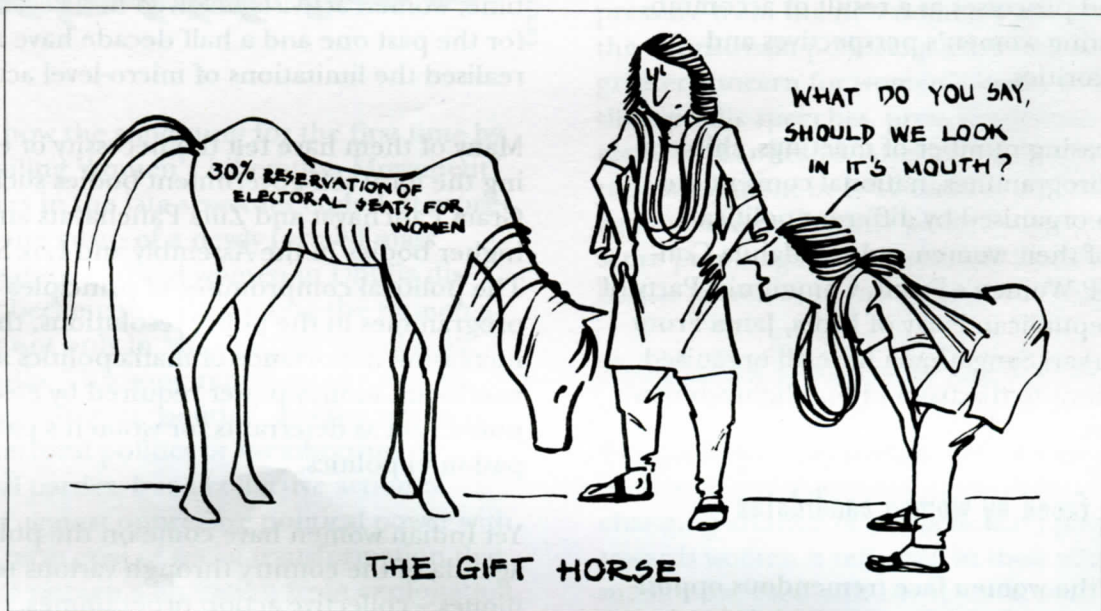


# Interview with an Indian Activist

**G**angaben Solanki is a 34 year old *dalit* Gujarati woman who has been working in her basti for the last ten years helping women informally. She is employed in a municipal school and works at home looking after her two children and husband. She has often locked horns with the local dalit's party leaders and caste leaders in putting forward the women's question. Her natural dynamism and deep concern for women makes her an instinctual feminist and activist. When 30 percent reservation of seats for women was announced, she formulated her viewpoint based on her own experiences and thoughts.



"When I first heard of 30 percent, I felt quite happy about it. Women, social workers like me who work in a community and all of us in the women's groups, need official support for everyday living. It is not only taking out marches and campaigns. Some women have problems when they are out hawking with the

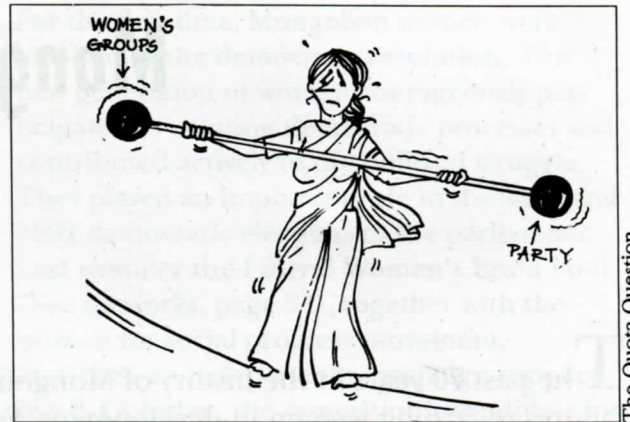
municipality or with the police. They can also be given stall space through the corporation. In my case I was allocated a house but the files just lay there for three years. So many women who become widows have to go to corporators pay bribes or do sexual favours to get their room in their name.



If women are elected then women can go to them, without feeling afraid, and ask for help. For example, they may need certificates or other official papers. Men have been corporators for years they have contacts with builders and have perfected the art of fooling people. It is common for them to give slum dwellers taps or latrines by asking them to waive their rights over the land. Or they take commission from builders. Wherever there are old buildings they tell the tenants that they will repair them but in reality they take money from the corporation. Women candidates can expose such goings on. See, no one is concerned about women, why look the gift horse in the mouth? So I thought if this government for whatever reason is giving something to women we should just take it."

"Around that time, my caste panchayat had its elections. Do you know that still women have no right to vote. We have the right to vote for the corporation, for the Assembly and Lok Sabha but not for the panchayat! It is such a problem for women coming before a panchayat. Suppose there is a dispute, divorce or battering, these are all problems to be solved by the panchayat. But what happens, the woman feels hesitant coming before a group of men, her own inlaws are there so she cannot speak freely and her family is not aware of what she really wants. Again women have to go to the panchayat for all sorts of certificates like domicile or asking them to pressurise a husband who is refusing to pay maintenance. People were quite impressed and the leaders offered me a seat. They said you should stand and very soon party leaders also heard of this and came to offer me a ticket. They said you will not have to do anything, just stand and we will take care of everything for you. One of them even offered me money for all the election work. If I stand, not only will I have to resign from my job but do what they say. As a woman I will never have the same status as men corporators. And then who will take care of the women of my caste here?"

"So I thought nothing doing I am not going to be sucked into this sort of thing! Being elected



to the corporation will be more of a symbolic thing. Male leaders will continue to rule over the community. If I stay where I am I could do much more for women and see that they get a better deal from the panchayat. By pushing me out of the community the male leaders will continue doing exactly what they have been doing so far, solve problems according to their beliefs or money power. Suppose I was elected, what would be my position in the corporation? I will not be allowed to do anything I want. I will have to get involved in party politics. Do you know that there has been no woman mayor or sheriff in Bombay in the last 40 years?"

"All sorts of other thoughts also came up. Elections will make women oppose each other. If there is another woman like me in my basti then another party will promote her, so both of us, who might have cooperated earlier in helping women will now stand against each other. Then who knows women can also become corrupted like the male corporators. Practically I don't know how I would be able to manage. As elected members women could do much good...If you ask me straight off yes or no should there be reservations? Then I think that reservations for women should be there but I am doubtful about it."

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**Source:** *The Quota Question, Women and Electoral Seats* by Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi. Akshara Publication, 1992. pp. 19-20.

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