elected to the Parliament during the period 1952 to 1977). Although no definite link can be established between the number of woman MPs and the socio-economic level and extent of literacy obtained in the region they represent, it will be observed that the share of Muslims and Adivasi women in both the list of candidates as also of the elected MPs is far from satisfactory. The Scheduled Caste women of course, show a slightly better strength. It also cannot be concluded that urban women have shown more consciousness than their rural counterparts.
The finding of the Commission appointed to examine the Status of Women in India on the eve of the International Women’s Year also need not be disputed. It can however be seen that there is a progressive decline after 1962 in the number of woman MPs. This is all the more astonishing against the background of the fact that women voters outnumbered men voters in every election. A glance at the Table below extracted from the above referred Report titled “Towards Equality” will be interesting exercise.

**Women Contestants for Lok Sabha**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of General Election</th>
<th>Total seats contested</th>
<th>No. of women contestants</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No. of women elected</th>
<th>%age of Winners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the Constituent Assembly in 1946 included only women members, they were an impressive lot considering their social status and their political career in the country Smt. Durgabai, Hansa Mehta, Ammu Swaminathan, Sucheta Kriplani, Purnima Banerjee, Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshi Pandit in the Constituent Assembly had behind them the backdrop of the glorious freedom struggle and naturally therefore made a mark of their own in the deliberations of the Assembly. They continued for two years as Members of the Provisional Parliament. In the first elections to Parliament in 1952 only 14 women were elected; in 1957 they were 27. The number went up to 35 in 1962 and thereafter the decline started. It is surprising that this decline was more pronounced since 1967 when the country had a woman Prime Minister. In the 1980 elections only 27 women were elected.
It is interesting to note State-wise that since 1952 the number of women elected from such states as U.P., Bihar and M.P., which are considered politically, socially and educationally backward as compared to the other states was more than those elected from advanced states. These States are even today lagging far behind in the type of political and social movements which I have discussed earlier, which again proves that there is no relation between women’s participation in these movements and their strength in the legislatures of the country.\textsuperscript{21}

I entirely agree with the ‘Status of Women’s Commission’s conclusions regarding the performance of women legislators. In the earlier days soon after Independence women legislators appeared more alert about women’s problems and even about the general issues but that was probably because of their close association with the freedom struggle, movements for general welfare, rights of women, etc.

It is therefore necessary to study in greater depth causes of the steady decline in the number of elected women and also their performance as legislators although their number as contestants in the elections might have increased.

In 1957 the then undivided Congress Party passed a resolution making it mandatory for the party to reserve 15\% of these seats in the legislatures for women. It must be admitted that of all the political parties in the country, the Congress Party has put up highest number of women candidates in elections to legislatures. This may be due to a number of reasons. One may be that the Congress Party was the largest party. But again the lists of congress party
women candidates show that their number from such backward States as U.P., Bihar and M.P. was larger than such developed states as Kerala, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Assam. Of course, I do not even for a movement believe that the Congers Party had carefully thought of giving ‘justice’ to women who constituted 50% of the population, in the development process of this country. It is more out of ‘political expediency’ revolving around groups in their party in each of the states rather than on the strength of their own contribution to social political work that the few women appeared to have risen. The women, mostly drawn from the elite class, have done no more social work than running children centres and conducting free nutrition centres, etc. This surely cannot be an adequate background to win the elections, and if elected, she is not likely to make any impact on the deliberations in the Councils. None of them is even remotely associated and has shown even much less mental involvement in these stupendous social tasks. “Black Money” and its concomitant evils have acquired an upper hand in the present day politics. Under these circumstances, the process of associating women with politics is bound to be hampered. As a matter of fact, these present day criteria of money power for selection of candidates for elections is not the worry of only women. The male candidates have also to face these odds; only that the odds are more serious for women candidates. Along with the free play of money power other evils like violence and character assassination are proving stubborn obstacles to women’s increasing participation in the present day politics.

Unless we radically change this situation the wider objective of women’s emancipation will be nowhere in sight. It is necessary to draw larger and larger number of women from the ordinary walks of life into social and political
movements. The Independence Movement to some extent was carefully chalked out as an integrated movement for political, social and economic uplift of the country and hence we saw greater participation of women in the freedom struggle. Movements for the emancipation of women will have to be drawn and carried on, on similar lines. The total divorce between the problems of the women and general social and political problems has resulted in the declining participation of women in politics.\textsuperscript{22}

Therefore I am firmly of the opinion that deliberate efforts will have to be made to develop women’s awareness, commitment and closer involvement in the day to day politics of the country and they will have to be enabled to take political decisions and initiate political actions independently. Only then, and not till then, women’s share in the governance of this country and their status in the country’s politics will grow up to the desired levels.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Symbolic of the mother goddess in India i.e., the power of women kind.


10. Ibid, pp. 102-105.


