

# Getting a Foothold in Indian Politics

By Vibhuti Patel

**L**et us enter Politics, continue our struggle and take leadership.  
Can't put up with patriarchal power any more.  
O Venubai, O, Rampyar why do you remain repressed?  
Come out and join our rally.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

This is how the song sung for the first time by the "Toiling Women's Liberation Movement" members in the late seventies ended. It represented the gusto of a newly formed mass organisation of tribal women in Dhulia district. It became popular among the women's groups not only in Maharashtra but also all over India. This song represented the new understanding of 'politics'. Politics was not only electoral politics or membership of political parties, but a collective action of women against oppressive political power with a long term goal of social transformation that ensured women's liberation from exploitation, degradation, injustice, subjugation and superstition.

The slogan "Personal is political" popularised by the Western women's liberation movement appealed to many city-based women's groups who realised how individual cases of violence against women were not merely "personal problems" but an outcome of sociocultural, historical, political and economic realities in which Indian women had to survive. As a

result, the issues which affected women and treated as personal problems such as rape, family violence, dowry murders, harassment at the workplace were put on the 'public-political agenda' of the women's movement. The pressure from the new women's groups forced the mainstream political parties also to show greater concern for women's issues at least in their public speeches, press statements and election manifestos. After the nationwide anti rape movement in 1980 cases of violence against women became issues for parties to score points against contenders in electoral battles as well as in the local power struggles.

## Mobilisation of women by political parties

The parliamentary parties started viewing women as a constituency in the eighties. This changing attitude of parliamentary parties towards women is reflected in their election manifestos, their attitude towards women candidates and their overall electoral strategies. In the electoral process, two contradictory processes exist. On the one hand, power-



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ful and articulate women leaders who are mainly from the elite are part of the process and on the other hand there are also women who are mere rubber stamps. However, the elite women's political presence derives from their relations with male politician-husbands, brothers, fathers, and father-in-laws.

## Implications of increased political participation of women

Women's visibility in the political scenario can be understood in two ways:

- ★ increase in the number of women in the electoral process and their meaningful contribution in highlighting women-specific issues.
- ★ qualitative change in political goals and processes as a result of accommodating women's perspectives and priorities.

An increasing number of meetings, shibirs, welfare programmes, national conventions has been organised by different political parties of their women cadres. Mahila Congress, BJP Women's Front, Communist Party of India, Republican Party of India, Janta Front and Shetkari Sangathana have all organised conventions to discuss and highlight women's problems.

## Hurdles faced by women candidates

Most of the women face tremendous opposition from family, community and the male political leaders if they decide to enter electoral politics or public life. The present political leadership, inspite of its populist rhetorics, want to keep women out of the political scene. Women politicians are still looked upon as appendages to the males in the political arena. Indian women's lower educational level, inferior social status and lack of autonomy are reflected in their lower participation in politics. Increasing criminalisation, corruption



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and compromises required to sustain one's political career deter women from entering mainstream politics. Even among the majority of women's rights groups, politics is equated with politicking, dirty manoeuvring and manipulations and therefore power and politics remain an anathema to them. But at the same time, women activists involved in direct action for the past one and a half decade have also realised the limitations of micro-level activities.

Many of them have felt the necessity of entering the local self-government bodies such as Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayats and higher bodies in the Assembly and Lok Sabha. The political compromises of principles and programmes in the policy resolutions, the increasing importance of mafia politics and exorbitant money power required by electoral politics act as deterrants for women's participation in politics.

Yet Indian women have come on the political agenda of the country through various techniques – collective action programmes, consciousness raising, petitioning and lobbying. In addition they have produced well-researched documents and obtained after great effort, some media visibility for women's issues. This contradictory process must be kept in mind to evolve a proper understanding of women's political participation in India.

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Source: *Womenspeak*