

# Electing a Representative

## An Account of Medha Patkar's Election Campaign

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*A first-hand account of the Aam Aadmi Party's candidate for Mumbai north-east constituency for the Lok Sabha illustrates how she came to be identified as one of their own by the poor and marginalised. It gives a glimpse of the new politics that is giving a voice to the powerless.*

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If one person has shown what people's politics means, it is Medha Patkar. Her campaign in Mumbai, where she stood as an Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) candidate, was a people's campaign in every sense of the word. It was a two-way relationship – those who campaigned for her in the hope that she would become their Member of Parliament (MP), identified with her as passionately as she identified with those she sought to represent – specially the poorest of them.

It was not as if the cynicism that marks elections had entirely been replaced by hope. You saw it in women's eyes especially, when Patkar walked through the narrow lanes of the slums and chawls of her sprawling constituency, asking for votes (funnily enough, never for herself). The difference lay in the lack of cynicism among the hundreds who not only joined her campaign, but themselves organised it – without having being paid to do so.

### History of Struggles

In December 2004-January 2005, Vilasrao Deshmukh, then chief minister of the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) government of Maharashtra which had just taken over, began his second term with a massive slum demolition drive in a bid to turn Mumbai into Shanghai. This was after having specifically promised voters that slums that had come up till 2000 would be regularised – until then, the cut-off date had been 1995. The demolition of 90,000 homes was on a scale matched only by another Congress chief minister, A R Antulay's similar drive, in the monsoon of 1981. At that time, a public interest litigation had been filed by journalist Olga Tellis and argued by advocate Indira Jaising, resulting in a landmark Supreme Court judgment that included the right to shelter in the right to life.

This time, it appeared as if nothing would stop the bulldozers, even though newspapers reported that newborns left roofless were dying in the cold. Opposition members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) remained silent, and ruling party MLAs disappeared as voters tried to question them on the betrayal of their poll promise. In such a scenario, Medha Patkar arrived and started mobilising slum-dwellers to resist the demolitions. It would be no exaggeration to say that her arrival turned the tide and ultimately halted the bulldozers.

It is these slum-dwellers, rendered homeless and then emboldened by Patkar to rebuild their homes on the same land that they themselves had reclaimed, who became Patkar's campaigners for the Lok Sabha election. They had long urged her to contest elections. Now that she had finally agreed, they were euphoric.

Their resistance in 2004-05, led by Patkar, had ultimately grown into the formation of the Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan. The struggle had empowered them, especially the women. They had sat on dharnas and fasted with her in Mumbai and Delhi; been lathi-charged and seen her being dragged by the hair by the police; gone to jail and

negotiated with the state with her. “Many a time, policemen have told her to leave, saying they didn’t want to arrest her. But she chose to stay on in the lock-up with us,” said one. Added another,

*Leaders always tell us to wait out, and go in to talk to ministers with a few of their own men. We don’t know what deals are made inside. But Tai [as Patkar is known] always insisted that either we come inside with her, or she won’t meet the minister. We saw how she spoke to ministers. Even the CM didn’t know what the Rajiv Awas Yojana was, he asked Tai to explain it to him.*

But after all this confidence, when it came to getting their rights on the ground, these slum-dwellers-turned-activists had to petition the local MLA and MP. The latter’s indifference would render them helpless again. For instance, while it was their struggle under Patkar’s leadership that had led to the decision to implement the Rajiv Awas Yojana in their area, the survey of slums that was necessary for it to be put into practice had not been done by the state government. Repeated petitions to the authorities had gone unheard. If Patkar were to be their MP, they knew the days of waiting in vain outside offices would end. “*Agar Tai jeetke aayi, to woh officer kya, uska baap bhi saarey rules nibhayega*” (If Tai wins the elections then the officers will definitely follow rules) said one. “*Tai ki jeet matlab garibon ki awaaz Parliament mein suni jaayegi*” (Tai’s victory means the voice of the poor will be heard in Parliament) said another.

## **A New Politics**

It was not just that these slum-dwellers who wanted her in Parliament because they saw her as their representative. Many felt they owed it to Patkar to work for her success – she had stood by them over the last decade. For this reason, when she asked them to donate for her campaign, they did so willingly. “She has never asked us for money. This time, we were thrilled when she told us: *ek vote, ek note*. We feel we have a stake in her campaign”, said the women. “If only she gave us the go-ahead, we would empty our pockets for her”. Some lent out their rickshaws, others got friends’ cars modified into open jeeps. Yet others lent out little cubicles for use as campaign offices. Some had been inspired by Arvind Kejriwal to join AAP, but they threw themselves into the election campaign because their candidate was Medha Patkar. “I first read about her in school. We’re lucky to get a candidate like her; it’s our loss if we don’t elect her”, said one AAP member.

These are not the kind of feelings campaign workers have for their candidates. Election time is boom time for the unemployed; rates can range from Rs 200 to Rs 500 a day, with meals thrown in; and the highest bidder gets the maximum workers. Most workers never get to meet the candidate; everything is handled by a few coordinators. Even in cadre-based parties such as the Shiv Sena, leaders complain that workers need more than a *vada-pav* to come out on the streets for a two-hour agitation. Election campaigning is a 24-hour job – at least that is how Patkar herself saw it.

If the enthusiasm of workers was a remarkable phenomenon, so was the level of Patkar’s own involvement in her first election campaign. Throughout, she remained the quintessential activist, exemplifying her brand of politics: *galli se Dilli tak* (from this lane to the corridors of power in Delhi), as she put it. Too embarrassed to ask for votes for herself, she asked people to “think and vote this time, to bring in change”. Her slogan was *vote dya, hakk ghya* (give your vote, take your rights), and *chunaav nahin, chunauti hai, yeh rajneeti badalni hai* (not an election, it’s a challenge; we have to change politics). She urged women to come out to vote, even if it was to press the none of the above (NOTA) button. Decrying that this election had turned into a “Modi vs Gandhi” battle, she spoke instead of issues she stood

for: democracy, an end to inequality and corruption. She spoke constantly about Article 243 of the Constitution that gave people the right to decide how resources are used; Ambani's building versus the hovels of the poor; Adani's super profits versus contract labour; 400 litres of water per person in Walkeshwar and not even 40 litres for her voters. "Think about why there's inequality," she told voters in her last speech.

Patkar was the only candidate allowed to campaign inside the Godrej residential colony at Vikhroli. There, she spoke of the vast tracts of land controlled by companies such as Godrej and Tata, while the state said it had no land to house the poor. The many land-grab scams she and her team had exposed, and the builders and politicians involved in them, formed a recurring theme: Lavasa near Pune; Hiranandani Gardens and Adarsh in Mumbai. In an interview to this author, she regretted not being able to speak in depth on issues in a door to door campaign. "There should be a platform where all candidates could come together and debate", she said.

### **Wide Support**

Activists from all over India had come to campaign for Patkar, mainly from the National Alliance of People's Movements. At every public meeting, she introduced them to the audience, so much so that her rivals started spreading the rumour that Patkar was relying on people from her village to campaign for her, in the absence of local support! Her socialist mentors were there in strength on the day she filed her nomination, from the 89-year-old G G Parikh to publishing patriarch Ramdas Bhatkal to theatre personality Ratnakar Matkari. Before she went into the Collector's office, she ensured that each of them spoke.

Many of them had witnessed if not participated in the freedom struggle; the time had come, they said, to launch a second one to turn independence into "real swarajya". Throughout that rally, patriotic songs were sung, with old Sarvodaya activists in khadi breaking into impromptu jigs. Equally inspiring was her final rally through the streets of Mandala where she had first landed amid the ruins of slums in 2004. Against the backdrop of Deonar's infamous garbage dump, she stood in an open tempo, strewn with flowers showered on her, and recalled the beginnings of the struggle she and those around her had waged. That last rally was entirely a people's show; from the flowers showered on her to the simple meal of *roti-bhaji* distributed to all, with Patkar insisting that she be served the same.

"She has sat on the floor and eaten vada-pav with us", one slum-dweller recalled as he waited for Patkar to file her nomination. The scene when she came out of the Collector's office was typically Medha Patkar: addressing her voters who sat on the road, she explained why filing the nomination had taken so long; expressed regret at having kept them waiting hungry; and then proceeded to explain the details of the affidavit she had filed, the cases against her and her assets. The cases were mostly to do with her dharnas; her supporters nodded in remembrance of old struggles as she enumerated them. When it came to her assets, she seemed almost apologetic, even as the slum-dwellers laughed when she mentioned she had Rs 25,000 in her account, 500 shares worth Rs 50,000, bought years ago for her by her brother; and Rs 1,32,000 in National Savings Certificates, which included a 50th birthday gift from friends. The rally ended with her shouting slogans and then turning the mike towards her supporters to complete the slogans.

Rarely has any politician made this gesture. Few politicians shout slogans themselves, but for Patkar, it was normal. On a blazing hot afternoon, walking through the sprawling Godrej colony, after having spent the entire morning on the streets, it was Patkar who started the slogans, seeing her companions droop wearily. Used to dharnas and gheraos but not election campaigns which meant approaching strangers, her supporters would sometimes forget to carry leaflets; if they did, they would forget to distribute them. Sometimes, the mike, or some crucial press note, would be

left behind somewhere. Even the *jhadu*, the party symbol, was often forgotten. Every time, it was the veteran activist who reminded them. After campaigning drew to a close, she instructed a supporter how to store the leaflets that had not been used. Once, upset at a three-hour lunch break included in her schedule by her aides, she converted it into a planning meet and also gave interviews to waiting journalists.

### **Back to the People**

Offered a drink or a snack, Patkar would insist on sharing it with those around her. But despite the 33°C heat, there were things she simply would not accept: Bisleri from an admirer on the road (he got a lecture from her on how Coca Cola had depleted water reserves; and why we must learn from Africa. V Venugopal, leader of the Plachimada struggle against Coke, was present, barefoot and lungi rolled up, in her nomination rally); tea in plastic cups (“this causes cancer”) or water in sealed plastic containers. Packaged and branded eats were politely refused; but a banana, lime juice and coconut water were welcome.

Many things unavoidable in an MP’s election campaign embarrassed her, self-praise for one. She would speak about legislation she and others like her had struggled to bring about – the vendors bill, the unorganised workers bill, the Rajiv Awas Yojana – but never of her own role in it. Having a car especially waiting for her was another thing that made her squirm. She would regret not being able to accommodate everyone in it. Rather than waving out to people from an open car, she would get off in the afternoon sun and walk, stopping to greet people, making impromptu speeches on the way. Her supporters would insist on her meeting small groups of acquaintances whom they had promised a one-on-one with the MP candidate; this seemed a waste of time given the vastness of the constituency, but she never said no.

On the last day, after the deadline for campaigning was over, she instructed her aides to drop all those who had come from out of town, in the few cars especially brought by her supporters for the final rally. Then she herself took an auto to her next destination. As is their wont, the auto-driver refused. “Do you know whom you’re saying no to?”, asked her aide. Had Patkar heard the question, she would have reprimanded the aide. At any rate, the auto driver was least bothered. So the MP candidate from Mumbai’s north-east constituency got off without a word and stood around till a willing cab was found to take her to her office.