

# DECENTRALISATION AND GENDER BALANCING BY DOCTRINE OF EQUITY: EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH PRIs IN INDIA

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## **Background:**

For sustainable economic and social development to take place in any country, it is necessary that people participate in the political process. The process of participation is complex—and it is by no means clear that it is comprehensively inclusive. By this, we mean that it is not possible to assume that all sections of the population take part effectively in the political and democratic processes of society. There are many reasons why people may not participate—from apathy to a sense of helplessness. Women are one side of a coin, half in every respect, then why not in power?

But reality is different that unless specific conditions are met, women face multiple hurdles and finds it difficult to participate in the political process that has hitherto been a male bastion. The reasons for this are gender specific. Women are less mobile than men are. They have domestic responsibilities, which puts limits on the time they can spend in such processes. There are historical prejudices. Consistent efforts will have to be made over a period of time to engender the political process and institutions and issues that are critical to this process. Someone has rightly said that woman is man with a womb, and as she carry womb, she need to nurture child in her womb and naturally she becomes weak and engaged in essential feminine activity that man does not require by natural reasons. At the same time, women have natural skill in certain activity where a man is unable to match her. They can do hand work in better and efficient way than her counterpart. (Ms. Sweta Patel, in Women's Cooperative in Indian Medicinal Plants and Innovative Nutritional Plants, a paper presented at Research Forum, ICA, Bangkok)

Women in India play an important role in social life, since time immemorial women are not merely managing their houses but have shown their interest and ability to work for whole society, all segment and sectors of society. Their role in economy is silent, but sounds well and remarkable as their invisible contribution in all economic activities can not be neglected. Indian old Sanskrit literature quotes "...*Nari sarvatra pujuryate*...." – women be worshiped everywhere. It gives a place to women to a respectable position. On the other hand women are ignored, and considered as ordinary household who can only work in house and farm, cook, wash and deliver child. But, thanks to large pool of women, whose participation in social activities, science and technology, political, and economy and so forth; and where not women worked at par with men and in many case they outraged men.

Before independence many women activist played crucial role as leader and after independence, even in absence of any special provisions women have proved their ability as good administrator. It provoked in mind of legislators to give prominent role to the

important and potential class of the society, a privilege by way of securing reservation in Local Governments. Its root lies in Gandhian philosophy, his influence on Indian politics and constitutional framers, who indicted "Directive Principles" in the Indian Constitution, directing State to take special care of women. In spite of low literacy, their time bound natural and inbuilt family duty, women have not only shown their equality with men, but as stated earlier, proved better than their counter parts. Women are changing governance in India. There are nearly one million women in Indian politics out of total 3 million politics, thanks to provision made through 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment in the constitution.

The Late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is considered as source of this remarkable change. They are being elected to local councils in unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the Constitution Law of India, which mandate the reservation of seats to the extent 33.33% of total number of seats, for women in local government. In India, we call this new system the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area like a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994. The study reveals impact of Constitutional Amendments on women's role in politics. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. By 1994, 330,000 women had entered politics as a result of PRI and many more have been elected in the last two years. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of this constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before PRI to 25-40 percent after PRI. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in governance of civic society into governance of the State. In this way, they are making the State sensitive to issues of literacy, health, poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

The Constitution of India was adopted in 1950. It had envisaged (Article 40) that "the State shall take steps to organise village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

This provision of the Constitution was primarily advisory. In the following four decades, some sporadic and indifferent steps were taken by some of the state governments to organise Panchayats; but they were invariably denied any meaningful powers and authority and, worst of all, the elections were seldom held at 5-year intervals as required. This deplorable state of affairs was an affront to the Constitution (Article 40) and there was growing demand in the country for a definite constitutional mandate to secure periodical and regular elections to Panchayats just as in the case of Parliament and State Assemblies.

Before I shift to discuss the amendment giving privilege to women in terms of reservation in local government, let us see scenario before sun shined in 1994 by way of constitutional amendment.

## **The History of Women's Inclusion in Political Representation in India:**

1946 There were 16 women out of 150 members in the Constituent Assembly.

1957 When Panchayat Raj was first introduced, the concept was to co-opt two women "who are interested in work among women and children" (Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report).

1961 Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961 provided for the "nomination of one or two women" to the Panchayat bodies "in case women were not elected".

1973 West Bengal Panchayat Act, also provided for co-opting 2 women.

1976 The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) demanded representation of women in Panchayat as well as the establishment of "All-Women Panchayat at village level".

1978 In Maharashtra Panchayat, only 6 women were elected although 314 were nominated. In most parts of India, women were brought into Panchayat only through co-option.

1983 As many as 25 percent of seats were reserved for women in the Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayat and Nyaya Panchayat Act of 1983. Elections under this Act were delayed for various reasons and could only be held in 1987. Some 14,000 women were elected out of 30,000 candidates who contested.

1988 Elections were held in Uttar Pradesh for 74,000 village Sabhas, the first elections for 22 years. There was provision made for the co-option of only one woman.

In Panchayat elections, less than one percent of women came through elections.

1991 Orissa Panchayat Samiti provided for "not less than one third of the total number of seats to be reserved for women". Elections were held in 1992 and over 22,000 women were elected. In Kerala Districts Councils elections, while 30 percent seats were reserved for women, 35 percent seats were won by women.

1993 About 71,000 women candidates contested elections and with 33 percent seat reservation, 24,900 women came in through the ballot box.

1994 In Madhya Pradesh 150,500 women were elected to village, block and zilla Panchayats.

33 percent of seats were reserved for women in village Panchayat and women captured 43 percent of the seats.

### **The historic amendment:**

The principle of equity emphasise equality between equals. To make an unequal, if weaker, on higher footing; enable each to provide healthy competition, the Amendment, dated 24 April 1993, directed all state legislatures to amend their respective Panchayat legislation to conform to the Constitution Amendment, within one year. All the states complied and adopted new Panchayat legislation by 23 April 1994. By April 1995 all the states were expected to complete decisions on new Panchayats - and those who delayed ran the risk of losing central government assistance, as announced by the then Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao.

The features of the Act in brief are:

- Panchayats shall have a uniform five-year term and elections to constitute new bodies shall be completed before the expiry of the term. In the event of dissolution, elections will be compulsorily held within six months.
- In all the Panchayats, seats shall be reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their population and one-third of the total number of seats will be reserved for women. One-third of the offices of chairpersons of Panchayats at all levels shall also be reserved for women.
- Offices of the chairpersons of the Panchayats shall be reserved in favour of SCs and STs in proportion to their population in the State.
- The Gram Sabha will be a body comprising all the adult members registered as voters in the Panchayat area.

Bringing these women into politics was an act of positive discrimination. It was the pressure of law, combined with social pressure and the political imperative of winning elections, which changed political parties' perception of women's limited capacity for public office. But, crucially, PRI has helped to change women's perceptions of themselves. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. PRI has also given many women a greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. On the other hand, some women's involvement in PRI has helped them affirm their identity as women with particular and shared experiences. This self-perception arises from two sources: from women's own sense of their shared experience and from attitudes and imagery imposed on them by the men. It appears that gender can supersede class and party lines. Women have opened up the possibility for politics to have not only new faces but a new quality. They are having better sense of solving problems than men, as they are working on shop floor since centuries to run house and society. They are precise and kind, they have vision and grit, they have clear perception

and conviction and killer instinct coupled with managerial ability. They are used to work in a team, share knowledge and experience and pleasure to serve others. With these strengths, natural and inbuilt, gained by experience, women have worked as others could in a better way.

But increasing the representation of women has not automatically led to a more gendered analysis of the issues confronting local government. Nor has it necessarily raised the profile of women's needs and interests in the policy agenda, given that elected women often act as proxies for men's views at the councils, being advised by their male relatives. But there is now a minority of women who are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness and visible changes in the articulation of ideas and leadership qualities exhibited by this minority have been noted in the different priorities and different values espoused by women in politics. Women in many cases proved that they are not merely proxies of men, but they themselves can decide and work.

Some of the ways in which women, through PRI, are changing governance are evident in the issues they choose to tackle; water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. Women also express different values. Women value proximity, whether it be to a drinking water source, a fuel source, a health centre, a court of justice or an office of administration. The enormous expansion of women's representation in decentralised government structures has highlighted the advantages of proximity, namely the redress of grievance and (most important of all) the ability to mobilise struggle at a local level where it is most meaningful. Thus women are helping to radicalise local government. They have a distinct sense of taking value judgment keeping humanity in their mind. They better understand government is meant for mankind.

As in any governing hurdle like illiteracy, caste, male dominance and thirst for power they have to face enormous problems including social boycott and physically manhandling. But obstacles to the realisation of PRI's transformative potential are many. There continues to be a resistance to really devolving power and funds from centres of (male) power to the periphery. Women still face considerable handicaps to their involvement in politics; for example, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, a lack of self-confidence and the opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views.

There is thus a need to provide women with specific kinds of support which go beyond technical training. They need support to build solidarity amongst women, through strengthening links between women's organisations and elected bodies. They need information about innovative organisations which enhance women's lives such as health providers and credit institutions. It is also necessary to strengthen women's sense of common identity by articulating the elements of a feminist consciousness and presenting it as the special quality of women's leadership. There has been insufficient elaboration of what that leadership has to offer which distinguishes it from men's leadership and which commends it as something special. Such an elaboration through feminist discourse and action is essential for this revolution to deliver the promise it holds.

There is also a need for a more enabling environment, which would allow PRI to become a process for the empowerment of women, not to mention other social groups who have been left out of participation in representative governance. Such an environment would include legal frameworks and services as well as packages of technical support. Ironically, it is development assistance agencies which often provide vigorous examples of patriarchal obstruction to people-led development. UN agencies, for example, are often obstacles to efforts to shift power structures from the civil service to the citizens.

PRI reminds us of a central truth: power is not something people give away. It has to be negotiated, and sometimes wrested from the powerful. Enshrining political change within the law has forced both the pace and direction of such change. Democratic politics is, in reality, the interplay of vested interests and PRI's great achievement has been to mandate a vested, and mutual interest, between women and the political process. The lesson of PRI is clear: if the wisdom of grassroots organisations, especially the courage and clarity of women, is to become policy, it will not be through the art of intellectual persuasion but by the arrangements made within a political system for their voice to have power. Bringing women into power is thus not only a matter of equity, of correcting an unjust and unrepresentative system. Many believe that the removal of poverty, the achievement of full employment and social integration cannot be effectively addressed without the kind of democratisation of the representative process that can be discussed to find out what kind of political restructuring is a key to economic growth with justice.

The challenges and assignment:

- \* bring to you the voices of the women concerned, in assessing the impact of the constitutional change;
- \* draw from the experience some inferences regarding the characteristics of women's leadership at the grassroots;
- \* comment on the outcome, especially the indications of success;
- \* argue the case for political restructuring, for a widening of representation, as a key to sustainable development with equity;
- \* identify some interventions, by both international agencies and the global movements committed to the elimination of inequality and poverty, which could strengthen grassroots women leaders; and

Women's experience of PRI has transformed PRI and women. The elements of this transformation include empowerment, self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of identity.

**Empowering women:**

Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. Men and their habits, long outside the realm of female influence, seem to be a major concern of elected women. Women themselves feel that the men have always ridiculed women, and perceived us as incapable of the management of public affairs. Women now make up one third of the councils. This adds to their sense of strength.

Women are also aware that their strength comes not only from their numbers but also from their knowledge and skills, for example literacy. Thus, women see training as an important part of their empowerment. Many NGOs have seized on this as a fundamental issue and have begun to focus on the training of women. Clearly this is necessary, but the danger of too narrow a focus is to suggest that it is only women who need training. What the presence of women politicians has done is to invert the conventional hierarchies as to who are the teachers and who are the taught. Such women are making it clear that it is the male extension officers who need training, and not just the female representatives. This is an important message for donors and other funding of training, which have tended to assume in the past that the objects of their support must be women.

It is not the education that matters so much here. It is the grit and determination, which a woman has in plenty.

Self-confidence gained through belonging to local organisations seems critical to enabling women to step out of unequal relationships. This sense of freedom is even more profound when the group to which women belong is the PRI. This freedom is carried into the very activity of politics by these women. There is a visible difference, a sense of excitement, in the women of rural India.

### **The Obstacles to Transformation:**

Many obstacles to the realisation of PRI's transformative potential remain. Scepticism about decentralisation persists in many quarters. There continues to be a resistance to really devolving power and funds from centres of (male) power to the periphery. Women still face considerable handicaps to their involvement in politics; for example, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, a lack of self-confidence and the opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views.

There are also administrative obstacles to be overcome. The current administration framework has a departmentally-administered sectoral funding pattern which conflicts with the women-led, area-derived programmes arising from PRI. There is a need to cut through the existing system of development finance to find more flexible approaches capable of responding to the new priorities that are being expressed. United Nations and other donor agency funding for central government inadvertently supports this regressive national budgeting process.

### **Sustaining the Transformation:**

PRI is beginning to transform the processes and priorities of local government in India as well as the women who have been brought into politics. But sustaining this transformation is a significant challenge, given the inertia and resistance of patriarchal institutions and values. Those women elected through PRI need specific kinds of support which go beyond technical training. They need support to build solidarity amongst women, through strengthening links between women's organisations and elected bodies. They need information about innovative organisations which enhance women's lives such as health providers, credit institutions and so on. Many women's NGOs are already providing these kinds of support to women representatives.

There is, however, a major gap in this woman-to-woman support which needs attention by the world-wide women's movement and local feminist groups. This is the need to build feminist consciousness, and strengthen women's sense of common identity, by articulating the elements of a feminist consciousness and presenting it as the special quality of women's leadership. These qualities of women in leadership are becoming well-known, especially as they continue to emerge from the collective struggles of poor women. Such qualities include: avoiding conflict, pre-empting injustice, responding to issues of basic needs for the family, learning through doing, consulting, sharing, caring, undoing hierarchies and rebuilding informality. The question remains as to whether it is possible to assist women both to recognise these qualities as being valuable and unique and to identify with such qualities as being constitutive of the way they see themselves.

The emphasis from the women's movement today is to demand more opportunity for women to lead, to demand more power for women (translated, for example, into demands for fixed percentages in all decision-making bodies, or legal and educational programmes for women's empowerment). But there has been insufficient elaboration of what that leadership has to offer which distinguishes it from men's leadership and which commends it as something special. Such an elaboration through feminist discourse and action is essential for this revolution to deliver the promise it holds.

PRI has created an opportunity to take forwards this feminist discourse and action in order to elaborate the qualities and benefits of feminist leadership in local governance. If they are to seize this opportunity and not only take power but also transform the values and priorities of India's political and cultural space, women must raise their own consciousness of the quality and content of feminist leadership.

How can women raise their own consciousness and sustain the transformations of PRI? The support of the women's movement in India is critical. Many sections of the movement were initially sceptical about the real value of this "revolution". However, as they have become more familiar with these elected women, they have been overwhelmed by the vitality and the enthusiasm of the women and are now offering both moral and material support. This process is of central importance, and must be continued and reinforced.

There is also a need for a more enabling environment, which would allow PRI to become a process for the empowerment of women, not to mention other social groups who have

been left out of participation in representative governance. Such an environment would include legal frameworks and services as well as packages of technical support.

Multi-lateral and bi-lateral development assistance also needs to be re-thought. UN agencies, for example, are often obstacles to efforts to shift power structures from the civil service to the citizens. The procedures of donor bureaucracies require the continued presence of central government and central machineries for negotiation and accountability.

Their division into subject sectors also inhibits the establishment of integrated support services such as social development services, to be designed and accessed by women at the local level. Ironically, it is development assistance agencies which often provide vigorous examples of patriarchal obstruction to people-led development. Finally, careful research is required to substantiate the claims made by supporters of the PRI movement.

Deep poverty is a social and political phenomenon as much as an economic problem and thus requires political and social change, particularly within the sites of power. The quest for equity cannot come about without wider representation of all groups; especially those currently denied access to power, and the presentation of all points of view in the process of decision-making. Revision of the current administrative and political structures, and their rules, is necessary in order to facilitate this broader representation and its translation into political power for those who are currently marginalised.

PRI reminds us of a central truth; power is not something people give away. It has to be negotiated, and sometimes wrested from the powerful. Enshrining political change within the law has forced both the pace and direction of such change. Democratic politics is, in reality, the interplay of vested interests and PRI's great achievement has been to mandate a vested, and mutual interest, between women and the political process. The lesson of PRI is clear: if the wisdom of grassroots organisations, especially the courage and clarity of women, is to become policy, it will not be through the art of intellectual persuasion but by the arrangements made within a political system for their voice to have power.

Bringing women into power is thus not only a matter of equity, of correcting an unjust and unrepresentative system. The World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen 1995, addressed itself to the removal of poverty, the achievement of full employment and social integration. Many believe that these questions cannot be effectively addressed without the kind of democratisation of the representative process that has been discussed in this paper. Political restructuring is key to economic growth with justice. PRI is also demonstrating that transforming local councils into representative bodies means they are likely to be more environmentally protective, as the new members have a greater stake in their local natural resources.

PRI in India offers an opportunity to women to change the face of political leadership. But we still have to ensure that these are spaces where women can go to negotiate for power. Other questions that arise at a conceptual level may be addressed are:

- \* Is this model a valuable method of restructuring the State?
- \* Does local government with special reservation to ensure the participation of "subordinated" groups as discussed here, bring a form of convergence between the State and civil society?
- \* In any alternative economic models, do institutional arrangements provide the safeguard for economic equity by changing power structures?
- \* At the level of discussion on macro-economic policy, especially structural adjustment programmes, does local self-government of this kind provide the necessary challenge to the imposition of economic policies which reinforce inequity and exploitation?

The women's own movement if continues to support the PRI "revolution", the objective of Constitutional amendment and expectation of Indian constitution framers can be fulfilled, if it becomes peoples movement and;

- facilitating their meetings across districts, offering women representatives to discuss issues e.g. the end of their term and the possibility of suspension of key organisations;
- transforming women's perceptions of the training they need away from traditional women-oriented training such as home economics, towards the provision of workshops where they can share, develop and refine their political views;
- ensuring that the women are not marginalised in the revenue and expenditure committee structures that will emerge to manage the development in these bodies;
- ensuring the devolution of project design and monitoring powers from central government to the elected bodies, so that the latter can develop their own policies, reflecting the views of their own representatives rather than those of central government, and be held accountable for them;
- strengthening the identity and feminist consciousness of women representatives, for example, by leadership training;
- building global coalitions through the activist, as distinct from the academic mode. This includes bringing women into political structures and supporting the backward and forward linkages of women's presence in politics, linking household and family priorities with macro-planning processes;
- campaigns and training programmes to prepare the women both as electors and elected; and
- urging multi- and bi-lateral agencies to revise their own patriarchal structures.

Again, politics cannot be seen as isolated subject, women's role in other field like technology, market and industry make an impact on negotiating politics. Women in business, science and technology, art and craft, management and administration, employment in government and private sector, professional service and sports, do make an impact on over all political achievement. The overall development of the society is seen in all important activity, sector and segments of the society. PRIs gives an example to the rest of world, empower women to achieve objectives of decentralisation and see the power of women.

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