

International Seminar on Women in Local Self-Governance in South Asia

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Inaugural Address

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Women's role and participation in governance – the why and the how of making it more effective, are parts of the unfinished agenda bequeathed by the 20th Century gender revolution to the present. We in India are conditioned to the phenomenon of “one step forward, three steps back” in the evolution of this issue – possibly because we do not draw enough lessons from our own history, and place too much trust in legislation and policy promises by the state apparatus, and less on people's own capacities, need, aspirations, and sense of responsibility. We also underestimate the reality of resistance. Seventy three years ago, Mahatma Gandhi left us a warning which we did not heed:

“Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the **problem** does not end there. It only commences **at the point when women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation**”. (*Young India*, 17.10.1929).

I felt that the best way of welcoming and commending all of you for this collaborative venture was by invoking the words of Gandhi as a blessing and a warning, to infuse your deliberations, and what you do with the conclusions thereafter.

As a student of history, I have been puzzled by certain major differences in trends of women's participation in governance at different levels between South Asia and countries in the Western world. Parallels of powerful women as actual rulers, or exercising great influence can be found in both regions in relatively distant pasts, but not after the adoption of democratic governance. Within the international women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s, we South Asians had to plead that getting a few women into top positions would not necessarily accelerate the gender revolution, as we had learnt from experience. On the other hand, the Western democracies had substantial women's participation in local self-governance bodies – for which we could offer little in the way of parallels from the past or contemporary periods.

In India, as a result of the revival of the women's movement in the seventies and repercussions of the Women and Development discourse, a GOI Committee produced a draft National Perspective Plan for Women in 1988, which recommended 30% of seats reservation for women in all representative bodies of governance – from the local to the national level. Debating this draft, a coalition of national women's organisations demanded one-third reservation, but only in the local governing bodies. They also demanded quotas within the women's quota for the Constitutionally acknowledged most

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depressed/oppressed groups in our society – the Dalits, and the Adivasis, or tribals. Lastly, they rejected outright the suggestion of nomination in the initial years – and demanded election as the only channel. I wanted you to note this significant choice of the women’s movement in 1988 because you will be discussing the perception gaps between various levels of the bureaucracy and political leadership regarding the outcome of the two Constitutional Amendments of 1992.

There were many political activists in that 1988 debate including some freedom fighters from pre-Independence days who had also served as members of State Assemblies and Parliament. As a student of politics I had asked some of them why they rejected reservation in the higher level bodies – when they had experience of being a dwindling minority in these chambers. “We need a new leadership to emerge, from below” – was the answer. We have lost these colleagues to the laws of nature, but I do hope your deliberations will demonstrate that their faith in the quality of ‘leadership from below’ was not in vain.

On behalf of the women’s movement and the Centre for Women’s Development Studies I welcome all of you and wish this conference all success and a future – of collaboration in doing. My age prohibits travels to the West in future but becomes an asset in crossing South Asian boundaries. As a South Asian grandmother, I shall hope for a more participatory role for myself in pushing this agenda forward.