CHAPTER - VII

Before concluding it would be much relevant to peep in to the views of Shobha De, a Novelist and critic, on women in politics. According to her, Women in politics aren’t taken seriously because they don’t take themselves seriously. And as we all know, politics is serious business. Women, it is believed, do not have the stomach for such activity. Women, it is also believed, get into politics for all the wrong reasons. To please their jailed husbands (Rabri Devi), to please their autocratic fathers (Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto), safeguard their family’s interests (Megawati Sukarnoputri), to preserve a political legacy (Sonia Gandhi, Sheikh Hasina Wajed), to vindicate family honour (Chandrika Kumaratunga), or to fix their errant husbands (Hillary Clinton), Rarely do women get into politics because they are politically motivated. In fact, women exercise very little real choice in the matter—they don’t get into politics. They wander in.

In the old, politically incorrect days, it used to be said half-jokingly, "For a woman to be taken seriously in politics, she has to look like a man (Golda Meir), behave like a man (Margaret Thatcher), talk like a man (Indira Gandhi). "No women made it in politics being woman. In fact, the worst form of humiliation, for a male politician in India, was to offer the fellow bangles and belittle him for "behaving like a woman".

Politics is a tough, grim, filthy business. Who says women can't be tough, grim and filthy? Men. When it comes to politics, men suddenly turn "protective", and show women the door. The bedroom door. The kitchen door. They say it is not possible for a woman to combine family with a career in politics. They used to say that about women in all other fields, too. They say, the only women who can succeed in politics are those with powerful male backing. A legitimate charge. Unfortunately, women who try and make it on their own steam do seem to fall by the wayside. The dice is clearly loaded against them. And it is easy to see why.

Women in any high-profile arena risk becoming victims of male voyeurism. More so in politics. People come to "see" Sonia. To "see" Priyanka. To "see" Sushma. Nobody to "see" Atalji or to "see" Sharad Pawar. They come to listen to them. Does anybody listen to our women
politicians, apart from the hired crowds who sit there because they're paid to?.

Take today's lot - a motley group consisting of fading film stars and tired TV icons. Whether it's Vijayashanti or Naina Balaswar, Malavika or Jayaprada, is anybody concerned with their views on anything? No, they are only concerned with the "view" they provide.

We ask for reservations. Reservations for whom? Illiterate puppets? What will this quota achieve other than giving women in politics a still worse name? The truth is, in India, women get into politics either by default or for all the wrong reasons. They themselves are responsible for reinforcing the stereotypes. Amma snubs the mamma. And men rejoice—"See, this is how females behave. And they call themselves allies?" Mamata Banerjee sounds hysterical each time she open her mouth and speaks. Who gains? Men. "Women cannot think rationally", they say, shaking their heads in disbelief. Sushma Swaraj brings a "behen v. bahu" angle into a serious fight. And men laugh. "Is she solving a joint-family problem or talking about national issues".

All of this makes the rest of the women in our country squirm. Not a single sane, articulate, non-strident female voice can be heard in the current cacophony. And men exult. "Stick to the choolah and children.
"they advise. "Cook, clean, procreates!" If women find this offensive and downright nauseating, why not do something to counter it? Why shout "discrimination... prejudice... hostility"? Politics is the single most-selfish profession in the world. The only service it recognises is self-service. Women, who fool themselves about that, fool no one else. The only suckers are voters. This negative argument can be challenged, because women as a considerable section of population must take part in active politics.

Women movement and feminism got wider attention only during 1975, which was celebrated as women's years. Since then Women's development and now empowerment of women attracted researchers' attention. It is true that National Liberation movement united both men and women under the umbrella of Gandhiji. But after independence, political, economic or social movement is not unifying Indian Women, rather they are being divided on caste, clan and so on.

Before the passage of 73rd Amendment, the number of women involved in politics is quite dismal, both in term of their numbers and as proportion to the men involved in politics, a small number of upper class women have played important roles in the women movement. Now in various tier of Panchayat Raj System there are 25,00,000 elected
representatives, among them 8,00,000 are women. Now they are visible, heard, flat and their voice is loud.

To understand the process of political empowerment of women in its proper context, literature relating to women movement, women participation in politics, role of women in Panchayat Raj and other such relevant subject have been reviewed. The review of literature indicates the fact that the process of political empowerment is got momentum only after the passage of 73rd and 74th Amendment, which provided for one-third seats for women in rural and local urban bodies.

However, those who oppose reservation of seats for women in Panchayats brandish four main reasons in support of their stand:

First, women who become members of Panchayats and local bodies will disturb the harmony of homes and of family life. Even those men who tolerate women working in offices for fixed hours do not take kindly to them when their roles change to one of community leadership. This is because then the women have to attend to people’s problems as leaders. This means irregular hours of work and a twenty-four hour demand on their time. Therefore, who will look after the children and household chores, the menfolk ask?
Second, women will become targets of attacks by anti-social elements when they move out of their homes or go outside their village for work, meetings, and so on. A case was cited of one state where a few local women leaders, obliged to spend nights away from home during their travel, were attacked by goons and even raped. Will any male family member allow his wife, daughter or sister or take part in a public role which has such potential dangers, they ask?

Third, they mention that whenever women hold elected offices, the male officers are the ones who “dictate” what is or is not to be done. They take control of the entire situation and women elected representatives become the hapless victims of officialdom.

Finally, these opponents contend, even if women are elected in large numbers, the power equation will never change. “Instead of Ram Singh, Ram Singh’s wife will be there”, these villagers quip.

Evidently, these and many other problems are the products of a particular mind-set and culture of male dominance. Panchayati Raj Institutions could achieve a social transformation aimed at the woman’s changing role. But, of course, the task is beset with enormous difficulties for women in its initial phases.
The two major obstacles for making this reservation a reality—are: reservation to enable women to play their rightful role in the national development at every level including the decentralised Panchayat level - are:

(i) the mass illiteracy of women, and

(ii) the discrimination, exploitation and oppression that they face in society, both rural and urban.

Women have been and are very seriously lagging behind in literacy vis-à-vis men. This means that women are not able to read what is provided for them in the Constitution, and follow the various orders and notices concerning them, issued by the State governments, regarding Panchayats. It is in the context, an attempt has been made to probe the socio-economic composition of the women representatives in Minjur Panchayat Union.

When Panchayat election were held for 12,893 Gram Panchayat with reservation for women in 1996 in Tamil Nadu, women were asked to grab this opportunity to empower themselves. Nearly 43,000 women were elected to various positions in Panchayat System in Tamil Nadu. Among them 170 women representatives come from Minjur Panchayat Union
which consists of 56 villages. Among them 140 are Panchayat Union Councillors and one member is District Councillor. Besides, 19 presidents of various Panchayat are women.

As the objective of this study states an attempt has been made to evaluate the various processes involved in women empowerment by providing reservation at various tiers of grassroots democracy. For this, first the socio-economic background and previous political experience of the women representatives were collected and analysed political empowerment of women and their participation in politics, particularly, in Panchayat activities one complementary each other's. Participation enables women representatives to get awareness and discharge their mandatory duties effectively.

The first chapter introduction provides a clear perception of the problem taken for this study i.e. political empowerment of women through Panchayat Raj. It also describes the methodology, objectives and study universe of this study.

In the Second Chapter it was found that women as a sector has been neglected and denied opportunities to take part in political process. Even voting right and equal opportunities to contest election was provided to them only during the early part of twentieth century. Hence, politics
remind as a male domain and women were marginalized and have not access to political process.

The Third Chapter political empowerment of women highlights the problems involved in the process of political empowerment of women. It is found that the argument for a Constitution Amendment and reservation for women’s has gathered momentum in the second half of 1980’s during Rajiv’s regime. His efforts went vain, as the Bill was defeated in the Rajya Sabha. However, on December 22, 1992, the Lok Sabha passed the 73rd Amendment, which came into force on 24th April 1993.

It is true that the Pachayati Raj Act has given women a chance to wield greater power at grass root level, which remained a far cry for a long time. But women by virtue of their gender, still experience discrimination in terms of denial of equal access to power structure that controls social structure and determines power equation in both men and women.

The fourth chapter The Profile Of Women Councillors analyse the socio-economic and political background of 170 women representatives from Minjur panchayat union. In this chapter a detailed analysis has been made to understand the socio-economic and political background of the women members, as it would help for better understanding, the process
of political empowerment of women through Panchayat System. Here, Panchayats have been viewed as a supportive environment and mechanism, which enable the women representative, to cross the traditional barriers, which marginalized them for a long time. Because, Panchayats have been made constitutionally viable unit and basic structure of grassroot democracy. Now let us see the socio-economic profile of the women councillors.

It is believed that only elderly women of 45 years of age must be representative of Panchayati Raj System. In this study, it is found that among the respondents, 56.50 per cent belong to the age group of 31 to 40 years. Only 14.10 per cent young age group availed the opportunity to become members of Panchayats. 18.80 per cent women representatives are above 40 years. Hence, the middle age group women dominate the Panchayats.

Access to education is considered one of the most influential factor in empowering people. However, Education is not universally available, particularly in societies like India. This fact is much relevant to our study, whereby as 52.90 per cent women representatives are not crossed their primary education. Only 40.60 per cent women representatives got
middle level and Higher Secondary level education. Another 6.50 per cent women representatives got Degree and more education.

Occupation wise, majority of women members i.e., 74.10 per cent are engaged in business and 21.20 per cent are agricultural labourers. Hence, it would be desirable to consider their husband's occupation. Here too, 69.4 per cent occupation of the husband of women representatives is agricultural related activities. Another 16.5 per cent are engaged as agricultural labourers. Only 7.1 per cent husband, are government employee.

Land, the primary source of power and wealth in rural India deserves a close scrutiny. As such, 26.50 per cent husband of women representative are land less. Only 17 per cent of them have more than 5 acres of land. 34.10 per cent of them have less than two acres of land.

Income wise distribution shows that only 30.6 per cent family has more than Rs. 10,000 as monthly income. 23.5 per cent family has more than Rs. 5000 and below Rs. 10,000. Another, 21.2 per cent family has less than Rs. 3,000 as monthly income.

Further, it is interesting to note some revealing facts collected and analysed about women representatives. First, 56.10 per cent women
representatives acknowledged that only due to the support of their family, they are able to contest and win the Panchayat election. Secondly, among our respondents 46.5 per cent accept the fact their husband are giving direction to decide matters at Panchayat level. Further, more interestingly, 90.60 women representatives opine that their involvement in Panchayat activities do not affect their personal work and family affairs. Thirdly, it is important, also to note that 86.5 per cent women representatives feel that training in Panchayats' rules and procedures is a must as it would enhance their capabilities to deal with the day today affairs of their respective Panchayats.

Participation of Women Representatives in Panchayat Activities is considered as a silent revolution. Hence it is desirable to see their level of participation and relation between their socio-economic background.

The relation between age and level of participation reveals the fact that the young age group participate in Panchayat activities than any other group. The higher the age, the less is the level of participation. Because the aged women representatives are less participative and middle age group participate moderately.
Education appears to influence the levels of participation of the women representatives. The secondary level educated women representatives participate in Panchayat activities than the primary educated. Paradoxically, the more educated women representatives are seemingly less active than the secondary level educated women representatives.

As far as caste affiliation is concerned, the most backward caste, backward caste are active in Panchayat Politics. The scheduled caste is moderate in its activities.

Religions wise, women representatives from Christian faith appear to be more active than the rest of the group. It may be because of the voluntary organisations' efforts to train the women in empowering processes.

Occupational status also plays an important role in increasing the level of participation. Agricultural labourers are more active than the housewives who are unemployed. This indicates the fact that the newly acquired status of power in Panchayat by the agricultural labourers. Similarly, occupational status of the husbands also plays an important role in the level of participation. Agricultural labourers generally, active in Panchayat activities. Those who are engaged in agriculture participated in
a moderate way. Those who are employee of private company or doing petty business take nominal participation in Panchayat activities.

Next, land holding of a family bears much influence on the level of participation in Panchayat activities. The women representatives whose husbands have more than five acres of land take active participation in Panchayat activities (89.65%). Land less women representatives are nominally participated in Panchayat activities (44.44%). Moderate participation is identified with small formers who have less than two acres of land (82.76%).

As far as political affiliations of the women representatives are concerned, more active women representatives are identified with the ruling DMK. Those women representatives who are not able to reveal their political identity are nominal participants.

Exposure to mass media does play evident role in increasing the level of participation of women representatives. For instance, 50 per cent newspaper readers take active part in Panchayat activities. 55.48 per cent TV viewers also participate moderately in Panchayat activities.

It has been found during the field visit, women representatives articulated the following demands:
1. They need ration-shops in their locations.

2. Except a few villages, village like Pulicat need drinking water facilities.

3. Most of the villages have seen some developmental activities after 1996 Local Bodies Election which is not sufficient to cater the needs.

4. Still, villages like Avurivakkam need link roads and bus facilities.

5. Most of the women representatives demand that the must be given a honorarium of Rs. 5,00 - Per Month.

6. Housing and Health still need better attention by both the local and state government.

In a way this study analysed the Political Empowerment Processes of women in Minjur Panchayat Union. At the concept level the Political Empowerment is not yet properly understood by the Women Representatives themselves. But it is a common fact that they have put a
step forward by contesting and occupying position of power in Panchayati Raj.

Its more relevant to quote M. Seetharam here, “In order to implement the new Panchayati Raj Act in letter and spirit, a strategy for human resource development needs to be evolved. In order to strengthen women’s role in Panchayats, training is needed for leaders and workers at varied levels.

> Gram Sabha level for adult women.

> Panchyat level for members and chairpersons.

> Policy and administrative level of functionaries. Principal components of the training should be:

> Orientation on provisions of Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act and member’s responsibilities

> Orientation on rural development programmes

> Management development of chairpersons / leaders

> Gender sensitisation of leaders, administrators and Communities to change attitudes and beliefs

> Training of trainers*”.