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**Indian Experience of Women's Quota in Local Government:
Implications for future strategies***

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Indian experience of women's quota:

India is the largest democracy in the world with over 1040 million citizens entitled to universal adult suffrage. Women have remained equal partners in India's struggle for freedom. This led to the constitutional guarantee of equal civil and political rights for men and women. Right from its inception, the principle of affirmative action has been adopted in the Constitution of India. In India, women's quota in local government was not something that was written afresh on a blank slate. There were various types of quotas already scribbled on it. India has a history of over 55 years of constitution-backed quotas for various sections in society. Article 15 (1) of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, sex, caste and place of birth. Article 15 (3) and (4) state that nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provisions for women, children and for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. Article 334 provides for a reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and the nomination of the Anglo-Indian community in the House of the People and in the Legislative Assemblies of the states. In India, quotas are also applicable in admission to educational institutions and in employment in the public sector. At present the ceiling on various quotas stands at 50% but there are persistent demands by various sections to raise these limits. There are proposals for quota for Most Backward Classes among the Other Backward Classes, employment quota for economically backward upper castes and minority religions and for extending quotas to private sector. All these proposals have led to a controversy over quota issue. These demands have overloaded the whole quota discourse to such an extent that it has had some negative impact on the issue of women's political quota. Indian discourse on quotas is extremely polarized and politicized and the issue is rarely being discussed dispassionately on its merits. To complicate the matter even further, in this society with caste-based quotas the Census Reports of India do not reflect data about castes.

Local Quotas versus Parliament Quotas:

In 1993, the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India provided for a reservation of 33% seats for women in local self-government institutions. This created over 1,000,000 slots for women. Both these Amendment bills were passed in the Parliament unanimously without any discussion or debate and without any demand from women's groups. At the time of 1996 General Elections to the XI Lok Sabha (House of the People) all major national political parties committed themselves to extending similar quota to state and national level. But the Women's Reservation Bill with this provision has become controversial for the past nine years, while all along in the XI, XII, XIII and XIV Lok Sabha the parliamentary arithmetic has remained in favor of the political parties officially supporting this bill. Curiously, these political parties have not initiated any measures for increasing women's representation in their ranks nor have they nominated more women candidates for elections to State Legislative Assemblies or for the Parliament.

The reason behind the smooth sailing of 73rd and 74th Amendments providing women's quota in local bodies and the nine-year deadlock over the Women's Reservation Bill providing quota in state legislatures and Lok Sabha is that the former did not pose any direct threat to the interests of male members of Parliament and State Legislatures while the latter threatens their own survival.

Process of Introduction of Quotas:

Prior to these Amendments the State of Karnataka had introduced 25% women's quota in Panchayat Raj Institutions¹. The state legislature of Karnataka passed the law in 1983 that

¹ Rural local self-government institutions

provided that 25 percent of the seats in local councils would be reserved for women. First elections after implementation of this law were held in 1987. Later in 1990, State of Maharashtra passed a law providing for 30% reservation of seats for women in rural as well as urban local self-government institutions.

Although the demand for the quotas for women was not a totally new demand, it was mooted primarily by the experts and academic discussants in the form of recommendations incorporated in some report. "Towards Equality" the Report of the Committee on Status of Women in India, 1975 as well as the "National Perspective Plan 1988-2000" had proposed women's quotas in local bodies. There was no mass mobilization of women for pressing this demand. Women activists in the feminist movement as well as in political parties admit that it is very difficult to mobilize Indian women for their political rights as compared to the mobilization for survival issues. In spite of over one million elected women representatives flooding local governments the women's movement in India was totally silent over this issue till 1996.

In the absence of a widespread debate about quotas, even after 12 years of implementation there is no consensus regarding what is to be expected from women elected through reserved seats. It was expected that if women enter politics in a large number they would change the whole texture of present day politics. They were expected to bring different values, preferences and perspectives into the political arena. It was expected that they would ensure that women's issues find high priority on the agenda of political parties. Women's presence in decision-making positions would lead to the elimination of discrimination against women, etc. Some believed that women would purify politics while others held that it would feminize corruption. Some crucial questions still remain unanswered. What is the objective of quotas: merely a sizeable presence of women? Can the new recruits from reserved seats act as the agency for change or would they end up internalizing prevalent rules of politics? Can we legitimately expect the women from reserved seats to owe a primary loyalty to the cause of women? Would it also mean that it would be okay if men behold primary loyalty to men? Do women alone represent women? Should women primarily represent women? How do we assess whether quotas are really leading to the empowerment of women? Can there be any role models for women representatives? Do we expect ideal women politician to be any different from an ideal male politician, in what way? And who constitutes the 'we'?

Some noteworthy trends:

1. Vacuum Theory:

The way women's quota on local level quota was introduced in India by skipping the preparatory phase altogether, is a cause of grave concern. All political parties and women's organizations were caught unaware as the gates of the political arena were thrown wide-open to women all of a sudden. A space for over 1,000,000 elected women representatives was created all over India, when all the political parties taken together did not have those many women activists. Therefore, the quota originally intended to create space for women, instead, created a vacuum generating a force of suction that pulled inside all the women standing on the brim of the political arena. Many of these were political activists in their own right, while others were close relatives of those shrewd male politicians who were prompt enough to step aside and push them forward. This led to the phenomenon of proxy women representatives in local bodies and made women's quota appear as a form of state-sponsored feminism. In some places, quotas were treated as the ceiling

and women incumbents from open constituencies were asked to vacate those and contest from a woman-reserved constituency

Deviation from the Feminine Stereotype

The following examples show a deviation from the traditional stereotypical femininity and challenge the notion of 'feminine essence'.

At Nagpur, the wife of a Councilor was reported to resort to physical violence against the wife of a candidate challenging her husband. (Daily Lokmat 22.2.97).

Women were also involved in booth capturing and allegedly tried to take away the blank ballot papers (Daily Nagpur Tarun Bharat 24.2.97).

A supporter a Member of the Legislative Assembly slapped another former Member with her sandal. (Daily Nagpur Tarun Bharat 21.2.97).

Women Criminals as candidates:

There were several women candidates with criminal record of drug trafficking, extortion, attempted murder, etc. Some of them even went to the extent of threatening their male rivals. Women were reported to have resorted to physical assault on rival women candidates and their male supporters. The increasing criminal element and use of violence generally discourage peace-loving elements. An average citizen and moreover, an average woman finds the rewards of political participation too low to justify the risk involved. Thus women's involvement in electoral violence, presence of a large number of rebel women candidates, presence of women criminals in the electoral arena threatening their male rivals, these are some of the trends that might cause concern. These trends suggest that women per se are not essentially different from men or at least do not behave any differently from men.

Rebel Candidates

The formation of electoral alliances led to the adjustment of seats among the partners in the alliance. Nowhere was a woman part of the steering committees of such alliances, which decided about the seat-adjustment. There were instances where incumbent women councilors seeking nomination from their own constituency were refused nomination due to de-reservation. Some of them defied the decision of the party and assertively fought the election on their own and also managed to get elected. The question is whether the rebel women deserve to be condemned for the breach of party loyalty for furthering individual ambition or should they be praised for not succumbing to the patriarchal decision of the party organization.

Gender differences and similarities:

There were quite a few similarities between the male and female candidates regarding several factors. Women aspirants also made a show of strength at the time of interview by Parliamentary Board. The issues highlighted in the campaign also display more similarity than differences. Some exorbitant promises about issues beyond the purview of the Municipal Corporation indicate the level of political ignorance on part of men and women alike and emphasize the need for massive campaign of political education. When refused candidature, the incidents of rebellion and shifting loyalties were also fairly common. Women did not display any different value preferences from men. Incidents of violence, threats for withdrawing candidature, misbehavior, violation of code of conduct, etc. were witnessed in case of both male and female candidates, though in a varying degree. There were incidents where women were involved in bogus voting, physical assault, threatening the rivals and pressurizing them for withdrawal, involvement in booth capturing, etc. Though these incidents are too few to generalize, they do suggest that there is no essential difference between men and women in this regard and perhaps over a period of

time even the difference in the degree of these incidents will also reduce, if some deliberate efforts are not made to change the prevalent rules of the game.

Some positive trends:

There are quite a few cases where women councilors display tremendous efficacy as actors in the political arena. These positive examples, though relatively small in number, vindicate the true potential of women's quotas:

Before contesting an election to Aurangabad Municipal Corporation, a Municipal School teacher had to resign from her job as it was an office of profit in the context of that Corporation.. Not only did she succeed in winning the support of the family for her decision, but after winning the election, also succeeded in transforming her family. Now the husband and children share household chores. In the private sphere they are equal partners and in the public sphere the husband who is a teacher in a municipal school, is subordinate to her. Surprisingly, this reversal of the traditional patriarchal hierarchy has not created any tension in the family. Her colleagues and municipal administrators alike praise her performance in the Corporation as well as in her constituency. However she admits that she would not have taken the risk of resigning the job and contesting election through an open ward had the constituency not been reserved for women. This example also questions the validity of widely held prejudices about the lack of progressiveness in Muslim community.

Another striking example is that of a housemaid belonging to 'Wadar' community. In her late fifties, this woman from Pune was working in the house of a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA). She was the mediator between her slum and this MLA, who used to solve many problems of that slum. When the municipal constituency of that slum got reserved for women, the MLA suggested that she should contest an election. Her longtime involvement in solving the problems of that slum, in addition to the caste factor, ensured her victory in the election. This woman displays a high sense of efficacy, does not have any inferiority complex about her underprivileged background, is quite assertive and at times even aggressive as a Municipal Councilor. She admits that women's quota was the only factor responsible for her entry into an elective role.

The convictions of a person occupying the highest position can have far-reaching impact on that institution. An analysis of the role of women Mayors is useful in this regard. The Mayor of Nagpur in 1996 tried to promote the cause of women as per her best judgment. She took up some activities like health camps, mobile health centers and provided for public toilets for women at several public places in the city. She gave an additional development fund of Rupees 100,000 to all women councilors in order to compensate for their disadvantaged position in mobilizing resources out of the fund of Members of Parliament and Members of the Legislatives Assemblies. But she discovered that only one woman councilor had given consideration to women's needs while spending this additional fund. This is ample evidence to the fact that the women councilors did not have any 'women's agenda' nor a sense of primary loyalty to the cause of women. But the women councilors at Nagpur, regardless of their party affiliation acknowledge that the leadership of this woman Mayor had boosted their morale. This case of Nagpur, though exceptional, point to the need for and advantages of a role model for women councilors.

Backlash:

As the implementation of the policy of women's quotas was not preceded by sufficient public debate, the popular mind was not prepared for the whole-hearted acceptance of this policy. Some men still perceive it as the ploy to strip them off their power. The backlash was out in the open during the parliamentary debate over the proposed Women's Researvation Bill where the leaders considered to be progressive exposed themselves by taking an anti-quota position. At the local level, manifestations of the backlash are even more glaring. Interestingly, men have devised a two-pronged strategy for dealing with women's quota. Individually they resort to fielding their wife or female relative as their proxy candidate and collectively their response amounts to a backlash against women's quota.

While the woman Mayor of Pune was hosting a state level all-women conference in Pune in August 1996, the Deputy-Mayor of Pune told that he intended to hold a similar state-level all-male conference to oppose women's quota. Curiously, the whole matter was later hushed up. There are sufficient grounds to infer that the Deputy Mayor was silenced by the Congress leadership for his unwitting and over-enthusiastic initiative in a politically incorrect move.

At Nagpur the Deputy Mayor, during his interview to the author, categorically expressed his opposition to the women's quotas in general and to the special development fund of Rs. 1,00,000/- given by the woman Mayor only to women councilors in particular.

In Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation, when Mayor's post was reserved for women in 1996, the post of the Deputy Mayor, although open, was also given to women, as no male councilor was willing to work as the Deputy under a woman Mayor.

Similar male prejudice was reflected regarding the membership to women and child development committees in all Corporations. Though 75 % seats of this committee are reserved for women, one finds 100 percent women members on these committees simply because male councilors hate to be associated with this committee.

The Role of Press

After going through thousands of news clippings, on many occasions the patriarchal bias of reporters became quite obvious and the content analysis of these news items revealed certain latent structures.

A news report about the 1992 Panchayat Raj elections states, "The candidates have been allotted very funny election signs. Some men have got signs like frock, comb and bucket whereas some women have got signs like ink bottle, pen and spectacles." The very fact that the reporter finds allotment of the election symbols like pen and inkbottle and spectacles to women "rather funny" is quite revealing.

Such bias held by an individual candidate becomes very harmful when it gets amplified through the newspapers reaching out to millions of readers. This calls for an intervention in the form of gender sensitization of reporters and media persons. Women's organizations as well as the Centers for Women's Studies can contribute in removing such bias by increasing the gender sensitivity of journalists and training them in gender inclusive language. This will positively influence the portrayal of women in the media.

Role of Women's Organizations

Women's organizations can contribute to the formal political process and the electoral process by developing a feminist critique of political ideologies of various political parties, the constitution of a party, their organizational structure, process of organizational elections, women's representation in the organization, policies and programs of a party, its election manifestoes and its position about the issues like globalization, liberalization, population, environment, labor, agriculture and the like.. Even the highest policy matters have a direct bearing on local politics, though they may not directly fall under the sphere of competence of urban local bodies. An integrated perspective which can relate highest policy matters to ground realities is a crucial factor which does not figure in the discourse pertaining to local elections. Women's organizations should be encouraged to contribute to the discourse by analyzing the implications of all these policies, programs, processes and structures for broader gender justice and egalitarian gender relations. Women's organizations should be encouraged to offer theoretical inputs in addition to collaborating with party activists in various activities like workshops, leadership development camps, study circles or actual agitations pertaining to women's issues.

Today most of the autonomous women's organizations are inclined towards or even committed to the Leftist ideologies. Majority of elected representatives in India, however, belong to the parties on the Right or at the Center. Women's organizations and women party activists share an element of suspicion and bias towards each other that has severely restricted the element of cooperation between the two

State-sponsored Feminism?

The way in which the policy of women's quotas was suddenly implemented in the local bodies, has done some harm to the women's movement. Had the decision of women's quota been an outcome of a long and intense women's struggle it would have helped the movement. But now it appears as though in a tug of war, one side has suddenly let go the rope, thereby, making the other side off-balance and fall backwards. The state has hijacked the agenda of women's movement and the movement is facing the challenges posed by this state-sponsored feminism.

The relationship between the women's movement and elected representatives is a crucial factor in evolving new politics. Elected representatives hold formal political power. Their attitude towards prevalent power relations will play a decisive role in either reinforcing or altering these relations. In India, so far women's movement has not succeeded in inducting its activists into the positions of formal power at local level. Women's movement is not in a position to influence the choice of candidates of political parties, nor does it field its own candidates. It did not influence the actual electoral outcome anywhere in Maharashtra. It did not intervene into the electoral process decisively. It did not generate any electoral discourse to reach out to the masses so as to influence their voting preference.

There was some evidence of local attempts at forming a women's alliance on the basis of a common agenda in Kolhapur. But failed as some parties insisted on using their banner which was not acceptable to others who insisted on a non-party banner. Moreover, such attempts were limited to the women from the left parties. Women belonging to the Centrist and the Left parties were kept out. This restricted the chances of electoral success of any such alliance even before it was formed. Further even within the Left, specific party loyalty of the activists proved to be an obstacle in the formation and sustenance of such alliance.

It was expected that if activists from the women's movement join politics, it would lead to a remarkable change. Evidence proves this to be a naive expectation. Not even a handful have joined. Moreover, in the absence of any accountability system of women's movement some

activists in the movement have used the cause of women as a short cut to their political promotion.

De-recruitment:

Quotas ensured political recruitment of women but the patriarchal dynamics are a major obstacle in the way of sustaining the participation of women. As a result we find a striking gender gap in de-recruitment. This gap is qualitative as well as quantitative.

Here are a few trends about de-recruitment:

In case of male councilors the de-recruitment from their office after the expiry of five-year term does not lead to de-recruitment from political process in general. They continue to nurture their political mass base through other power structures like cooperative credit societies, youth clubs, cooperative dairies, and the like.

Even though a male member fails to get re-elected when his constituency gets reserved for women, he finds a way out by nominating his wife or sister-in-law in that constituency. He continues to exercise de facto power, even though she is de jure councilor. In a way he is the agency for her to a political office.

After the expiry of their term these women, who perceive themselves primarily as dutiful housewives, hand over these constituencies to their husband and retreat to the private sphere. Their de-recruitment is total. It is not simply from the political office but from the political process as a whole.

Though genuine activists have failed to get re-elected, in last three elections to Kolhapur Municipal Corporation we find four examples of proxy woman getting re-elected in the subsequent election. None of them had any involvement in politics before their first election. Husband of each of them was a councilor. But during their second tenure, they seem to have developed a taste for power and have started to assert their authority themselves.

Achievements of the policy of women's quota:

The success stories reported from all over India vindicate that women's quota in local bodies has mustered magnificent gains. The presence of 1,000,000 is a number large enough to legitimize and asserts the role of women as equal partners in the public sphere. It has enforced women's rightful access to political power. Many women from deprived sections in the community have got elected through quotas and have made their mark. Especially in rural India, it has increased the self-esteem, confidence, and motivation of women in general. They have led anti-addiction campaigns and turned the towns into liquor-free zones; they have strengthened literacy campaigns,

In the event of enough inputs from women's movement and women academics, this critical mass would soon lead to critical acts. It has initiated the process of empowerment in the political sphere that would spread to other spheres as well. It has started a process of challenging the patriarchal hierarchy in the private as well as public sphere.

Government of India's Periodic Report on CEDAW for the year 2005 states (P. 48) that the provision of 33% quota has helped to increase women's representation even further. In the state of Karnataka it is as high as 45% at the village level, 42% at the block level and 38% at the district level. In Kerala it is 36.4% and in West Bengal 35.4%. In Uttar Pradesh 54% of the Zillah Parishad Presidents are women. In Bihar, first Panchayat elections with women's quotas were held in 2001, where, in spite of an overall climate of resistance to women's quotas, about

125,000 women contested elections for about 40,000 seats. Although women's representation in the Parliament has decreased from 49 to 45 from 1999 to 2004, the number of women contesting Parliamentary election increased from 295 in 1999 to 355 in 2004.

Most striking and quantifiable achievement is the entry of over one million women in elected offices. Quotas created a space for dedicated women activists in various political parties, who, even after working for the party for over 30 years, would not have dreamt of contesting an election. Once quotas created space for women, even for women from lower economic background, their inability to bear the election expenditure was not a detriment in securing party nomination or ensuring success in the election. Their constituents contributed generously to the campaign fund. This alone justifies women's quota, whatever its other side effects might be.

It has widened the base of Indian democracy by facilitating the representation of hitherto underrepresented section of our society that include one million women representatives, still more candidates and even larger number of supporters.

It clearly legitimizes and asserts the role of women as partners in the public sphere, particularly in operating formal governmental structures. This will encourage more women to take up political life as their career or mission and to shape their priorities accordingly.

It has increased the self-esteem, confidence, and motivation not only of women activists but also of women at large. When one's next-door neighbor is elected as a Panchayat Pradhan has made more impact on an average woman than the impact of having a woman as the Prime Minister.

It has led to evolving cross-hierarchies or reverse hierarchies where the wife is a councilor and the husband, a Municipal school teacher or the daughter-in-law is the Chairperson of the Standing Committee and the father-in-law is a municipal clerk. These reverse hierarchies have the potential for challenging asymmetrical gender relations

It has initiated the process of empowerment in the political sphere that is liable to get reflected in all other spheres as well.

What needs to be understood is that quotas per se do not guarantee effective participation of women. Several complementary processes need to be initiated for realizing the ideal of women's empowerment. An artificial measure like quota will ensure only quantitative participation of women. There is no guarantee that these women would behave in a way conducive to the overall empowerment of women. Necessary pre-conditions should be created for making the quotas work. This alone would ensure the successful implementation of the policy of women's empowerment in its true spirit. The absence of these conditions has led to the emergence of certain trends some leading to pseudo-empowerment while others counter-productive for the very cause of women's empowerment.

Suggestions for better implementation of women's quotas:

There is gross under-representation of women at every level of party hierarchy, in all its wings and in important committees of the party continues even after the implementation of women's quota at local level. Political parties have not initiated any special drives for the recruitment and training of women with the vigor that they should have. The political parties be encouraged to amend their constitution to provide 33 % organizational quota for women at every level of the party hierarchy and in every wing and in all decision making bodies of the party organization. This will widen the pool of eligible women candidates, reduce the percentage of proxies and

improve the efficacy of women's participation. Where major national parties do not have even 10 % women members, it is unrealistic to expect them to field 33 % women activists as candidates.

One-third seats of the committees dealing with women's empowerment should be reserved for men. This will convey the message that women's cause should not be the concern of women alone.

Political education of the electors will reduce the number of proxies. Responsible electors will reduce the role of money and muscle power and other parochial loyalties, which largely determine the effective merit.

At present political parties are not performing their function of political education, political socialization and political recruitment effectively. Parties need to be revitalized and other supplementary programs for political education of the cadre as well, as the masses need to be undertaken.

Massive efforts for comprehensive political education and gender sensitization are necessary. Training camps for political workers may be organized by professional training institutes or even universities. This will establish hitherto missing linkages between formal education of political science and political education of citizens.

Gender sensitization needs to be an integral component of such education. Such programs will be instrumental in neutralizing the male backlash. Joint gender sensitization programmed for women representatives along with their spouse may be conducted on a trial basis. Despite the change in the role of women in the public sphere their roles in the private sphere have not changed. The contribution of women to the public sphere must be compensated by an equal contribution of men to the private sphere. This would give a more humane face to both the spheres and family will not become an obstructive site for women in their pursuits in the public sphere.

Elected representatives must be provided with adequate honorarium, training and other support services to enable them to function better. Administrative support and guidance is required for women representatives at least in the short run.

Quotas need not be an eternal phenomenon. The time limit should be specified for quotas and a periodic check should be carried out to see whether women are being represented in proportion to their population.

Minimum Common Agenda for women be chalked out from local, state, national, regional and global level.

Women representatives, women activists and women academics should work in close collaboration for women empowerment.

Women's groups should gender sensitize press reporters and should try to turn them into allies and ensure gender sensitive news reporting.

National and local governments should provide the elected representatives with an adequate amount of honorarium to enable them to perform efficiently.

Political Science Departments and Women's Studies Departments should undertake an ongoing massive training campaign for increasing the functional efficacy of elected women. Governments should allocate special funds for this.

Relief from day-to-day household chores is essential for women if they have to perform well in the public sphere. This will call for an attitudinal change on the part of men as well as women. Gender sensitization is necessary for bringing about this change. A massive project of such sensitization needs to be initiated by the NGOs, Centers for Women's Studies and women's organizations. A trial could be given to joint gender sensitization programs for women representatives and their spouses.

Simultaneous implementation of quotas on committees, party organization, constituencies and constituencies

Public financing of elections helps level the playing field for political actors.

Short-term reservation of constituencies but permanent party organizational quotas is desirable.

Dual-member constituencies with one male and one female candidate be encouraged on an experimental basis.

Striving for the development of linkages between women's movement and elected women, party activists, academics

Dissemination of best practice examples would offer several role models as well as creative ideas for other women representatives.

Funding agencies be encouraged to sponsor women's quota campaigns & mass mobilization of women for the issue

WTO, IMF, WB should be urged to place a premium on the societies that are implementing gender equality and social justice measures

Radical electoral reforms in the form of de-criminalisation of politics, public financing of elections, etc. must be initiated. This will remove the greatest obstacle that inhibits women as well as many other citizens from active political participation.

On the whole, the positive things achieved by quotas outweigh the newly emergent counter-productive trends and if we succeed in evolving a mechanism for checking the counter-productive elements, the policy of quotas is sure to meet its goal.

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