

# Reservation for Women in Panchayats: A Sop in Disguise?

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The decision by the union cabinet to raise reservation for women from one-third to 50% of seats at all three levels of panchayats is a welcome one. However, this decision was taken without addressing the problems caused by mandatory rotation of reserved seats, which women have been drawing attention to and the impasse over the Women's Reservation Bill remains. The latter in particular suggests that the 50% reservation in panchayats is a sop to cover up the government's inability to ensure reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures.

In August the union cabinet decided to reserve 50% of the seats in panchayats at the village, district and intermediate levels for women. The posters of the women's movement have always proclaimed that "women hold up half the sky". However, their right to one-half of property or land or political space has not been recognised and until now the reservation initiatives have stopped at 30% or one-third seats.

The current minimum reservation of one-third positions in panchayats for women was introduced by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. Introducing the bill for this amendment, the then minister of state for rural development had said,

We have provided for at least one-third of the total seats at every level. Considering the fact that women constitute nearly half the population, even this reservation can be considered inadequate; but the honourable members will agree that it is significantly more than what has been attempted so far in most of the states (Lok Sabha Debates 1992).

This indicated an acceptance that the reservation should have been proportionate to women's share in the population as the bill included women from the scheduled castes (scs) and scheduled tribes (sts) too. But the State was not ready for it then... It has taken the state 17 years to decide to enhance the reservation for women to the proportion that it should have been legislated in 1992 itself.

## Advantage Women

There is no doubt that women have benefited from reservations due to the competitive politics of the various political parties. In 1983, Karnataka which had a Janata Dal government led by Ramakrishna Hegde and with Nazeer Sab as the minister in charge witnessed the revival of panchayat institutions. It also introduced 25% reservations for women in panchayats. The 1980s saw attempts at exploring strategies for what

was referred to as integration of women in development and later simply as women's development. The inclusion of women in all decision-making bodies was also strongly advocated as an important part of the strategy. The National Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000 spoke of 30% reservation for women in decision-making bodies, including the panchayats at all levels. This showed a gradual acceptance that we needed to move from the token nomination or co-option of one or two women in panchayats as recommended by two committees – the B R Mehta Committee (1957) and Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) – to include "a critical mass" which was pegged at 30% at that time. The preparatory conferences organised on various issues in panchayats before the drafting of the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill did not include a conference on panchayats and women. However, the last of these conferences also resolved on 30% reservation for women.

The 64th Amendment Bill proposed "as nearly as may be 30%" reservation in favour of women in the membership of panchayats at all the three levels, in the seats reserved for the sc/st as well as in the total seats. In the former it mandated reservation of one seat for women if this reservation was of only two seats. It did not provide for reservation in the post of the chairperson, leaving such reservation in favour of sc/st/women to the state legislature's discretion. The V P Singh government, which took over the reins from the Congress in 1989, prepared another draft bill and made it "not less than one-third" in membership by rotation, but there was still no reservation for the post of chairperson. When the Congress came back to power in 1991 it made the reservation for women "not less than one-third" and also included the positions of chairpersons in the 73rd Amendment.

The journey of inclusion of reservations was tentative and slow with the reluctant addition of the chairperson's post only in the last bill. The mandatory rotation of these reservations means that the incumbent is left looking for a new seat in each election, something that was not realised in the initial euphoria over this historic change. Anyone familiar with the working of panchayats

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would know that the post of a village panchayat chairperson carries prestige and is seen as an important post even by members of the higher tier panchayats.

In the 1984 parliamentary elections following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, women voters came out in large numbers. The impression gained ground that this factor contributed hugely towards Rajiv Gandhi's massive victory and as a consequence women's votes gained recognition and value. Since then, political parties across the political spectrum have spoken in favour of women's political, economic and social empowerment, created women's cells within their organisations and supported reservation for women in panchayats and urban local bodies.

### Token Presence

What does one see after these developments and the occupation of one-third of the positions and sometimes even more by women? Myths were created about women's disinterest and passivity in politics, and about how female relatives of influential politicians from the well-off sections merely occupied these seats while the men were the ones who actually carried out the tasks. However, research data disproved these stories and the documentation of the work of younger, first time women entrants from economically weaker sections brought out their participation and performance levels (e.g. Buch 1999). But, what one sees in these local bodies today is public patriarchy whereby the women are included but not allowed to participate and their work is consistently undervalued.

Despite the documentation of women's participation levels and leadership in panchayats, the belief persists that women in the reserved seats are there by proxy and that their husbands and male relatives exercise power and responsibility on their behalf. There is inadequate understanding of the way women combine their multiple roles and perform their panchayat work. The epithets of "sarpanchpati" and "pradhanpati" have become part of the panchayat lexicon, though there are husbands who do not interfere in their wives' panchayat work and are, in fact, supportive of their work. Their number is not exactly small, especially the number of those coming from the weaker sections. But unfortunately they are not

considered role models by their peers. Officials however acknowledge the enthusiasm and work of the women in panchayats.

So, why has the central government initiated the move to have 50% reservation for women in panchayats at this stage when there is no widespread demand by the women's movement for increasing the one-third reservation in panchayats to one half? Further, why has this initiative been proposed only for panchayats while leaving a similar reservation in urban local bodies to be brought up later? One may, of course, recall that at the time of the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill too the proposal first started with the panchayats.

In the panchayats, the reservation for the weaker sections is already proportionate to their population, but in the case of women why did it start with only one-third of the seats? History seems to repeat itself with the centre following the states.

It is possible for the states to reserve 50% of the seats in panchayats for women through an amendment to their panchayat laws without a central initiative for a constitutional amendment. The 73rd Amendment says the reservation for women should be "not less than one third" and not one-third of the seats. So legislation in the states could have included more than one-third reservation for women at any time. However, no state saw fit to do so. Most of them just reiterated "not less than one-third" without stipulating any specific percentage. Now that all political parties are in search of new allies, reservations for women in panchayats have been enhanced in the states. Bihar took the lead in 2006 under Chief Minister Nitish Kumar when he was exploring new social coalitions that included sections like the most backwards and women. This state, which was dragging its feet on panchayat elections, finally held them after including 50% reservation for women. Thereafter, other states like Madhya Pradesh (MP), Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan have amended their panchayat laws to provide 50% reservation for women.

### Tolerated, Not Accepted

The aim of the political parties in bringing women into the panchayats does not extend towards promoting their participation or sustaining their leadership development. In the states where panchayat elections are

contested on party tickets and symbols as, for example, in Rajasthan, women across political parties stated during our field work for study of women's experience in post-73rd Amendment panchayats, that when they complete their first term successfully their parties do not give them tickets for the next election even if they have done well and are keen to contest. They are told that other women should be given a chance – an argument not made in the case of men. Again, women are restricted to the reserved seats. It is seen that women fare better in states like MP where the panchayat elections are not fought on a party basis.

Women's participation in panchayats is still not accepted by large sections of society. It is more appropriate to say that it is tolerated rather than wanted. A discussion on women in panchayats invariably elicits the opinion that only educated women should be elected. No such qualification is suggested for men.

The biggest obstacle to women's effective use of the new opportunity of reservations in panchayats for leadership development and producing results is in the form of rotation of reservations and particularly the mandatory rotation in the chairpersons' positions. This hampers their performance and proves an obstacle when they have to go back to their constituents asking for votes based on their performance. The reservations for women are not only in all posts but also within positions reserved for the SC/ST and in most of the states, in the reservations meant for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) too. This limits the possibility of being able to contest again and women have been raising this issue.

In Tamil Nadu, the women were able to ensure that the rotation takes place after two terms but everywhere else the problem remains. If the government is really keen to boost effective and sustained women's leadership at the grass roots level, it has to revisit the concept of rotations. That will also give the people an opportunity to demand better accountability from their elected representatives.

The reservations for women in panchayats must continue and enhancing them to 50% is a welcome step. Our field enquiries and interviews of women in panchayats clearly indicate that given the continued patriarchal culture of our society most of

