



'We need more politicians who read poetry, more poets to enter politics'

An openly gay man steps into mainstream Maharashtra politics and argues in favour of crafting an alternative political imagination through investment in literature and the arts

"In many ways I'm crafting a new narrative of what a politician looks like," Anish Gawande, dressed in cool whites offset by bold red socks, tells mid-day. The newly-appointed national spokesperson of the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) notes how "the role allows [him] to redefine what it means to be a politician, what it means to dress, and speak like one. That's a transformative journey that one can embark upon when one is given a position of responsibility." **PIC/KIRTI SURVE PARADE**

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

WE meet Anish Gawande at Method Bandra a day after the announcement by the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) of his appointment as its national spokesperson. "An ideal space," the curator, writer and Rhodes scholar says of the choice of the

gallery-cum-cafe for our meeting. "To me, politics has always been intertwined with art and literature." Gawande, 27, has degrees in comparative literature, intellectual history and public policy and is the director of the Dara Shikoh Fellowship, an interdisciplinary

arts residency based in Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh.

He recalls a visit to Babasaheb Ambedkar's house in Pune a few years ago when he was struck that what occupied pride of place in the living room was not a fancy dining table or a work of art, but a library. He believes the need of the hour is to craft an alternative political

imagination, a task that has to be accomplished through an investment in literature, the humanities and the arts. "We are still figuring out what that alternative political imagination is. How do we readdress the issue of caste? How do we readdress the divisions created

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The Mumbaikar who secured human rights for womankind

From enshrining women's rights in the Constitution of India, to tweaking the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights so it didn't exclude women, this extract from a new book lays out how Mumbai freedom fighter Hansa Mehta fought to empower all women

IN 1947, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) set about drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in the aftermath of World War II. Eleanor Roosevelt, the former first lady of the USA, was the chairperson of the commission. The Draft Article 1 of the UDHR said, "all men are born free and equal". Hansa Mehta, reformist and activist, who was also the Indian delegate to the commission, stood strongly against the exclusionary language. Her years of feminist activism had imbibed in her the importance of equality in all spheres and forms. She argued that the words "all men" could be used to restrict the rights of women. She prevailed upon her colleagues to choose a gender-neutral international human rights framework

that proclaims, "all human beings are born free and equal".

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In December 1917, [Sarojini] Naidu led a delegation of women that met Edwin Montagu, the secretary of state for India, and Lord Chelmsford, the viceroy. In their address to Montagu and Chelmsford, the delegation highlighted that women in India had "awakened to their

The Draft Article 1 of the UDHR said, "all men are born free and equal". Hansa Mehta prevailed upon her colleagues to choose a more gender-neutral "all human beings are born free and equal"

responsibilities in the public life". They wanted women to be recognised as "people", specifying that "it may be worded in such terms as will not disqualify our sex" and allowed the right to vote and "same opportunities of representation" as the men. The hectic advocacy, however, met with limited success. Britain enacted the Government of India Act 1919 (based on a report by Montagu and Chelmsford), which listed being a woman as a disqualification to the right to vote. However, it allowed provincial legislatures to enfranchise them.

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By 1945, the victory of the Allied Forces was inevitable and Indian independence was finally on the

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Indira Gandhi, then the minister of information and broadcasting, flanked by Hansa Mehta on the left and Mehta's husband Jivraj Narayan Mehta—then the Indian high commissioner to the UK—on the right, in London in July 1964. The Mehtas lived in Mumbai, participated in the freedom struggle here and were even arrested in the city by the British. **PIC/GETTY IMAGES**

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on the basis of religion that have fractured our society? How do we craft a new understanding of gender and sexuality politically? And how do we learn to navigate a world undergoing massive transitions? This demands serious thinking which you cannot do without reading. We need more politicians who read poetry and more poets entering politics."

Gawande speaks of a rhetoric of care that is missing in political discourse today. "I think 'care' is a word that's been lost in politics amidst the upheavals that we've seen, amidst the focus on politics as a vehicle for power. We must recenter the conversation around why we believe in equality, secularism, why we believe in granting farm loan waivers to farmers."

For him, the inspiration to pursue a career in public service came from home.

He speaks of his grandfather, who hailed from Yeola near Nashik, a professor of law who worked alongside Ambedkar during the drafting of the Constitution. "There's a certain legacy of progressive values [in my family]. I've been constantly reminded that there is a need to serve."

But not belonging to a political

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family meant the barriers to entry were many and even though he had the experience of working on now Shiv Sena MP Milind Deora's campaigns for Congress in 2014 and 2018, he says he wasn't convinced of his entry into politics. "This election cycle has been reassuring. Supriya Sule and Jayant Patil have been guiding forces and mentors. And they've proven to me for the first time that they'll walk the talk."

He speaks of meeting with the Baramati MP and her party's National Working President, four years ago, when he had invited



During COVID, Gawande ran a community kitchen called the Bhiwandi Project, where they fed almost 6,000 people a day. **PIC/INSTAGRAM**

her for a conference at the Harvard College US-India Initiative on trans rights. Within a month, he says, she had set up a meeting with Maharashtra's then deputy chief minister and helped set up a transgender welfare board in Maharashtra. "Knowing that you have leadership in a party that is open-minded and willing to engage is important. There was a certain way in which she inspired me to finally take the plunge".

The presence of a political class that's ready to tackle queerness is, he believes, what has made his selection possible. "The NCP-SP had

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the most progressive manifesto on LGBTQIA+ rights, an entire section that ranged from social security to shelter homes to reservation and marriage equality. It was the first party to launch a queer cell, and has a trans woman heading that department. There is a willingness to engage which makes a [career] move like mine possible," says Gawande, who came out as gay in 2019, when he was 22. "That was only the beginning, though," he is quick to warn. "The real struggle begins now. This is uncharted territory. How this manifests in the backlash I may face for my identity, I don't know. There might be none or there might be a lot. What this means in terms of being pigeonholed only to queer causes and not being asked to speak on other issues is yet for me to find out."

With the splintering of the NCP-SP from the Ajit Pawar-led NCP, which Gawande says "was aided and abetted by judicial and political moves that were unethical and also in my opinion, unconstitutional," the party has been left in a precarious position. But it has shown that it could win eight out of 10 Lok Sabha seats, he argues.

"No other national party has a strike rate that high, especially when contesting in a state as politically fragmented as Maharashtra. Only Pawar Saheb can make magic like this happen."

The way forward, he believes, lies in expanding the party's presence in urban areas, conveying its ideology to an English-speaking audience, targeting young people in Tier 1, 2 and 3, across Maharashtra and the country.

There's a need, Gawande says, for a renewed conversation around what 'Marathi asmita' means. "The state was founded on Marathi pride but it unfortunately got mobilised and weaponized in a negative way. I see a resurgence of a more progressive form of Marathi asmita. It's why you had people across linguistic, religious and caste backgrounds participate in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement." Since Mumbai is at the heart of this inclusive ideology, "it's important to take the Mumbai model national."

At a time when the crafting of a national narrative from the perspective of progressive values in the opposition is being evaluated, there is an opportunity, says Gawande, to showcase the Shahu-Phule-Ambedkar ideology. "We're witnessing a peculiar moment in politics where the possibilities are endless and open. In this moment you will have the ability to enter the conversation more easily than you will once a new political imagination has been crafted. It's this narrative that will fuel the country for the next 20 years."

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horizon. Women activists were hopeful that their aspirations of equality were going to be realised in an independent India. They had stood against the colonial rule and were now keen on forging a republic that would elevate their status.

Hansa presided over the annual conference of [All India Women's Conference] AIWC in December 1945. At the conference "members were instructed to collect the relevant clauses dealing with women's rights from various constitutions". In her presidential address, Hansa talked about crystallizing their demands through a women's charter of rights. Hansa also spoke of raising the economic status of women. "It is in the economic sphere that woman will have to fight hard to establish her position," she said. Hansa then broached a subject that remains unresolved—the issue of unpaid household work, which she felt had not been recognized yet and wanted to highlight. Hansa passionately voiced, "It is the work of the housewife. She works from early morning till late at night... It is time that the importance of this work was recognized and conditions of work improved." She then enumerated another essential but ignored right—the right to leisure.

Hansa had put her privilege to good use. She was well-travelled and informed of the advancements around the world. The progressive thinking on display was a testament to her commitment to feminist causes.

The AIWC session of 1945 was in many ways redemption for Hansa. In the 1927 session, she had caused some flutter when she sought to outlaw child marriages and recognize marriages as a "strictly monogamous and equal contract". Now at the helm of affairs, Hansa made it known that the charter of women's rights would advocate holistic changes to personal laws vis-a-vis succession, divorce, polygamy, and guardianship. She also made it clear that a woman "shall have a right to limit her family". At its 1946 session, the AIWC adopted the Indian Woman's Charter of Rights and Duties. In presenting the 'Charter of Rights and Duties' of women, life had come full circle for Hansa since her college days when an errant male classmate thought he could decide the duties of Indian women. The charter was "forwarded to the Central and provincial governments, strongly urging that the fundamental rights and economic and social directives embodied in it form 'an integral part of the Constitution'". Hansa was elected to the



Mehta at a United Nations Commission on Human Rights meet in 1947, when she objected to the use of gendered words such as "all men" and "brothers" because "she felt they might be interpreted to exclude women and were out of date". **PIC COURTESY UN IN INDIA'S X ACCOUNT**

Constituent Assembly from Bombay on a Congress ticket in 1946.

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The second session of the [United Nations' Commission on Human Rights] HRC was held in Geneva in December 1947, a few months after India gained independence. At the meeting, Hansa again spoke of the International Bill of Rights forming part of both international and domestic law. She apprised the

delegates of India's commitment to incorporate fundamental human rights into its Constitution. When the matter of implementation of the Bill of Rights came up, she said that the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights] UDHR must not contain anything "which would not be implemented". Subsequently, she was made part of the Working Group of Implementation and elected 'chairman'.

Hansa proposed that individuals

must have the right to petition for violation of their human rights. Her working group asked the UN Secretariat "to draw up a full and detailed scheme of regulations and procedures regarding the right of petition". The move was scuttled by the USA which was sceptical about the implementation.

At its thirty-fourth meeting, the HRC discussed draft Article 1 of the UDHR. Hansa objected to the use of gendered words such as "all men" and "brothers" because "she felt they might be interpreted to exclude women and were out of date". Chairperson [former First Lady of the US Eleanor] Roosevelt disagreed saying "all men" was used in the general sense and implied human beings. The draft Article was put to vote and "all men" was accepted. In the subsequent sessions, the matter was brought up and brushed away. Some members felt it was irrelevant as "all men" automatically included women. The French representative highlighted the translation issues that were to happen if "all men" was substituted with "all men and women". The United Kingdom and India joined hands and moved another resolution. It was only in the last session of the commission that Hansa's suggestions for gender-neutral terminology were accepted.

Excerpted with permission from The Fifteen: The Lives and Times of the Women in India's Constituent Assembly by Angellica Aribam and Akash Satyawali, Hachette India