

Cutting Across Party Lines

Women Members of Parliament Explain their Stand on Reservation Quotas

Meenakshi Nath

Reservation for women in legislatures is an issue which has brought most women members of Parliament (MPs) together from across the political spectrum. Only a few like Maneka Gandhi (see article on p. 27) feel the move will be counterproductive. In the following interviews, four women MPs from our national parties explain their views on reservation quotas for women.



Margaret Alva,
Congress (I)

WHAT is your personal stand on the issue of 33 percent reservation for women?

I was the one who initiated this in the '80s when I was Minister for Women. It was the *National Perspective Plan on Women* which, for the first time, spoke of reservation from *panchayats* to Parliament.

So right from the beginning the intention was to go right up to Parliament?

That was our demand. But there was quite a lot of opposition at that time. So it was decided that we should start with the Panchayati Raj amendments and move up later. However, in 1989 the united opposition defeated the Panchayati Raj bill. We re-introduced it in '91 and it was passed. In three years the states have passed legislation as required by this constitutional amendment. As a result, one million women have been elected to local bodies.

The argument against reservation was that we will never find women who will seek election in the rural areas, that they are too conservative, mostly living in *purdah*. However, in many states they have even exceeded the quota — for example, in Karnataka, women constitute 47 percent of the elected *panchayat* members. Bengal has also been a success story, as have Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

I am not saying that there aren't aberrations but aren't

there aberrations in all the main political parties? Does every party put up saints as nominees, or even the best, most effective individuals? We need reforms not just for women — the whole system of selection of candidates needs to be overhauled.

So you see reservation as part of a greater change in the system?

I believe the quality and the atmosphere of politics will improve if more women come in. I'm not saying that every one of the women who has come into the *panchayat* is a graduate or is appropriately qualified. But how many MPs are? How many MLAs (Members of Legislative Assemblies) are? Whenever we ask for tickets for women in the legislature they ask us "Are they going to win?" as if every man who gets a ticket ends up as a winning candidate.

Someone stated that reservation will mean admitting to the weakness of women. I say, "Do you have any doubts about it?" After seeing the system work for 45 years, it is obvious that we are the weaker sex, whether we like it or not. We are excluded from jobs, the economic mainstream, decision-making processes, inheritance rights...

Whether one is fighting for the Scheduled Castes, the Backward Classes, or the minorities — the largest group that is affected is women. The Khalekar report has said that women are the single largest group of Backward citizens in the country. And things have not changed since then. Unless we are guaranteed an entry point by law we will never be allowed to participate. I really believe that.