

***A DECADE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
THROUGH
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN INDIA***
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***Against the Notion of 'PROXIES':
A methodological critique of the widely applied PROXY —
Terminology to describe and explain women's failure to
become politically active despite the 33% women's reservation***

Women Pradhans in Himachal and Uttar Pradesh

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Introduction¹

Already in preparing my own research project, then later while being actually in the field and also in many discussions afterwards, I again and again encountered the tendency — be it by villagers, other lay people, state officials, NGO people or academics — to reduce some of those women who got elected to the panchayat bodies to ‘proxies’ or ‘puppets’ in the hands of their husbands, relatives or other male panchayat members. Which, of course, does not seem to be so far-fetched at first glance, if one thinks of panchayat meetings without a single women present, or the women sitting mum in the corner while the show is going on somewhere else, or even if a woman pradhan actually implements some schemes and does some work, it still seems as if she is acting on how she was briefed.

However, I would like with this short presentation to vote for a change in perspective, so that even the extreme examples of ‘purdah–pradhans’ will appear in a different light — i.e., as active agents, with their own rationale and agenda. In fact, when viewed this way, one is witnessing a transformation of local politics as well as a change in gender relations. This is a process, however, that is still limited by its own infancy, as well as by the way gender and politics are constructed in the dominant discourse within Indian society.

The idea to increase women’s political participation in local governance — from next to non-existent to 33% — by a constitutionally-prescribed women’s quota, is such an exciting, unique large-scale experiment that, of course, this drew the interest of researchers (like me), feminists, politicians, the media and even the public in general. The outcomes of the numerous studies done on how the newly-elected women access, use and reinterpret the new legally-sanctioned chances, as well as the difficulties arising, are varied. They range from making a case for women being the better, more honest village politicians (i.e., more functional for efficient village development), to concentrating on the failures of the system, or even the shortcomings of the women themselves as being not yet suitably equipped to ‘function’ in the political field.²

However, the baseline generally is that despite a few ‘success-stories’ of committed women struggling for women’s and village interests at the local level, women still have not really captured the political arena. Nor have the reservations come up to the high and noble democratic expectations that were expected. Or to quote Amartya Sen, there is a huge gap between democratic ideals and democratic practices.³

¹ My argumentation is not just based on sociological theory and methodological reflections, but also on a total of 15 month of ethnographic field research, mostly in Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Ghazipur District) and Himachal Pradesh (Mandi District). My ongoing research project “Women’s Political Participation in Local Governance and Changing Gender Relations” (India) is part of my Ph.D. studies at the University of Bielefeld, Department of Sociology, Sociology of Development Research Centre.

² Many studies depict a rather somber scenario of women’s dependence on other men and concentrate on the sidelining, sabotage, condescension, paternalism and harassment they have to face if they dare to become politically active — accusing society of not being having democratic ideals and ideas of equity.

³ Drèze, Jean and Amartya Sen, “Democratic Practice and Social Inequality in India”. ISS Occasional Paper 29. Delhi:ISS, 2002. The analysis of the difficulties of women to gain ground in local governance very often concentrates on the failures, democratic loopholes and participation traps of the reinvented panchayat system. Few studies question the desirability of the reservations as such, but seek to highlight the system’s shortcomings.

In this paper, I argue for a methodological change in perspective on how these observations are analyzed and interpreted. I want to show that portrayals describing women as ‘proxies’, ‘puppets’ or ‘male equivalents’ reflect a male-centred perspective denying women’s agency and rationale.

Proxies vs. Women’s Agency

A ‘Proxy’ perspective tends to stress the dependency of the elected woman on her ‘male guardian’ — which is most often her husband — for getting elected in the first place, and later to do whatever work she is doing and whatever decisions she is making. Depending on who is speaking, this is interpreted as ‘a failure of the woman herself to claim her rights and become involved actively in local politics’, or ‘it is the only way local governance can function, because women are ignorant and just not capable of playing the political game and making decisions for the village’, or it is the ‘the omnipotent social structure of Indian patriarchal society, which is at work’.

The dependency, and thus the power relation of wife and husband concerning participation in local politics, is usually depicted as highly disadvantageous for the women and as exclusively dominated by the husband. If one, however, looks at the elected women and others from an ‘actor-oriented’ approach, and thus considers both woman and husband as social agents, the concept of puppets becomes difficult to maintain.

According to Anthony Giddens [1998], a social actor, or agent, is considered a rational human being and as being both, knowledgeable about choices from which he/she can draw, as well as being capable of making such choices. An agent is choosing selectively — both consciously and unconsciously — from different discourses, available cultural constructions and strategies, to give meaning to her/his social reality and to attain her/ his aims.

Agency is the ability of a social actor to process social experiences and to develop strategies to actively design her/his own life. Even in extremely subordinated positions and under coercion, social actors still dispose of some power and are never just victims of structural constraints or at the complete mercy of other actors’ arbitrary will. This interaction maintains, but also changes, social structures and cultural discourses.

Starting from such a premise, one has to acknowledge that the concept of ‘proxies’ is too passive, and that we have to think of social relations as being much more complex. From my own empirical data, I can say that the mere fact of getting elected to the panchayat bodies brought about changes in the gender relation of all the women I talked to. These changes may be subtle — and if one thinks in absolute terms, or with the high expectations of emancipation that often go along with the reservations, they may indeed seem very small — but are nonetheless part of a process of social transformation.

Let me give you just one example from those women I talked to in Uttar Pradesh (UP). There is a woman, let’s call her Manju Devi, in an Eastern UP village, who from the mainstream perspective would be an ideal example of a ‘proxy’. She has never been to any of the panchayat meetings. In fact, since her family is observing purdah, she has hardly left her house, and the majority of the villagers — and maybe even she herself — would tell you that all political activities are managed by her husband. Due to a male conspiracy of villagers and officials, nobody ever complained. And all the village men and most of the village women — including herself — are convinced that this is the right way to deal with these ‘silly

reservations’, because her husband, so it is assumed, is so much better disposed to deal with village matters.

However, Manju, who initially was against her nomination, has taken a vivid interest in what is going on the panchayat level. She was against it because she feared that her name might get blackened for things that would be done in her name and which may not be ‘right’. She was not beaten or coerced into signing her nomination paper, as one might expect from a ‘proxy’, but she negotiated and played her cards right, so that her husband finally agreed to at least share with her what was going on outside. Her rationale for agreeing to get nominated was in the end her husband’s happiness and her family’s status, as well as the possibility to influence local politics in her family’s interests.

Since she got elected, she has tried to stay informed by talking and questioning all people coming to her house — mostly women or younger relatives — but even by using her children to get hold of information and other people’s views. Being herself a school dropout, she went through some manuals with the help of her daughter, because she felt she should know some things about “what all this panchayat thing is about”.

Village women are coming to her house to speak to her, because they are afraid or “too shy” to interact directly with her husband. On their behalf, she then talks to her husband and tries to make him understand their concerns, be it widow’s pension, domestic violence, alcohol abuse, consideration for BPL schemes, water problems or the need for a balwadi. She has a corner in the angan where she meets the women — which, with some goodwill, one could describe as her office.

She is proud that she can do something for the women and that she is addressed as ‘pradhanji’, and that everybody in her village knows her name. Together with the other women of the extended family — especially her sisters-in-law — she likes to chat and gossip extensively about village news, or about the problems confided by other village women to her, thus rechecking and shaping her views through discussions with others.

She is aware that her husband depends on her ‘good behaviour’ for his standing in the village, and also that he needs her for her signatures. She would never do anything against her husband’s direct wish, but when in doubt about his approval, her strategy is not to ask him in the first place, but rather to try to manipulate things in subtle ways by ‘being nice to him’, or by involving third parties — generally other family members. She usually discusses politics and the village women’s concerns at night in bed with her husband, because that is the only space, where she can talk to him — thus rendering their most private time a locus for village politics.

So, finally it appears that it is not so clear a decision as to who is actually manipulating whom. Even though her scope of action is extremely limited, Manju has found ways to influence decisions. It depends on how she advocates, and if she decides to advocate at all to one woman’s request. Through her, previously unheard women are getting a voice. However small, eventually she is/they are influencing the decision-making process.

The fact that she has managed to be listened to at all on these village matters constitutes in this context a dramatic change in gender relations:

- in the sense of her own relation to her husband;
- in a subtle change of the discourse on women and politics for her husband;
- in relation to other village women across caste boundaries, and the voice these women bring through her into the panchayat’s decisions.

As well:

- She acts on her own agenda, trying to extend her scope of action within the limits of the possible.
- She is aware of the limits of her scope of action, but has developed strategies to negotiate subtle redefinitions of existing gender relations, and has successfully created new political spaces for herself within these limits.

Gendered Support Systems

By focusing on women's dependency on their husbands, it is often ignored that men also depend heavily on their own support systems. Also, men have to rely on both female and male support structures. Men have their mothers, wives, bhabhis and daughters, so that they can neglect bothering about reproductive work. Probably they would not like to admit it, but if done skillfully, they also may incorporate ideas which originate from interaction with women. They have, of course, their circle of male friends, where they discuss village matters, where they shape their ideas, and where they can draw support from different patron–client type relations. Still, nobody suggests that they are puppets or proxies for somebody, whereas the influence other people may have on their decisions, and their dependency on these sources of support, may just be more hidden and subtle. Because men's mobility is less restricted, their networking is more extended, and their choice of resources more varied.

However, women also have their gendered support systems. As the previous example has shown, Manju is very resourceful in obtaining the information she needs and uses all female relatives, including her own children, as her supporters.

My own empirical material shows that women, in order to become active and to fully participate in local governance, have to extend their support system. According to my observations, women only succeeded in becoming active when they had both female and male support systems. The fact that a woman follows the advice of somebody senior and more experienced in local politics does not render her automatically a proxy of that person.

In fact, many of the women I talked to pointed out that their husbands were their biggest aides, especially in the beginning when they were about to enter a completely new arena. They were grateful to have somebody they trusted to ask for his opinion and advice — above all, for technical matters. If the husbands were not up to it, because they had no clue about or no interest in politics, the women usually found other male 'gatekeepers', be it an ex–pradhan, the secretary, a patron or anybody else experienced in the political field. Maybe this eager supporter's intentions were indeed to manipulate the women (as his extended arm in the panchayat), but very often — according to my observations — these processes developed their own dynamics and gradually the women extended their scope of action. Sometimes they were happy with whatever they had carved out for themselves, and sometimes, of course, they were also frustrated by the limits.

But my own material also shows that equally important were female support systems, which can be as varied as including female friends and neighbours, female relatives, local women's groups or, in few cases, more experienced and educated woman–panches or a woman pradhan. Female support systems are essential for women to obtain crucial information and to shape their own ideas and opinions. They

are imperative as a back-up to overcome 'well-wishing' paternalism and attempts of domination, as well as to counter village gossip by developing alternative discursive strategies.

Of course, a woman whose spatial as well as social mobility is not as restricted as Manju, and somebody who is better educated, is already exposed to more varied discourses that she can draw from — i.e., such a woman will have a more extended support network. But Manju's example shows that even purdah women are not isolated, depending only on their husband for information and input to make decisions.

In my concluding note, I want to refer to the empowerment concept, which is at the center of this workshop. In my opinion the concept of empowerment is very much linked to the concept of agency and change in gender relations. In order to analyze empowerment, it is important to acknowledge that women are capable and rational agents, and not ignorant, dependent victims — as in the proxy concept.

Empowerment is about extending one's scope of action, or rather one's room to maneuver. The reservations for women are opening up new chances for women to do exactly this. Empowerment is about being able to make choices and to develop new strategies to attain one's goals, and should be always interpreted in relation to the social actor. Empowerment is about giving new meaning and transforming dominant discourses.

Women are not proxies, but are transforming — I admit slowly — the way the political field is constructed, and are reshaping their field of action in political activity.