

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Many more Mayawatis

They cannot compete with Mayawati, or Jayalalitha or Sonia Gandhi. But the new breed of women politicians springing up in India's small towns will become a political force to reckon with in the years to come, writes Kalpana Sharma.

03 May 2009 - Rajeshwari Nora owns a beauty parlour by that name in the town of Narnaul in Haryana's Mahendragarh district. Her 6 ft by 10 ft beauty parlour has mirrors on two sides and large posters of a host of popular Hindi film stars ranging from Rani Mukherjee to Katrina Kaif on the back wall. Two swivel chairs and a bench for those waiting their turn completes the furniture. All the film stars are dressed in bridal finery. Rajeshwari tells me she specialises in bridal make up. Beauty parlours are a flourishing business in this small town of under one lakh people, she says.

At home in politics

But Rajeshwari is not just in the beauty business. She is also into politics as a nominated member of the local municipal council. And she takes her task seriously, worrying about the water supply and garbage clearance. She already speaks like a veteran politician. "My family was in the BJP. I was also in the BJP. Right now I'm in the Congress. But I can change," she tells me without the slightest hint of embarrassment.

In Mirzapur in U.P., a town on the banks of the Ganga that also hosts the carpet industry, Mamta Yadav is enthusiasm personified. This 28-year-old MA in history has been elected to the Mirzapur municipal council. She got the largest number of votes and says she won because "people thought we should vote for an educated person." Mamta also heads the standing committee on education and she loves every minute of the importance and attention she is getting. "*Rajneeti bahut achchi cheez hai (politics is a very good thing)*", she tells me as we sit in her home in Mirzapur town.

Mamta lives in a middle-income colony with paved paths and unexpectedly clean drains. Her husband, a cable operator in five wards, supports his wife's efforts. Unlike other husbands of elected women representatives, he defers to her and lets her do all the talking. "I'm a fan of politics," says Mamta, a mother of two children, a boy aged nine and a girl aged five. Earlier, she had considered becoming a teacher. But now she has been bitten by the *rajneeti* (politics) bug and intends to continue.

Mamta says she draws inspiration from Mayawati, Pratibha Patil and Sonia Gandhi. "Whatever you say, women are proud that a woman and a Dalit has reached such a high position," she says of Mayawati. An interesting comment coming from a woman who is not a Dalit and who is close to the Congress Party.

In Rajnandgaon in Chhatisgarh, a Dalit doctor is a member of the municipal council. Dr. Rekha Meshram is a Mahar. She runs her clinic and her office as a councillor from her home, located in a colony of Mahars. Her education helps her, she says, to understand her duties and her rights as

a councillor. She can read the budget and discuss it unlike other councillors, many of whom are barely literate.

But Rekha has a different spin on educated women entering politics. "I understand why educated people don't want to enter. We need to be patient, to be articulate. Being educated is the biggest handicap in politics. You can't get ahead on your own talent. Till you have a godfather, you can't go all out. Women get caught, entangled in this web. Party politics is very difficult for women members." Rekha is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Although she believes that women have a difficult time, she too is convinced she will continue to be in politics.

Even as the media focuses on educated women like Meera Sanyal and Mallika Sarabhai, other women have already entered politics at the local level without drawing too much attention to themselves.

Education, an asset

In Madhubani in Bihar, Anuja Jha, who also has a post-graduate degree, is one of the most active members of the municipal council. Unlike Rekha, she does not consider her education a handicap. Far from it. She has used it effectively to her advantage. She is the only one from the council who is a member of the District Planning Committee. She takes on the role of a leader, even though a man is the chairman of the council. Anuja sees a future for herself in politics. "Politics is *janata ki seva* (serving people)", she says. "I decided to enter because people said only men could do it. I said, why not women?"

These are just four of thousands of women who are now in local governments in thousands of small towns across India. They are educated. They could have just remained housewives or become teachers. Instead, they are in public life. Admittedly, there are also other women in urban local bodies who are not so well educated and who are mere proxies for their husbands. The latter do everything except attend the official meetings. Even fathers-in-law are proxies for elected women representatives, as I discovered in Madhubani. But the increasing number of educated women who are articulate and active needs to be noted.

So, even as the media focuses on educated women like Meera Sanyal, the CEO of ABN-AMRO Bank and Mallika Sarabhai, the well-known activist and dancer, who have decided to contest in the Lok Sabha elections as independents from Mumbai and Ahmedabad respectively, we should recognise that other women have already entered politics at the local level without drawing too much attention to themselves.

Crucial difference

The difference is that women like Mamta, Rajeshwari, Anuja and Rekha live in small towns where strong bonds between people continue to survive despite urbanisation. People know each other. They are engaged in problems that have an immediate impact on their neighbourhood. The process of devolution facilitated by the 74th Amendment, giving urban local bodies additional powers, allows these women to take initiatives that make a noticeable difference in their wards.

But they are also not afraid of party politics. Many of them accept that this is the only way to advance in politics.

In the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, Mayawati might well be the Queen Bee who decides the shape and form of the next government. But in years to come, we could see many more women surging forward from local politics into State and ultimately into national politics. Reservation has given them a leg up. But it is their enthusiasm about the political process that will ultimately carry them through.

Kalpna Sharma

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Source:

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2009/may/ksh-womenpol.htm>