

# Partners in Politics, Competing in Crime

## Fallouts of Women's Reservations in Maharashtra

(Part I)

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**T***his article examines the impact of sudden implementation of the women's reservation policy at the Zilla Parishads, or mid-tier district level institutions of governance. The article confines itself to the study of a select few zilla parishads in institutions of governance in Maharashtra. The policy of reservation automatically reserves a certain portion of these seats for women throughout the State Government. As the author explains below, the results of this reservation policy have been mixed. On the one hand, women have indeed received some political and social gains that brought about some increase in their participation in the government. On the other hand, the rampant corruption and abuse of the system have limited the genuine women activists from participation in local electoral politics.*

The Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth amendments of the Indian Constitution enacted in 1992 provided for the reservation of one-third of the seats in rural and urban self-government institutions for women in village *panchayats* and *zilla parishads* with the result that the gates of the local political arena were suddenly thrown wide-open to them. As many as one million women got an opportunity to enter these institutions as members, and some of them, as office bearers. Many more participated in elections and still more as campaigners. This changed the landscape of the local political elite drastically.

Unfortunately, a nationwide discussion on this historic move was not initiated before implementing the policy. Nor did the political parties discuss this issue in their party fora. Therefore, the rank and file of every party was taken by surprise when 33 percent reservations became law. As a result, discrepancies existed between the official position adopted by major political parties and the actual attitude of their members at all levels. One possible explanation for the

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smooth passage of reservation provisions in local bodies on the one hand, and the totally uncertain fate of reservation in state legislatures and Lok Sabha on the other, was that the former was initiated from the very top by Rajiv Gandhi. Most legislators ended up voting for it without much thought or debate because it posed no direct threat to the interests of the Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs). For this reason, many male

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politicians at the local level who have been adversely impacted by the reservation policy say with glee: "Let there be reservation for women in the Assemblies and Lok Sabha as well. MPs and MLAs have thrust this reservation upon us. Then they will learn a lesson! They will find out where the shoe pinches. Serves them right!"<sup>1</sup>

It was expected in many quarters that if women entered politics in large numbers, they would change the entire texture of present day politics and bring different values, preferences and perspectives into the political arena. It was assumed that women's presence in decision-making positions would lead to the elimination of discrimination against women, and that women's issues would begin to find high priority on the agenda of political parties. But there was no minimum consensus regarding what was expected from the reservation policy and from those women elected through the reserved seats. Some believed that women would rid politics of corruption, while others felt that it would only "feminise" corruption. This paper examines relevant developments in the

state of Maharashtra and analyses the results of the reservation policy.

The Government of Maharashtra introduced 30 percent reservation for women in local bodies in 1990. The 30 percent quota was increased to 33 percent after the Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth Constitutional Amendments. At this time, the third group of women elected from women-reserved constituencies is about to complete its term.<sup>1</sup>

### Creation of a Vacuum

It is noteworthy that the proposal to reserve seats for women did not emanate from women's organisations. Consequently, none of the contemporary women's organisations had ever carried out mass mobilisation of women on this issue prior to this enactment of law. As a result, although reservation was originally intended to create space for women, instead it created a vacuum that sucked in all the women standing on the fringes of the political arena. Some of those elected were political activists in their own right, but the majority of winners have been close relatives of male politicians, mostly sitting members of the local bodies. These male politicians shrewdly and promptly pushed forward their female relatives, usually their wives, to fill the vacuum. Thus emerged a new phenomenon of women as "proxy politicians."

All political parties are obsessed with the numbers game since winning a majority is the crucial pre-requisite to acquiring control over the government machinery at any level. The winnability of a candidate is often the sole criterion for the selection of party candidates. This has led to the elimination of many genuine activists and in its stead brought inactive women relatives of male politicians to the forefront. Wherever there was no prominent woman activist, the vacuum created by the reservation was



A typical election meeting—one lone woman on the dias.

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filled by 'proxy' women. In all three elections held in Maharashtra after the reservations, the number of proxies elected were greater than number of victorious activists throughout the State.

Until 1990, no clear consensus existed even among women politicians themselves regarding the issue of reservations. In 1989, I interviewed over 150 political activists from all

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major political parties for my doctoral work, before there was even a hint regarding reservations for women. At that time, the respondents were equally divided over the issue; half of them opposed it and the other half supported it, but *none* of them demanded it. However, once the policy was indeed adopted by the Government of Maharashtra in 1990, it suddenly became politically incorrect to oppose these reservations. Yet there was no consensus or sufficient awareness among women corporators elected members, of Municipal Corporation about the principles underlying this policy.

It is significant that as many as 50 percent of the respondents agreed with one of the statements in my questionnaire that a woman corporator should accord greater priority to her role as a housewife rather than to her role as a corporator. Only 15 percent disagreed with this statement, while 35 percent respondents chose to remain silent on this issue.

### Proxies in Majority

The presence of 'proxies' in Municipal Corporations is a state-wide phenomenon. Their percentage differs from one city to another depending

upon the degree of social and political participation of women in any given city. I surveyed about 300 corporators and found that the percentage of 'proxies' was as high as 80 percent in the Kolhapur Municipal Corporation, even after the second election. Cities like Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur, which have a relatively longer tradition of women participating in public life, have a lower percentage of proxies as compared to Kolhapur, which has few female political figures who act in their own right.

Eleven out of the 15 women who participated in a Focus Group Discussion at Kolhapur Municipal Corporation admitted that they entered the political arena merely because the constituency nursed by their husbands became reserved for women. None of them had any prior involvement in any social or political activity. All of them admitted that they had never even dreamt of entering political life; the reservation of their husband's constituency for women was the only factor responsible for their entry. When asked how many of them intended to contest the next election from the same ward, some of the women asked how they could contest it since it would become a men's ward after five years? They simply assumed that wards not reserved for women were reserved for men.

All of the women interviewed admitted that, at that time, that is one year after their election, they were still discharging their responsibilities as municipal corporators primarily through their husbands. Some of them explicitly stated that since they were totally ignorant about their responsibilities and powers as municipal corporators, and as their husbands were already acquainted with all the intricacies of the role and responsibilities of a corporator, mediation by their husbands facilitated

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the smooth discharge of their duties. Some of the women also expressed the fear that municipal administrators would not take them seriously and therefore it would be very difficult for them to get work done without the mediation of their husbands or male relatives. However, not all women thought this way.

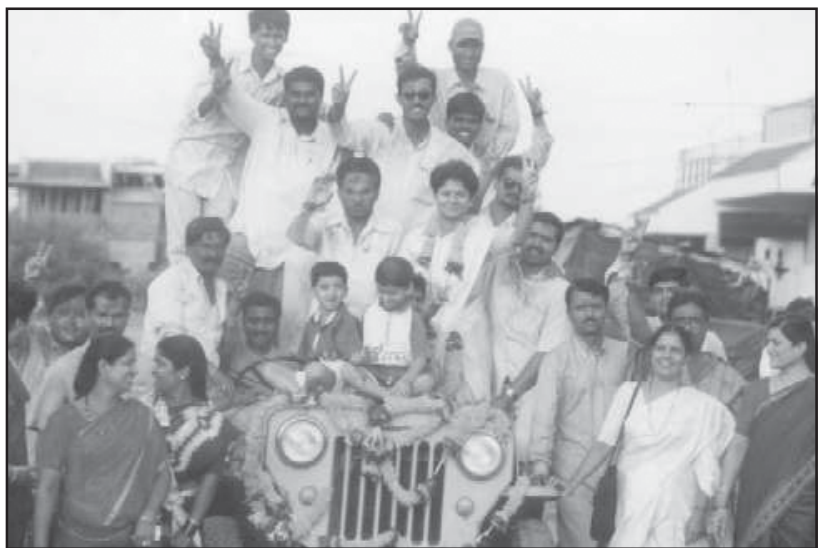
#### **Meeting New Expectations**

With regards to the role of new women corporators within their families, the women claimed that their entry into elected positions did not significantly alter their domestic lives. They continued to perform all the duties that are expected of a full time housewife. In addition, they had to fulfil the expectations of the citizens in their constituencies, who constantly kept them on their toes. Many of them, however, continued with their pre-election life pattern whereby their

husbands took care of the responsibilities as corporators while they took care of the home. For those women who were political activists before getting elected, the additional role of a municipal corporator was yet another heavy responsibility. In some cases, male members of the household started sharing domestic responsibilities. In most cases, women simply shouldered the additional burden on their own.

A woman corporator from Kolhapur narrated with great pride how she decided to contest an election. She claimed she contested "due to popular pressure." Her husband was the previous corporator for two consecutive terms. In 1995, when that constituency became reserved for women, people from the neighbourhood came to see her and requested her to compete. She admitted how people of her constituency said it clearly: "We know that even if you get elected, your husband would continue to work as though he himself was the corporator."

When asked how many of them would like to continue with public life after the expiration of their first term, all the proxy women categorically said that they would hand over the wards



**A woman candidate on a victory rally.**



to their husbands to whom they felt it rightfully belonged and would retreat to their homes. Thus, in case of proxies, their role as elected representatives is just an extension of their roles as cooperative wives.

### **Political *Vahinis***

Some women functioning as “proxies” were forced into politics against their own wishes and also pressured into corrupt practices. For example, the husband of a female member of Pune Municipal Corporation forced his wife to contest corporation elections and later negotiated with the ruling group in order to get her elected to the Standing Committee, which has tremendous financial powers. The husband dictated her actions and she was compelled to comply.

The majority of the “proxies” have no independent support network or previous experience of social and political activity; therefore, these women generally have a very low opinion as to the effectiveness of their participation in public life. The proxies do not challenge power relations between the sexes and tend to reinforce the status quo by entrusting all political matters to their husbands as mediators. They display a defeatist mentality by seeking refuge in the private sphere immediately after their term ends. In every corporation there were at least a few incidents in which the husbands of women corporators interfered in day-to-day official business. In Kolhapur, the Municipal Commissioner and the Mayor had to give an ultimatum to these husbands directing them to stop such interference and gave an official order to the municipal staff to disregard instructions made by interfering husbands of women corporators. Some respondents also quoted a few incidents of husbands accompanying their wives to committee meetings.



**Men dominate election campaigns even after reservation for women.**

This phenomenon of “proxy” corporators is reflected even in the vocabulary in which these women are addressed as ‘*Vahini*’ in the house. ‘*Vahini*’ is the term of address for a brother’s wife. For example, when deliberations in the House are in progress and a woman corporator in the ‘proxy’ category wants to speak, male corporators patronisingly say: “Let ‘*Vahini*’ speak first.” It is noteworthy, that male corporators do not routinely refer to each others as brothers but the wives of corporators are addressed in familial terms. However, in Pune, we found that some women corporators who were initially entirely dependent upon their husbands, later began performing in an increasingly independent manner. For example, in one reported case, a woman succeeding her husband proved to be a much better corporator

than her spouse; the situation strained their marital relationship to a certain extent. It remains to be seen whether she will continue her political career afterwards in the de-reserved ward.

### **Proxies and Women’s Wings**

The interviews with Dr. Nishigandha Mogal, former President of Bharatiya Janata Mahila Morcha; Dr. Pramila Jarag, then Vice-President of Mahila Congress Maharashtra and Srimati Vaishali Rajshekhar, then President of Shiv Sena Mahila Aghadi, Kolhapur revealed that the relationship between the proxies and the women’s wings of the parties is quite strained. Women’s wings continually demand a key role in the process of nomination of party candidates, but their requests meet with little success. They demand increased representation for women activists who are involved in the party and in public life for a much longer duration, but have little chances of winning the election against the wife of a former male incumbent. As they deprive genuine activists of legitimate opportunities, the proxies carry a burden of guilt and an inferiority complex that leaves little scope for a healthy interaction between politically active women and themselves.

**Some women corporators who were initially entirely dependent upon their husbands, later began performing in an increasingly independent manner.**

Proxies also get elected to important municipal committees relatively easily because their male relatives do all the necessary manoeuvrings for them. This demoralises genuine women activists who have to struggle on every front, be it the family, the party organisation, or the Municipal Corporation. While the proxies do not enjoy any real power themselves, their positions render women political activists powerless. In that sense, the presence of proxy women is indeed counterproductive to the cause of women's empowerment.

However, the presence of women benefited by their family connections should be treated as an inevitable part of the initial stage of the process of women's political empowerment and should not be used as an argument against the policy of reservation. Moreover, there are also some hopeful signs. There is evidence of at least a few women shedding their "proxy" label and proving to be assertive elected representatives after some time.

*Tarun Bharat* on February 20, 1997 reported that Alakunte, a BJP candidate in Solapur and the wife of then Corporator Alakunte, vehemently claimed that though her husband had worked as the Corporator, she was not contesting as his proxy. During the entire tenure of her husband, she claimed she had actually done more than half of his work, especially regarding public relations in the constituency and other day-to-day matters in the ward. This, she said, gave her sufficient experience, exposure, and personal contact with the voters.

Moreover, men, too, benefit from family connections and can be influenced by their male relatives. In fact, there were a few instances where men owed their candidacy to their women relatives. For example, *Nasik Sakal* (March 3, 1997) reported that

**The proxies carry a burden of guilt and an inferiority complex that leaves little scope for a healthy interaction between politically active women and themselves.**

'Prakash Borade was the only rebel candidate to get elected. He owes his success to the work done by his wife, Ranjana Borade, who worked as the Deputy Mayor. *Maharashtra Times* (February 16, 1997) refers to the son of Pushpalata Tidake without even mentioning his first name, thereby emphasising his identity only as "the son of an influential mother."

However, a man can often initially choose politics as his career and after the initial help from relatives, can

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easily emerge as a politician in his own right, whereas our male-dominated society leaves little chance for a woman to emerge as a politician in her own right. On the other hand, there is substantial evidence of women participating in the local election campaigns in increasingly large numbers. Therefore, we are likely to witness an overall decline in the number of proxies as the notion of women political elite gains roots and inspires more women to run for elected office.

Though these examples above tend to reinforce the established feminine stereotype, the following examples deviate from this stereotype and thus challenge the notion that women necessarily behave in a typical and predictable way.

### **Reinforcing Stereotypes**

Conforming to newspaper reports studied by the author show that though the behaviour of women candidates and corporators does at times fit into a stereotype, there are also a large number of reported incidents which clearly show them behaving drastically differently from popularly held feminine stereotypes.

In the election campaign of Mumbai Municipal Corporation Shri.



**A candidate making personal contact with potential voters.**

Dattaji Salavi (Shiv Sena leader) appealed to women candidates to keep the ward clean just as they keep their own house clean. He reminded them of late Smt. Indira Gandhi as the true manifestation of women's power and added patronisingly, "Women should not bother too much about their looks but should be concerned about their image in the minds of people." (*Sakal* January 1, 1997).

For example, *Sakal* (January 1, 1997) also reported that a woman corporator from Pimpri Chinchwad started crying when asked by the President of the city unit of her party about her absence at the time of election to PCMT (Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Transport) Committee. Though this example reinforces the established feminine stereotype, the following examples show deviation from it and challenge the notion that women necessarily behave in a typical and predictable way.

#### **Deviation from Stereotypes**

→ At Nagpur, the wife of an independent candidate asked some rival women activists to vacate her husband's election *pandal*. After the heated exchanges that followed, the corporator's wife physically assaulted them. (*Lokmat* February 22, 1997).

→ Women were also involved in booth capturing and allegedly tried to take away blank ballot papers (*Nagpur Tarun Bharat* February 24, 1997).

→ One supporter of Satish Chaturvedi, Congress MLA, hit an ex-MLA with her *chappal*. (*Nagpur Tarun Bharat* February 21, 1997).

→ At Nasik, when the supporters of Jadhav, an independent woman candidate, were allegedly indulging in bogus voting, the activists of the Sena - BJP alliance complained. Since their complaints went unheard, they finally stoned the polling booth. The report further states that Jadhav



**A woman candidate on a cycle rally accompanied by an all male team.**

assaulted another independent candidate, Indutai Nagre (*Lokmat* February 24, 1997).

→ At Nasik, a woman polling agent slapped a male corporator. (*Lokmat* February 24, 1997).

→ A sitting Shiv Sena corporator from Nasik, Smt. Mandatai Datir, once took away the Mayor's baton during a General Body meeting of the Corporation. Many news items about Datir, (*Tarun Bharat* February 2, 1997, *Sakal* February 12, 1997) described her as "baton-fame Datir," the woman who took away the Mayor's baton.

→ At Nasik, a woman threw a sari at Muralidhar Mane, the President of the Congress (I) city unit. The woman was unhappy with the functioning of Mane and expressed displeasure by asking him to wear a sari if he could not run the party unit. (*Gavkari* February 18, 1997). However, despite her untraditional

behaviour, her action of throwing a female garment at a supposedly incompetent man demonstrates the prejudiced view that women by nature are incompetent and lack initiative and leadership qualities.

#### **Criminalisation of Politics**

One of the biggest challenges facing our democracy is the growing nexus between crime and politics. The criminal elements, which were initially being used by the politicians, have now started running the show themselves. Without any exception, all municipal corporations in Maharashtra witnessed the entry of a sizable number of candidates, both men and women with criminal backgrounds and an equally significant number of corporators with criminal records. We found candidates

- Who were criminals themselves,
- Who were close relatives of criminals,
- Who had close links with the underworld,
- Who were sponsored by criminals,
- Who were manipulating criminal elements to ensure their electoral success.

**Municipal corporations in Maharashtra witnessed the entry of a sizable number of candidates, both men and women with criminal backgrounds.**



Newspapers throughout the state gave wide coverage to the role of criminal elements in these elections. **Table 1** gives some details.

These candidates have a police record pertaining to crimes like bootlegging, illegal lottery, gambling, black marketing, extortion, armed assault and even murder. Thus the usual excuse offered by various political parties to justify the candidature of criminals on the grounds that they were involved only in political crimes is rather misleading,

In Mumbai, various gangs of criminals played a decisive role in corporation elections. The gangs led by underworld dons like Arun Gavali, Chhota Rajan, Guru Satam and Amar Naik were the major figures in the election. One leader of the Chhota Rajan gang, Avadhoot Bonde, went to the extent of kidnapping rival women candidates contesting from his wife's constituency. It was reported that the Congress (I) activists from ward No. 58 were threatened as the wife of Vijay Tandel, a Gavali gang member, was contesting from that ward. (*Maharashtra Times* February 11, 1997)

Ulhasnagar was perhaps the first city to give the control of city politics entirely into the hands of criminals. Rich criminals sought political patronage and protection by helping political parties at the time of elections. The practice continues even today. Pappu Kalani, a well known criminal from Ulhasnagar controlled the city's entire politics in the 1997 election. He virtually took over the local Congress (I) Committee and remained in the saddle until he was expelled from the party. After his expulsion, his wife succeeded him and continued to control Ulhasnagar Municipal Council. In the first election to

Table 1		
City	No. of candidates with criminal background	Source of Information
Nagpur	72	<i>MaharashtraTimes</i> (16.2.97) 75 <i>Loksatta</i> (23.2.97) 50 <i>Sakal</i> (20.2.97)
Pune	75	<i>Loksatta</i> (23.2.97) 50 <i>Sakal</i> (17.2.97)
Mumbai	150	<i>Sakal</i> (21.2.97)

These estimates differ since the reporters failed to cross check with police records.

Ulhasnagar Municipal Corporation, Ulhasnagar Peoples Party led by Pappu Kalani's wife Jyoti Kalani fielded 63 candidates (*Maharashtra Times* February 16, 1997).

In order to counter Pappu and Jyoti Kalani, the Shiv Sena decided to 'adopt' Gopal Rajavani, a known rival of the Kalanis. At least half of Shiv Sena corporators had criminal backgrounds (*Maharashtra Times*

February 16, 1997 and February 27, 1997).

### Criminalisation of Women

Contrary to the widely held belief, crime in fact, is no longer the monopoly of men alone. We found several women candidates with criminal records. 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 women candidates who had to face an underworld-supported rival were forcibly removed from the electoral fray. These criminal elements resorted to kidnapping of at least

**Ulhasnagar was perhaps the first city to give the control of city politics entirely into the hands of criminals.**



**Women show up as voters in large numbers.**

four women candidates. A few other women were forced to withdraw or were not allowed to file their nomination papers. The participation of women in crime challenges the theories about biologically determined feminine essence. The increasing intervention of criminal elements and use of violence in politics is likely to intimidate many women who already are very reluctant to contest as a candidate.

At least seven women criminals contested the 1997 election for Mumbai Municipal Corporation (*Sakal* February 21, 1997). **Table 2** provides details.

Similarly, Smt. Vatsala Andekar, a sitting corporator in Pune had three offences on her police record. She got elected from Ward No. 107 as a Congress (I) candidate.

Corporator Smt. Neeta Naik (Shiv Sena) went as far as threatening Shri. Harischandra Padval, a Shiv Sena rebel candidate from her Ward, pressurising him to withdraw. (*Loksatta* February 5, 1997).

Pune editions of *Sakal* (February 7, 1997 and February 12, 1997) and *Tarun Bharat* (February 7, 1997) share an interesting case which offers decisive evidence about the detrimental effect of criminal elements on women's participation in politics. In the election to Pimpri-

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Chinchwad Municipal Corporation, Usha Gajbhar was elected unopposed since nobody else was allowed to file the nomination from ward No. 57 reserved for S.C. women. Usha Gajbhar, 21, was a third year B.A. student in a local college. Two other women, Draupadi Gaikwad and Sushila Waghmare, had filed their nominations. Gaikwad withdrew the nomination and Waghmare's form was declared invalid at the time of scrutiny.

Waghmare lodged a written complaint with the police and the Municipal Commissioner alleging that a local goonda, Kailas Kadam, forced her to withdraw in order to ensure victory for Gajbhar. She was able to file her nomination with the help of police. She had to submit a true copy of her caste certificate at the time of scrutiny. But Kailas Kadam kept Waghmare in confinement and she could not

submit the certificate on time so her papers were declared invalid.

Waghmare staged a hunger strike on February 11, 1997 protesting against the unopposed election of Gajbhar. The only result was that her complaint was forwarded to the Election Commission; it was later ignored.

Violent incidents on the day of polling were also instrumental in reducing the participation of women voters. In Nagpur, at one of the polling stations in ward No. 29, when the police resorted to *lathi* charge, women electors who were standing in the queue were dispersed.

Increasing crime and use of violence generally discourage peace-loving individuals. An average citizen, and especially a woman, finds the rewards of political participation too low to justify the risks involved.

Women's involvement in electoral violence, presence of a large number of rebel women candidates, and women criminals in the electoral arena who threaten their male rivals are alarming trends and suggest that once women get entrenched in politics, they are not likely to behave differently from men. **(To be continued in the next issue.)** □

#### Endnotes:

1. This paper utilises the data and evidence of two statewide projects that I completed on behalf of an NGO, Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini and the other for Bharatiya Stree Shakti. The statewide network of both these organisations and team of dedicated grassroot activists contributed in the data collection. This paper also draws from my previous article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (13th-18th July, 1998). I have also incorporated some data from my ongoing project "Gender Difference in De-recruitment" as well as from my doctoral dissertation.

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Table 2		
Ward No.	Name	Crime
24	Lakshmi Nagappa Shetty (Independent)	Drug trafficking
29	Neeta Naik (Shiv Sena) (Sitting corporator)	Murder threat
161	Alpana Painter (Independent)	Two offences
181	Chhabubai Jadhav (Independent)	Two offences including extortion
181	Phulabai Sonavane (Independent)	Extortion
181	Ashwini Kambale (Independent)	Two offences
85	Sadhana Dal (Independent)	Extortion, physical assault.