

A DECADE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
THROUGH
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN INDIA
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*Impact of Women's Participation in Local Governance in Rural
India*

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One might say that the world is passing through an era of democratic decentralization and women's empowerment. Many developed as well as developing countries are experimenting with various forms of devolution of power through democratic structures at local levels. And women are becoming more involved in local decision-making structures. Because of its size and boldness of policy, India is one of the most exciting examples of this experiment. This paper aims at describing the process of women's participation in local governance and assessing its significance. It also tries to analyze the impact of this process on rural society in India. It sums up some results of a team research project, based on numerous local field studies, concerning expanded inclusion and empowerment in local government councils. [Baviskar: 2002]

History of PRIs in India

Panchayats or village councils have existed in India since ancient times. The traditional panchayats were informal bodies of village elders from dominant castes and families. They dealt with disputes of various kinds, law and order problems, maintenance of common facilities, and the general welfare of the villager. In addition, there were caste panchayats which dealt with family matters, marriage disputes and violations of caste customs. The introduction of formal, statutory, elected local councils began under British rule in the early 20th century. Limited in franchise and powers, these local bodies (usually constituted at the *taluka*, or sub-district, and district level) dealt with education, roads and maintenance of public utilities in general. Major changes in local governance came only after Independence in 1947.

In 1952 the Government of India launched an ambitious countrywide programme of community development and national extension service to promote the development of rural areas. This programme failed because it offered little scope for local priorities and decision-making. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1958) recommended an improved three-tier structure of local councils, which could take a more active part in the implementation of various development programmes. Many states introduced new, elected Gram Panchayats at the village level, Taluka Panchayat Samitis at the sub-district level, and Zilla Parishads at the district level. Launched with great fanfare, this 'panchayati raj' system gradually lost steam and stagnated, leading to further investigation by yet another committee.

The Asoka Mehta Committee (1978) recommended that PRIs be changed from instruments for the delivery of bureaucratic development programmes to structures for sharing power, thus giving greater decision-making to local councils. This stimulated enthusiasm for a while in some states such as West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra. Some states, such as Karnataka and Maharashtra, even took the bold step of reserving 25 to 30 percent of council seats for women. However, soon the momentum was lost and another phase of stagnation followed. There was a great deal of discussion and debate on revival and revitalization of PRIs. The issue was given serious consideration during the last days of Rajiv Gandhi's Prime Ministership, which ended in 1989. It was during P.V. Narasimha Rao's term as Prime Minister that the historical 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution were passed by the Indian Parliament on 22 December 1992. While the 73rd amendment dealt with PRIs in rural India, the 74th

amendment concerned urban governance. This paper deals only with the 73rd amendment concerning rural PRIs.

73rd Constitutional Amendment and After

Given its far-reaching consequences, the 73rd amendment (together with the 74th) is rightly called ‘a silent revolution’ for various reasons. First of all, the PRIs no longer operate at the whim of state governments and their laws. They are now a part of the Constitution and enjoy the status of institutions of self-government, like Parliament at the federal level and legislative assemblies at the state level. The amendment prescribes regular elections every five years and elections within six months of the dissolution of any PRI. To ensure free, fair and timely elections there is a provision for the setting up of State Election Commissions. The most revolutionary provision is the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in local bodies, along with reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs — i.e., ex-untouchables) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their regional populations.

To ensure the financial viability of these councils, there is a provision to set up State Finance Commissions. The amendment lays down 29 functions to be entrusted to the PRIs. To maintain a democratic ethos, popular accountability and transparency, the amendment emphasizes the need for periodic meetings of the *Gram Sabha*, composed of all adults in each village. These meetings approve ongoing programmes and financial allocations. In brief, the amendment visualizes the allocation of funds, functions and functionaries to these bodies to ensure genuine and effective democratic decentralization.

After approval of the amendment by the President of India on 24 April 1993, and the passing of conformity acts by the various state governments, two elections (mainly in 1995 and 2000) have been held in almost all states to constitute the new PRIs.

Profile of Women’s Participation in Local Governance

There were already some women in local government prior to the passing of 73rd and 74th amendments. But they were few and far between. In most cases the state laws prescribed at least one or two seats for women in the old-style PRIs. Very often these seats were filled through nomination. And invariably the nominees were members of elite families belonging to higher castes and owning substantial land, thus enjoying high status in terms of family, caste, and class. These women were usually related to established political leaders. As symbols of tokenism, they rarely took active interest in the functioning of the PRIs. The new system of reservation and competitive elections, based on adult franchise, changed this situation radically.

When the provisions for reservations of seats for women were being debated in Parliament, several members were doubtful that such a large number of women would come forward to contest these seats. But these doubts proved to be wrong. In total, for over one million seats reserved for women in all the local bodies, more than five million women candidates contested. Thus, on average, there were five women candidates contesting each seat. Moreover, some women candidates won unreserved or general seats, defeating their male rivals. Of course, such cases were not many, but they were no less significant.

It needs to be mentioned that the reservation of seats for women — and for SCs and STs — concerns not only members but also office bearers. Thus, not only one third

of elected members but one third of sarpanches or chairpersons have also to be women. In the country as a whole, there are 231,630 Gram Panchayats (Village Councils) — over 77,210 of them now have women as sarpanches. At the intermediate level, there are 5,912 Taluka (or Block/Mandal) Panchayat Samitis — more than 1,970 of them have women Sabhapatis or heads. And of the 594 Zilla Parishads (district councils), 200 have women Presidents. Thus, in the country as a whole, about one million women now occupy positions as members or heads in rural and urban local government bodies. This may be unique in the world.

There are variations among states in the magnitude of women's representation. While most states manage to meet the Constitutional target of 33% seats for women, in some this proportion has been exceeded. For example, in Karnataka women occupy 43.6% of seats in local bodies. This means a large number of women have managed to win general (unreserved) seats, defeating rival male and female candidates. This suggests a highly significant trend for the future.

Seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are in proportion to their share of the population in each region. In the country as a whole, there are 15% SCs and 7.5% STs in the population. So, about 22.5% seats are reserved for these communities. One-third of these seats have to be filled by women belonging to these categories.

It was feared that the reserved posts for women would be monopolized by women belonging to families of locally influential politicians of higher castes and classes — since local elites enjoy the advantages of status, wealth, information, political skills and influential contacts. However, representation has broadened. For example, reservation of seats ensures representation of women from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Many of these women belong to families of small and marginal farmers, or landless labourers.

In terms of age, most elected women are forty years or older. [Datta: 1998] There are few younger women. This is because older women enjoy greater freedom regarding physical mobility. They also are relatively freer from the burdens of household chores and childcare. Depending on their availability, educated or literate women are preferred over illiterate ones. Even then, there are a large number of illiterate women, many of whom are even heads of panchayats.

There is also the phenomenon of all-women panchayats. They have arisen in a few progressive states, such as Maharashtra and West Bengal. Although insignificant in numbers, they deserve attention. At one time there were about a dozen all-women panchayats in Maharashtra.

In some cases women themselves took the initiative in forming all-women panchayats. In others, the men encouraged women to take over panchayats. This was sometimes motivated by a desire to dampen down bitter factional fights. In Maharashtra, some sugar barons (powerful leaders of cooperative sugar factories) decided to let women control the panchayats around their factories. The sugar barons considered panchayat positions as unattractive in terms of money and power — as not worth expending political capital in order to avert small-scale factional feuds. Besides, the barons were confident that they could manipulate panchayat decisions by proxy. Some all-women panchayats arose due to active intervention of the Shetkari Sanghatana, a farmers' organization with its own ideology and political agenda, wanting to empower rural women through these means.

These all-women panchayats were partially successful as experiments, but for a variety of reasons they did not endure. Women preferred to tackle problems of water supply and toilets. They also took greater interest in schools, particularly in the

attendance of girls. They were innovative in their methods for getting things done. And on the whole, women were less prone to be tempted by opportunities for corruption. But men did not like women's campaigns against the consumption of alcohol or vending of liquor in the villages. Most men did not favour giving another term to women, although the latter had managed the panchayats well despite various obstacles. On the whole, all-women's panchayats were an imaginative experiment in women's empowerment.

Women's Reservation: How and Why Did it Happen?

Prior to the 73rd amendment, there was no significant presence of women in local government. Nor were they conspicuously present in legislative bodies at the state and federal levels. Even today, women account for no more than 8% of members of the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament). For years, the federal government has tried to introduce a bill prescribing reservation for women in Parliament. But so vehement was the opposition by some political parties, it failed even to introduce the bill for consideration. Even the recent attempt (in June 2003) by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha to arrive at a compromise on this issue failed. How then did the two houses of Parliament pass the provision for reservation of one-third of seats in PRIs for women without a single dissenting vote? In the absence of any systematic study one can only speculate on this matter.

It has been argued that the easy consent by politicians in Parliament to women's reservation in PRIs reflects their low valuation or indifference towards these institutions. Since these politicians do not consider PRIs as centres of power and authority, they do not care if women occupy one-third of the seats in these bodies. Even though some men would lose their positions in the PRIs as a consequence of such reservation, the politicians did not consider it a great loss or sacrifice.

It has also been suggested that the politicians looked upon the women's reservation as an opportunity for women in their families and kin groups. Once their own women were elected to these seats, they could control the local councils from behind the curtain. In effect, the politicians did not see much of a loss in the election of women to these reserved seats.

Some politicians, it is argued, looked upon women's reservation in the PRIs as a welcome chance to reduce bitter factional conflicts at the local level. They assumed that a contest among women would not be as fierce and expensive as among male candidates. Thus they could save their political capital for other, more serious, contests.

Another argument is that the politicians were also influenced by the continuous discussions and debates, for over three decades in various fora, about gender equality and justice. They did not mind making a concession to a widely accepted principle, and thus deriving the satisfaction of seeming liberal and progressive as regards gender issues.

The final outcome of unopposed approval to the reservation of seats for women in PRIs seems to be due to a combination of all these factors.

Gains and Achievements of Women's Participation

When women are in charge of panchayats, their programmes tend to be oriented to daily household needs. Women think of tap water and toilets, while men think of roads and buses. Women are also keen on improving school facilities and seeing that girls attend school regularly. [Datta: 1998] They see the value of education in their daily

life. Illiterate women often regret their plight and say how much more effective and efficient they would have been in their panchayat work if only they had been educated.

Wherever women were in power they worked for community toilets, having experienced the daily embarrassment of going out in the open for relieving themselves. They also brought in smokeless *chulahs* (stoves). In most villages, both schemes failed because toilets could not be kept clean and the design of stoves was faulty.

Women are also innovative in their style of operation. [Datta: 1998] In some of the Maharashtrian villages with all-women panchayats, they established the practice of having water taps and pipes repaired within 24 hours, since women suffered most from delayed repairs. In a village called Vitner in Maharashtra, where people had encroached on common land, the women decided to release their cattle to graze there in order to reclaim the land for the community. In another village, women contributed labour to repair the road to the village school so that children could go to school without difficulty. In yet another village, where there was no teacher appointed to the school and endless paperwork did not help, 22 women marched to the Block Development Office and left it only when a teacher was appointed.

In those panchayats where women are in power, there is less corruption. It is not that women are inherently morally superior to men. But women's upbringing and outlook towards life seem to make them less prone to corruption. [Datta: 1998]

Some Problems of Women's Participation

Patriarchal culture and social structures dominant in rural India seem to inhibit women's participation in local governance through panchayats. Some families oppose their women working in panchayats, saying women's place is in the home and not in the panchayat office.

Women are often excluded from playing legitimate and active roles in rural community life due to social and institutional constraints. [UNDP: undated] Examples of social constraints include restrictions on freedom of movement and action imposed by traditional family, caste or patriarchal norms. Women panchayat members are sometimes treated as mere proxies or surrogates for their husbands. In some states, such as Uttar Pradesh, husbands take over the role of their wives as panchayat heads — so much so that the term 'Pradhan Pati' is commonly used to refer to them. 'Pradhan' is the head of the panchayat and 'Pati' is her husband. In a typical proxy case, except for signing official documents, the Pradhan Pati (the husband) does everything. He makes decisions, issues various documents, attends meetings, and in an interview he answers all questions on behalf of his wife. In some cases there are pragmatic arrangements between husband and wife. The wife does most of the panchayat work inside the village but the husband takes charge of dealing with the world of outsiders, such as teachers, contractors and officials.

Institutional constraints can be imposed on women panchayat members in various ways. In some cases, men conspire to oust women from power. A woman may become sarpanch (head of panchayat) through reservation. Her deputy is usually a man. He joins hands with other members and gets a vote of no-confidence passed against her, and starts acting as sarpanch in her place. Thus what is given by law and the constitution is taken away by intrigue and chicanery.

The rotation system of reservation also works against women's interests. In any election one-third of the total number of constituencies are reserved for women. But in

the next election (after five years), these constituencies will be treated as open/unreserved, and another set of one-third constituencies will be reserved for women. The woman elected in the first election from a reserved constituency has to choose either to contest from her old constituency — which is no longer reserved for women and thus compete with men as well as women — or go to a newly declared reserved constituency for women. In the latter, she will face only women candidates but will not derive any benefit from the work she might have done in the old constituency. She will have to begin from scratch. Thus women face a difficult choice either way. That is why women have demanded reservation for any constituency to last for at least ten years (i.e., two terms). That way they will be able to enjoy the benefit of their past good work (which they might have done in the first term), while contesting the election for the second term.

In some states, the law lays down a ‘two child norm’ for panchayat candidates. Anyone having more than two children is not eligible to contest for panchayat elections. This is unfair to women because in many cases they have no control over decisions about their reproductive life. The desired number of children is often decided by the husband or the family.

Sometimes women are discriminated against even in seating arrangements at panchayat meetings. In some cases, women sit separately from male members. In one panchayat in Haryana, all members sit in chairs, while the female Scheduled Caste Sarpanch is made to sit on the floor because she belongs to a lower caste. There are also some extreme cases such as that of Gundiabai from a village in Madhya Pradesh. She belongs to a former untouchable caste and is a poor agricultural labourer. As Sarpanch of the panchayat she was to unfurl the national flag on the Independence Day, but the dominant caste men of the village did not allow her to do it. Not only that, they also beat her up for polluting the sacred national flag.

There are other bizarre examples of male domination. In some election campaigns, the husband’s name is displayed more prominently on the banner than the wife’s, even though she is the candidate. In one case, when the wife won the election, her husband was paraded in the victory procession with garlands around his neck, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Because many women are illiterate and uneducated, they lack knowledge about rules and procedures. This weakness is often exploited by bureaucrats working within the panchayat raj system who maintain records and accounts. There have been several cases of mismanagement of panchayat funds, where the village clerk found it easy to misappropriate panchayat funds thanks to the illiteracy of the woman sarpanch.

When the amendment was passed, men could not prevent women from being elected. Yet in some cases, they have been able to sabotage effective implementation of the law — sometimes by force, sometimes by stubborn consensus regarding patriarchal domination, and sometimes by exploiting women’s ignorance and lack of experience.

Impact of Women’s Empowerment on Rural Society

When reservations for women in local government were first raised, there were many sceptics regarding the idea. They feared that women from politically powerful families would grab the reserved seats. However, these fears proved to be unfounded. The sheer size of the reservation quota (33%) worked against such monopolization. Studies have found that about 40% of elected women belong to families below the poverty line. [CWDS: 1999] And the majority of elected women are from ‘non-political’

families with no previous experience in politics. Women from established political families are also elected. But they are few and certainly not in the majority. As well, the sheer numbers and the requirement of filling SC and ST seats means that rich and politically dominant families are not able to grab all the positions.

Caroline Moser [1993] makes a meaningful distinction between the practical needs and strategic interests of women. She points out that as long as women work for water, toilets, schools and other such needs, men support them. But as soon as women demand equality and an end to gender discrimination and subordination, there is opposition from men. Men support women when they agitate for fodder or water, but not when women demand local bans on the sale and consumption of liquor.

One thing is certain. Women's participation in the public sphere of panchayats has enhanced their status in their families, castes and villages. Shubhatai of village Vitner in Maharashtra looks more confident, and her husband has stopped battering her, thanks to her enhanced status in the family and community. Women say that thanks to women's panchayat work, many men have given up drinking.

Even more significant is the improvement in the self-image of women and their increasing confidence and experience in public life. They no longer obey orders from males unquestioningly.

The most important impact is the recognition of the value of education by women. New panchayat members experience many handicaps due to lack of education. This makes them keen to educate their daughters. There is no doubt that female literacy and education will improve in the near future, thanks in part to women's participation in panchayats. The next generation of women panchayat leaders will be better educated and, therefore, better equipped to manage panchayat affairs.

Many women in panchayats now receive petitions from other village women. These are about family conflicts, disputes over land, employment and housing. The new panchayat members may not be able to solve all these problems, but they are exposed to a whole new world of public service.

Conclusion

Have women acquired power through panchayats? If yes, then in what sense and to what extent? There is no doubt that women have been empowered following their participation in panchayat work. But the degree of empowerment varies from region to region and situation to situation. If a woman conducts panchayat affairs on her own, fully participates in the decision-making process, and gets things done for the community by interacting with outside agencies, she is almost fully empowered. At the other extreme, if a woman does not come out of her house or remove her veil, and signs on the dotted line (or gives her thumb impression) as directed by her husband acting as 'Pradhan Pati', it is a case of zero empowerment. In between there are many cases of varying degrees of empowerment. A woman who leaves her home, goes out in the public sphere to a panchayat office, and sits in a chair near other men and women, is also on the road to empowerment, even if she keeps quiet in the meetings. These are her first steps on this road.

In matters of empowerment, one has to take a long-term view. What will happen ten or twenty years hence? I am sure, thanks to this process of participation, women representatives of the future will be much more assertive, confident and competent.

Indian women are now on the road to increasing empowerment, following the 'silent revolution' ushered in by the 73rd and 74th amendments. The initial hostility of men towards this process is on the decline. Now men have accepted the change and are trying to use women to their own advantage. When seats were reserved for women, in most cases, men persuaded women to contest elections to retain political power and status within the family. As time goes by, women will acquire the skills, learn the rules of the game and work according to their own agendas. Whenever this happens, women will have helped create better village communities, based on harmony and cooperation achieved through gender balance and justice.

Note:

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