

Women in Political Decision Making the Indian Experience, 1917-1993

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Universally across the globe, the women have struggled to create a space for themselves in the public arena which was conspicuous by their absence from it. Though the First Wave of Feminism had granted women some amount of political rights in the form of enfranchisement, they were still far from taking decisions, formulating policies in the actual process of governance. As opposed to males who have always been projected as 'productive,' 'political', 'public' and 'rational', women have been generally dubbed as 'non-political, non-productive, private and emotional'¹. Lamentably all socio-political structures and institutions—the state, market, organizations of civil society and cultural institutions have been instrumental in re-enforcing gender inequality. "Development till date is not sex-neutral- it is biased against the fair sex as is evident from the saying—"Development, if not engendered, is fatally endangered." [Human Development Report, 1995:1]. Such engendered development, in the context of gender inequality and other issues concerning women, can be corrected only by involving more women in the decision-making process.

Literature Survey

In her work, Prof. Pam Rajput concludes that “Women have been unable to find a concrete space for themselves in the decision-making sphere; women's qualitative and quantitative participation at all levels of governance structures is essential for their empowerment. “There are certain stumbling blocks in the way of their effective participation and these are according to her culture, childcare, cash and confidence. It is also established that political parties are mostly unwilling to select women candidates in safe constituencies. The author feels that women's excessive engagement in household chores, lack of family support and self-confidence and absence of consciousness are the root causes for their unequal sharing in power structures and decision-making process.

In 'The Private Roots Of Public Action: Gender, Equality and Political Participation, Nancy Burns et al. have tried to make an overview of the situation from the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of U.S.A in 1920, which conferred women the right to franchise, thus creating vital and cherished avenues for opening the scope of women's political activity. But after achieving the right to franchise, women are not much visible in political activities except casting of votes. Also, the authors have tried to find out the reasons for the disparity between men and women in political participation. The factors picked out for the low level of women's participation are lack of time, lack of willingness, patriarchal family system, equal socio-economic resources and different environmental inputs for men and women right from childhood to adulthood. In this way, they have tried to single out the various reasons that affect the way of women's effective participation in political activities even after a long period of recognition of the right of political participation of women

Comprehending the need of imparting political education for building consciousness, the author's Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury in a study of 43 countries have shown that

there is no country in the world where women have been enjoying equal status, access or influence like their male counterpart in political spheres. They further opine that irrespective of the form of government and nature of executive power, a feeling of political subordination, patriarchal outlook, lack of interest and initiative to share power with women are visible among the male leaders. They conclude that except a few Scandinavian countries, the political status of women is secondary and the picture is almost the same throughout the world.

The study was conducted by Eschel. M. Rhodie confirms the hypothesis that throughout the globe the status of women is low, they are the most deprived and discriminated against in societies. Through a comparative and comprehensive study, the author tries to highlight the prevalence of discriminatory laws, rights, customs and beliefs against women and seeks to find out the probable methods of solutions. In the study, the author has also shown extensively the extent of discrimination against women that exist even in advanced countries. According to him patriarchal outlook, discriminatory laws, bias negative attitude of political parties and bureaucrats, low level of education and poverty keep women away from the corridors of political power.

Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay in an article portrays a comparative picture of the situation in the women's movement in the period between the pre-independence and post-independence era. She opines that even before the formation of the United Nations, the education of women and children was given importance in India. Women's organizations were formed which struggled hard for the enactment of laws for increasing status and conditions of women. But after independence, such voluntary efforts gradually became weak and minimum. The author observes that at present the women's voice is rarely heard against issues like poverty, price-rise, dowry, child marriage etc. The author is convinced that the parochial interest of male political leaders has compelled women to slip back into their traditional place i.e within the corridor of home instead of the corridor of power.

Madhu Kishwar in an article examines the reasons for the low participation of women in politics. She is critical of the situation and concludes that patriarchal attitude, the monetary influence and muscle power of the male-dominated political parties compel women to remain backward. The author doubts the intention of the leaders in accommodating women in the seats of power. The views of different political parties on the reservation of seats and the issues of constitutional arrangements are highlighted in this article.²

In a study, Niroj Sinha and others have dealt with the scope and extent of participation of women in the freedom struggle and the scope of their empowerment through such participation. The authors mainly confine their studies to the participation of women in national and state politics. Mrs. Sinha opines that the Panchayati Raj Act, 1992 has the potentiality to include a substantial number of women at the grassroots level political institutions which are 'likely to affect and influence the political process of decision making and policy formulation at this level. She further feels that politics has been considered as a strictly male-dominated field because the values like rationality, self-discipline, competitiveness, aggressiveness, orderliness are considered inborn qualities of men. On the contrary, submissiveness, impulsiveness is some of the qualities associated with women. Illiteracy, vulnerable economic condition, the reluctance of political parties, high cost of elections, patriarchy, caste hierarchy, dependence on male members, the traditional

administrative orientation of the bureaucracy are some of the reasons for the low level of women's participation in the political process.

International Scenario:

Globally the issue of women's empowerment through their participation in political activities is comparatively a new concept. It can be viewed as the product of the late nineteenth century and gained prominence in the first half of the twentieth century and has been continuing as such till date with greater emphasis and significance. The UN General Assembly recommended during its first session in 1946 that all member states fulfill the aims of its charter i.e. granting women the same political rights as men. Throughout the rest of the UN's history, international feminists worked to keep women and women's political rights on the agenda. The world Women's Christian Temperance Union(WCTU) formed in the U.S.A in 1874 and the German Social Democratic Party(GSDP) in 1890s led by Francis Williard and Clara Zetkin respectively were considered to be the fore-runners to the fight for women's causes including voting rights.³ Like their Asian counterparts, the Western sociologists and political scientists were equally concerned with the ill-treatment of the black, poor and unprivileged citizens in their respective countries. But the overall rate of participation in the political decision-making process and the implementation of policies and programs of various Governments and Non-Government Organizations have remained relatively low.

The question of women's participation in politics began to assume importance only in the latter half of the twentieth century. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights created in 1948 as an international body for laws, was meant to protect the integrity and dignity of women beings. Those laws, together with the 1979 "Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" (CEDAW) have been pivotal in the affirmation and implementation of human rights. The global concern for women's participation at least in words was first noticed in 1975 when the United Nations declared the decade as the 'Women's development decade' and adopted some resolutions relating to it. The U.N also declared 1975 as the 'International Women's Year'. The 1975 Conference at Mexico City was a watershed in the sense that this was the first global conference ever held on women and marked the starting of global attention on women's issues. The first World Plan of Action for Advancement of Women was produced at this conference. This was followed by the U.N's Decade for Women (1976-85) with the theme "Equality, Development and Peace. The decade played an important role in bringing women to the political front by creating two U.N bodies devoted exclusively to women: UNIFEM(United Nations Development Fund for Women) and INSTRAW(International Research Training Institute for Advancement of Women). This was followed by the World Conference at Nairobi in 1985 that reviewed the achievements of the decade. This conference was of much importance as the participating countries were asked to take steps for ensuring women's participation in politics through the reservation of seats in all elections. The century ended by convening the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in China, wherein the area of women's political participation was identified as a "fertile area for discussion and action'. It is reported that Beijing was the place where women's interest in politics and their determination to capture the political arena was most vivid and united.

National Scenario

Pre-Independence Period

In 1917, sec of state for India Edwin Montague announced the British Government's intention of including more Indians in the governing process. Montague and Lord Chelmsford, the viceroy planned a tour of Indian to listen to the views of individuals and groups. Hearing of the proposed tour, Saraladevi Chaudhurani applied for an appointment for members of the Bharat Stri Mahamandal to discuss women's educational needs. Members of the newly formed Women's Indian Association (WIA) in Madras also requested an audience official informed both groups that only deputations on political subjects were welcome so, Mrs. Margaret Cousins sent a new application and request an audience for women to present their political demands. Sarojini Naidu (1879 - 1949) led an all India delegation of prominent women to meet with Montagu and Chelmsford. The Indian women who formed a deputation to Lord Chelmsford and Mr. Montague asked for the franchise on the same term as men. In 1918 the Provincial Conference of Bombay and Madras passed resolutions to remove sex disqualification from the reform bill. Similar resolutions were approved by the Andhra Provincial Conference, the Bombay Special National Congress, the Indian Home Rule League, and the Muslim League. Behind the scenes, Indian women and a few British women, especially Dorothy Jinerajadasa and Margaret Cousins worked conscientiously to make their case. At this time petition, politics seemed the only way to make an impression on the government.

Montague himself told Milicent Fawcett, a long-standing member of the British female suffrage organization, that it would be up to Indian women to make a strong case for Franchise Committee.⁴

The Southborough Franchise Committee toured India in 1918 to gather information. They accepted women's petitions but interviewed women from only two provinces Bengal and Punjab. In their final report, they concluded that granting the franchise would be premature. Lord Southborough decided Indian women did not want the vote and even if they did, social customs would impede its implementation.⁵

Two members of the Southborough Committee had been in favor of extending the franchise to Indian women. Mr. Hogg and Sir C. Sankaran Nair the only Indian member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. After the Committee published its report, Sir Sankaran Nair met with the Bombay Committee and advised them to send a delegation to give evidence before the Joint Select Committee. The Bombay Committee on Women's Suffrage decided to send Mrs. Herabai A. Tata and her daughter Mithan to England with Sir. Sankaran Nair. Herabai and Mithan researched all topics associated with women franchise and prepared substantial reports to argue their case. Anne Besant warned the Joint Select Committee that they were making a mistake by ignoring women's demands. She was raising the aspect of a revolt from within the zenana, a dangerous space because it was unexplored and uncolonized. All three women Anne Besant, Sarojini Naidu and Herabai Tata asserted that Indian women were strong and united ready to reform the society, being restored to their former power and influence due to the recent educational and social opportunities. Most of the British men however were quite skeptical and firmly believed that majority of the Indian women were uneducated and lived in seclusion. Their ideas found ready support among some Indians, the prominent among them being Cornelia Sorabjee (1866-1954), who studied law at Oxford and

returned to India in 1894 to act as a leader for women. She opposed the work of both male and female nationalist reformers. According to Miss Sorabji, the Indian women could be accommodated into two groups, one being “the progressives” who comprised of a small group of educated women, over perhaps 10% of the female population, who were largely independent of ancient customs and the rest of 90% who were illiterate and lived in seclusion. All the schemes for ameliorating the hardships of women had benefitted “the Progressives “but left the masses of women virtually untouched. Moreover, according to her, the progressives made no effort to comprehend the facts of existence for the masses of women.⁶

Therefore in a confidential memorandum to the government regarding the proposed Montague- Chelmsford reforms, Cornelia warned that the western ideals of government would not fit a fatalistic and superstitious society like that of India. Until education had changed Indian institutions and attitudes, Western political institutions would be useless. Until all women were educated, political reform could not be of “any real and lasting value” to the country. Though there is no conclusive evidence that Cornelia Sorabjee’s advice carried any weight, members of the House of Commons ignored the pro- franchise memoranda presented by Indian women’s organizations, the Indian National Congress, the Home Rule League, the Muslim League and British women’s organizations. Montague observed that conservative opposition to the female franchise was almost a religious feeling”. Because it would be dangerous to provoke religious men, he urged the house to pass the India Bill as it existed. A proviso could be added allowing provincial legislative councils to add women to the list of registered voters.⁷

The Joint Select Committee of British Parliament, in its first report on the bill for the Government of India Act 1919, endorsed the recommendation of the Franchise Committee on the subject of women’s franchise and said “The question whether women should or should not be admitted to the franchise on the same terms as men should be left to the newly elected legislative council of each province to settle by resolution. Hence the Government of India Act 1919 provided that if the legislative council in any province passed a resolution in favor of women’s franchise, they should be put in the electoral register of that province.⁸ Women’s organizations now worked in the provinces for the removal of sex disqualification and between 1920 and 1930 propertied women won the right to vote. However, this was only one hurdle as women were still disqualified from membership of the legislatures.⁹ The Women’s Indian Association (WIA) had lobbied and met with members of the Muddiman Committee. After this, the Governor-General in Council decided provincial legislatures could vote to admit women¹⁰. Although nine of eleven provinces voted to allow women to become members of the councils, no women candidate was even elected. Instead, women were nominated and this is how Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first Indian women legislator.

The Simon Commission appointed in 1927, was the first step towards the formulation of a new India Act. This initiated the second round in the fight for female enfranchisement. The India Act passed in 1935 increased representation to some extent. However, the expectations of organized women were not fulfilled.

When the Simon Commission was first announced, the WIA was willing to cooperate, being the only national women’s organization, committed to women’s franchise.

But by the time the commission arrived in 1929(Feb), the WIA had joined the nationalist boycott against them. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) decided to form a franchise sub-committee and by the 1930's concluded that political emancipation was the first step towards releasing women from their "shackles."¹¹

They also boycotted the Simon Commission. However, there were other educated women, who met the commission and suggested giving the vote to literate women or reserving seats. These women acted independently of the major organizations.

At the end of Oct. 1929, the viceroy Lord Irwin announced that the British Government would call for a Round Table Conference to discuss the next step towards dominion status. Initially, WIA had submitted the names of three women Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddy and Rameshwari Nehru.¹² However when the Indian National Congress decided to boycott the conference on the ground that Irwin's declaration read "discuss", not "implement", the WIA supported the nationalist agenda and withdrew their cooperation without any hesitation.

The Round Table Conference began its meetings in November of 1930 and Indian women were represented, but not by the women chosen by leading women's organizations. These women were Begum Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz who was attending this conference as her father Sir Muhammad Safi's private secretary. Another member was Mrs. Radhabai Subbarayan, who was well known by British women suffragists. These two women spoke about the "awakening" of women and their leadership in promoting social change. They claimed that the custom of purdah will decline if women gained the vote. The ideal was the adult franchise, but they were willing to accept special reservations as an interim measure.¹³ Organized women in India disagreed. Margaret Cousins, M. Reddy (WIA), Mrs. Hamid Ali & Rani Rajwade (AIWC) together with Sarojini Naidu issued a joint memorandum in support of the universal adult franchise. Most of the women who had previously supported the nomination and reserved seats now changed their priorities. They decided to place the nationalist position of non-cooperation with the British rule over and above their desire for wider female enfranchisement. They did not want any privileges and wanted "a fair field and no favor."¹⁴

With the Gandhi – Irwin Pact of March 1931, Congress agreed to participate in the Second Round Table Conference to draw up a plan for federation and responsible government with the reservation of certain powers. The women's organizations followed the congress lead, agreed to participate and sent Sarojini Naidu as their representative. Gandhi was the sole representative of the Indian National Congress and Begum Shah Nawaz & Mrs. Subbarayan were again nominated by the British. By this time Begum Shah Nawaz firmly supported the Congress demand for the universal adult franchise. But the other member continued her support for reserved seats.

At the end of the second Round Table Conference a white paper, recommending an increase in enfranchised women, was presented to both houses of parliament. Lord Lothian was named to chair the Franchise Committee to work out the details. His committee planned to tour India in 1932, collect evidence and opinions and submit concrete proposals for the next India Act. ¹⁵Radhabai Subbarayan and the MP from Lancashire Mary Ada Pickford were the two women appointed to the Lothian Committee.

The Lothian Committee met with very few women in India. It accepted in 1932 a

memorandum from all Indian women's organizations. In this document, women vented their criticism of all the formulas under consideration: nomination, enfranchising educated women and the franchise for a percentage of urban women. This was their official stance, though there was a great deal of support for special electorates and nominated seats.¹⁶

Eleanor Rathbone a member of the House of Commons, in her letter to Mrs. Subbarayan and other Indian women leaders urged them to accept any scheme that would increase women's progress.

In their final report, the Lothian Committee recommended various schemes for enfranchising more women: lowered property qualification and literacy. They also endorsed reservations for the provincial legislatures. However, women would vote with their communities and therefore be voting and acting as Muslim women, Sikh women, women from the depressed classes.¹⁷ But they rejected adult franchises because of the country's size, large population, and high rate of adult literacy.

When Gandhi agreed to the Poona Pact, accepting reserved seats but not separate electorates for the depressed castes, he tacitly agreed to the Communal Award.¹⁸ The next step toward the India Act, the white paper of 1933, endorsed women voting with their communities but placed restrictions on the wifehood qualification and eliminated the literacy qualification. However, they agreed with the concept of communal reservations for women.

The leaders of the women's organizations objected to the reservation, indirect election of women to the Federal Assembly, the wifehood qualification, separate electorates and the Communal Award. However Muslim women like Begum Shah Nawaz supported communal electorates. She agreed that it would be impossible for Muslim women to campaign freely amongst a mixed electorate, while they would feel comfortable among Muslim men and women. The three women who opposed the Communal Award, went to London to present the position of the women organizations to the Joint Select Committee were Amrit Kaur, Muthulakshmi Reddy and Mrs. Hamid Ali. Begum Shah Nawaz attended as a member of the Indian delegation.

The 1935 Government of India Act introduced reservations and complex methods of increasing the percentage of women voters: wives could vote in some provinces, literate women in others and the wives of military officers in still others, always voting as members of their communities.¹⁹

Although the number of women voters was significantly larger, women's organizations had a difficult time getting women to register and run for elections. Congress was not willing to support women candidates for general seats. Nevertheless, women in the three major organizations worked hard to register women, field women candidates, and get out the vote.²⁰

When the elections were over, women held 56 out of the 1500 seats in the provincial legislatures: 41 had been returned from reserved constituencies, 10 from general constituencies and 5 were nominated.

In the years following independence, members of the women's organizations felt betrayed by their male allies. They did not receive the rewards they expected. Women members of the Constituent Assembly opposed special concessions for women and so reservations disappeared with the universal franchise. This ideology continued to dominate the women's movement through the early 1970s, when the Committee on the Status of

Women in India rejected reservations. Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar's note of dissent was the first document in post-independence India to suggest reservations for women could have positive consequences.

Post-Independence Period (1950-93): The events leading to the passage of the 73rd Amendment Act of 1993

In independent India, the constitution after guaranteeing equality to women in all spheres left their political representation to their willingness, opportunity and support, even while providing for reservations for scheduled cases and scheduled tribes in parliament and state legislators (in their lower house).

Regarding the panchayats, Article 40 stipulated that the state should endeavor to organize village Panchayats and endow them with power and authority as may be necessary for them to function as units of self-government. The question of representation was left to the state legislatures. However, following the prevailing practice of national-level consultation, deliberation and consensus which was to be reflected in the state's legislation, the subject was discussed in various fora at the national level. Thus the Central Council of Local Government in its third meeting held at Srinagar in 1957 recorded that the elected representatives about 20 in number in each block panchayat, "will co-opt two women who are interested in work among women and children".²¹

At this point, the Government of India appointed a Committee chaired by Balwant Rai G. Mehta to examine whether the Community Programme which was launched during the first decade of independence and which emphasized rural governance was being implemented properly. This Committee also suggested a similar token co-option of two members who are interested in work among women and children by the 20 or so elected members of the block level Panchayat Samiti. It also suggested similar co-option in the Gram panchayat. It thus reflected the almost universal tokenism in respect of women's representation in panchayats. The State Acts in 1950 and early 1960 reflected this ideology and consensus. In all these Acts there was a grudging reservation of two seats or co-option/nomination of up to two women if none came through the election.²²

Between Balwant Rai Mehta and Asoka Mehta Committee's report of 1978, the Committee for the "Status of Women" in India (1974) in its famous report "Towards Equality" argued forcefully that rural women's needs and perspectives had never been given sufficient weightage in the plans and development policies of the Government of India. The report recognized that cooption and nomination were underwritten by the assumption that women were incapable of contesting elections, and would not permit the questioning much less transformation of power equations in rural society.²³

It, therefore, recommended the setting-up of statutory women's panchayats at the local level, which would have strong links with Panchayati Raj Institutions, as well as possess some resources to manage and administer welfare and development programmes for women and children. On the question of reservations for women in legislative bodies, however, the committee was divided. The majority opinion was that reservations were a retrograde step from the equality conferred by the constitution, but the note for dissent recognized the importance of reservations as an instrument of empowerment.

The Ashok Mehta Committee(1978) emphasized the importance of Panchayati Raj Institutions to local development planning on account of both the democratic imperative of

decentralizing power, as well as the efficiency imperative of strengthening the micro-level planning process. It recommended a two-tier panchayat system, in which the two women who polled the highest number of votes in the panchayat elections would even if they failed to get elected, stand co-opted into the panchayat. Where no women contested elections, and two women known to be active community workers could be co-opted.

A Committee on PRIs set up by the government of Andhra Pradesh in 1979 discussed the question of reservation in favor of women. The committee reviewed the recommendations of the Asoka Mehta Committee regarding co-option of women members from defeated women candidates from general seats securing the highest number of votes. The committee found this recommendation "fraught with possibilities of political stalemate, especially if the elections are held on party basis. Thus in keenly contested elections, the defeated opposition may be able to secure a majority through the backdoor if the suggestion of the Asoka Mehta Committee is implemented.

The Committee, therefore, did not recommend the co-option of defeated women candidates and instead recommended reservation of 5 percent of the posts of Sarpanches in each block for women. This reservation may be made in panchayat where the percentage of women electors is comparatively higher. The Committee did not favor reservation of offices of Presidents of Panchayat Samities in favor of women who should contest along with men for general seats.

According to Nirmala Buch, the evolution of women's representation in the panchayats in the decades of 1980's and 1990's as finally included in the 73rd Amendment makes interesting reading. It also helps in understanding the motivation in its introduction, the invisible limits in the political commitment and the challenge that women face in using this new political space.

In the decade of 1980s, several developments particularly the movements and struggles during the emergency and post-emergency period led to more debates on women's issues and renewed activity in favor of women. The issue of the representation of women and their participation in local-level institutions only comes up again in the parallel stream with the National Perspective Plan(1988) for women recommending 30 percent reservation for women in these bodies. The same recommendation was also made in the unsuccessful 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1989.

After the 64th amendment fell through and before the 73rd amendment was finally passed, some states initiated changes in their panchayat laws to bring reservation for women, in a way trying to anticipate these developments and claim to be pacesetters. Thus Orissa introduced 30 percent reservation for women in the membership of the panchayats. Maharashtra also made a change in 1991 by introducing 30 percent for women. Both the states also held elections on this basis to their panchayats. However, it is surprising to note that West Bengal, one of the states that introduced a new Panchayati Raj system in 1978 and held an election at regular intervals did not make any effort to encourage the participation or even visibility of women. Regarding the picture of women's representation in the period preceding the Amendment Act of 1993 in West Bengal, we have to depend entirely on the researches of Neil Webster and G. K. Lieten. Both of these scholars have presented a very dismal picture on this subject. G.K. Lieten, devoted a considerable amount of attention to the gender issue and noted the quasi-complete absence of women in the Panchayati Raj

organizations in the state. Out of the 480 candidates for Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti elections under study, as many as 478 were males. Lieten observed that “many political leaders and candidates indeed do not seem to be aware of the necessity to induce women into all spheres of public life as one of the means to eliminate the gender discrimination.”²⁴ Neil Webster was equally emphatic in denouncing gender discrimination. He noted that women have largely failed to gain representation because social structures and cultural practices mitigate very much against a woman standing, with the pressure from the woman's household being very strong in this matter.²⁵ The semiofficial Mukarji and Bandyopadhyay report (1993) also observed that “largely because of societal constraints, there are very few women in the Panchayats at present and even fewer in key positions. Women's representation is less than one percent of the total elected Panchayat members”. Summarizing the gender position in the Panchayats of West Bengal in the pre-reservation era, Sonali Chakravorty Banerjee has observed that the average and typical leader of a Panchayat body in West Bengal was “almost invariably a man, who would automatically treat the political arena as a natural domain for the males.”²⁶

The Janata Dal Government which succeeded Congress government after the 1989 elections introduced another constitutional Amendment Bill in 1990 with a different phraseology. It provided for reservation of “not less than one-third” seats for women in panchayats at all levels. These were to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies. But even in this Bill, there was no reference to a possible reservation in chairperson's positions. This bill was introduced in Parliament but was not discussed. When Congress came back to power after the elections of 1991, a new Amendment bill was introduced in the Parliament which finally became the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution in 1992. This continued the provision relating to “not less than one-third” reservation in membership but also introduced this in chairperson's posts in every panchayat and municipality.²⁷

This Act has ushered in the watershed in the history of state initiatives concerning the political empowerment of rural women. This legislative innovation has enabled women to participate in decentralized governance, planning and development. Consequently, there have been around eleven lakh women including women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as members and chairpersons in all three tiers of the Panchayati Raj structure. It is said that such an arrangement has created scope for women to form a ‘critical mass’ whereby they can raise their voice and challenge the patriarchal norms.²⁸

However, being in large numbers is not enough as reservation provides only the possibility of a voice for women. It does not guarantee it. This is more so because the backdrop in which the reservation has been introduced in our country is marked by such factors as illiteracy, male dominance, casteism, deep-rooted cultural beliefs and values, which do not encourage women's assertion but retain them in their traditional roles of the dependent spouse, mother and housewife. However, despite the existence of these multiple hurdles and the presence of multi-dimensional constraints for women in Indian rural canvas, it has been established unquestionably that the 73rd Amendment has created space for women's needs within the structural framework of politics and has “legitimized” women's issues.²⁹ The study of the Institute of Social Sciences has revealed women's disadvantaged position in all spheres of life. Amid such maladies, women's success in panchayats is creating an encouraging trend all over the country. Nirmala Buch has observed that the participation of women in

panchayats has had an impact on their sense of self. The data on their perceptions, recognition, respect, enhanced levels of mobility and exposure, their increased political aspirations and community's perceptions and evaluation of their performance are seen as markers of empowering process for this long disadvantaged group. The debate on their participation levels and their leadership development continue, but it has been noted that despite all the odds stacked against them, the post 73rd panchayats have shown emerging leadership of rural women and that they have moved from the initial learning phase in the first year after 1994 and 1995 elections when they entered panchayats in a critical number for the first time.³⁰

Thus it remains to be seen whether this newly acquired leadership has encouraged women to question and even change the issues and values of governance by adopting methods different from those of their male counterparts and emerge as independent individuals who will "smash the prison" as Gail Omvedt says and create a society with a new understanding of power different from the existing patriarchal understanding.

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