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PANCHAYAT RAJ: WOMEN CHANGING GOVERNANCE

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About the author

Devaki Jain is a renowned writer and activist from India. She began her career as an economist but gave up a prestigious tenured university position to devote herself to a range of activities revolving around women, their living conditions, their situations, their strengths and their quest for a peaceful and just world. Devaki helped to develop networks of advocates for women's empowerment, including the network of *Economists Interested in Women's Issues* and the *Ghandian Women's Network*. But perhaps the most well-known network is *DAWN* (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). She is also a founding-member of Kali, the first feminist publishing house in Asia.

Devaki's many achievements include developing a strong curriculum component on gender for India's Institute of Social Studies, which has become renowned for its pioneering work on ensuring women's "visibility" in national statistics. She also edited the book entitled *Indian Women* which was published by the Government of India in honour of International Women's Year in 1975. Devaki was one of the three women members of the erstwhile Commission for South-South Cooperation, headed by former President of Tanzania, Dr. Julius Nyerere. In their report, *Challenge to the South* the Commission advanced a framework for action to help Southern countries maintain their political and economic independence, to improve the lives and living conditions of their peoples and to promote a just order. Today, she is working to bring more women into leadership positions in India and to encourage more women to vote. She works with many national and international organisations for justice and peace.

Executive summary

Women are changing governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the Constitution which mandate the reservation 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 such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994 and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of government. But some evidence of women's impact can be drawn from the experiences of PRI in the two states which have experienced a full 5-year term of this new administrative and political regime (1987-1992). This paper will discuss the

evidence from the state of Karnataka, where elections under PRI (mandating 25% seat reservation for women) were held in 1987 and 14,000 women were elected.

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 has 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 poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Bringing these women into politics was an act of positive discrimination. It was the pressure of law, combined with the political imperative of winning elections, that 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.

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.

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 creche, 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.

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 has been discussed in this paper. Political restructuring is key to economic growth with justice.

Introduction

The success story I bring to you is from India. It is a story about 330,000 women who have entered the arena of formal politics. This number will soon rise to more than 1 million women. These are women who have been elected to local councils by the processes of classical democracy: universal adult franchise; political party campaigns in a multi-party system; and mandatory elections every five years. As elected members of local government, the power these women have is real. This includes the power to decide both the direction and pace of local development and also to administer and monitor the implementation of those decisions.

Significantly, the remit of these local councils mirrors the themes of the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995: poverty eradication (usually economic programmes targeted towards the poor); social security programmes such as welfare for children, the old and the disabled; and the social sectors of education, health, women and development. The success story of the women of India is that they are beginning to translate these global themes into policies and programmes at the local level.

The story begins with a law passed in 1983 in the southern state of Karnataka. This law included a clause that 25 percent of the seats in local councils would be reserved for women. The elections to these councils were held in 1987. On 1 May 1987, the Janata Dal (the party that won the elections) called a convention of all the 56,000 elected representatives, of whom 25 percent were women. It was a wonderful sight to see 14,000 women in the audience, shining bright, 80 percent of whom were participating in politics for the first time, thrilled with their victory at the hustings. Even those who had passed the law, and advocated for its positive discrimination in the interests of gender equity, were stunned.

By 1995, the presence of women in local government had increased by many multiples, as the whole nation had introduced this political/ administrative change to reserve seats in local councils for women through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution. In India, we call this new system the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, in the formal sense of the word. They are the government for their area, be it one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district.

The entire process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994. It is, therefore, too early to assess how far women's entry into formal structures of government as a result of PRI has changed the direction and practices of development, especially in relation to sensitive packages of social and economic security, the reduction of inequality, the safeguarding of livelihoods and the environment, and the reduction of domestic violence and other forms of oppression of and discrimination against women; in other words, all the elements of a feminist agenda for social and economic progress.

Box 1: The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India

This Amendment, dated 24 April 1993, directed all state legislature 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 Prime Minister.

Why?

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.

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.

It is too early to assess how far women's leadership of local development has facilitated a more just and peaceful society. Nevertheless, we have some indications of women's impact on the administration and on their male colleagues' attitudes towards women's priorities and women's capabilities, which this paper will discuss. To make this assessment as quantifiable as possible, we must address both the national and the state level. As the PRI process came into effect nationally only in 1993, the information on impact is still not adequate, although there is some preliminary and anecdotal evidence on which to draw. A more detailed assessment may be made at the state level, and this paper will discuss the evidence from the state of Karnataka, which is one of the two states that has experienced a full 5-year term of this new administrative and political regime (1987-1992), with about 14,000 women in the development councils. With this in mind, I have prepared this paper to:

- ® bring to you the voices of the women concerned, in assessing the impact of the constitutional change;
- ® draw from this 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

® relate my own involvement in this story, not as evidence of personal achievement, but rather to indicate the role of an individual in collective action.

Transforming the State from Within

PRI is a success story. But the measures of this success must be somewhat different from the indicators that are commonly used to identify success stories. Examples of such commonly used indicators include the capability (vision, insight, commitment) of organisations of women, or NGOs, to establish movements which generate ideas and prototypes for people-led development activities (e.g. the Green Belt Movement in Kenya and the Sewa Movement in India), or the success of organised advocacy and pressure groups, such as the "Support Stockings" in Sweden and the National Women's Coalition of South Africa, in transforming political representation by putting direct pressure on the State from outside.

But in this story, the success of PRI lies in the possibility of women transforming the State from within. I argue that this new arrangement provides the first step to converting grassroots leadership into State leadership, which many feel is the key to ushering in equitable, people-led development. What appears to be happening is that as women enter the structures of governance in large numbers, they are changing these structures so that they reflect more closely the concerns of women.

This is different from the usual process by which a small number of grassroots representatives are elected and can easily be isolated and forced to make compromises. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. 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 poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Measuring and assessing these qualitative changes is not easy, however. Furthermore, the immeasurable is sometimes invaluable. Thus, while much in this document is subjective and preliminary in character, it gives a strong indication of positive outcomes for gender-equitable governance, and is very suggestive of areas for future research.

Who are these women?

The women who have entered politics through PRI are from local areas, representing various backgrounds; rich and poor, dominant and oppressed social classes, educated and illiterate, working and not-working. In a survey of elected women in Karnataka between 1987-89, the following picture emerged (Shashikala *et al* 1989):

Age: they were usually young women, 25-45 years old (more than 50 percent were 25-35 years old, while 75 percent were below 45 years of age). The explanation given is that older women still feel a reluctance to go into public office. Elected men, on the other hand, were usually of an older age-group. It was noted that experience in political work was an advantage for all candidates, from which men were more often able to benefit.

Political experience: 20 percent of the women, compared to 80 percent of the men, had previous political experience.

Caste: the pattern of caste representation was the same as before the constitutional change. 60 percent of the elected representatives, whether men or women, were from the dominant castes. However, a reservation for the "downtrodden" castes and minorities added a margin of representation for these groups.

Education: most of the women elected were illiterate. Here too the variations were striking between men and women, with 20 percent of men being professionally-educated compared to 5 percent of women.

Occupation: the majority of women declared themselves as homemakers. However, we know that this is a broad category which includes heavy work, including income-generating activity.

Positive discrimination works

The percentages of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically as a result of this constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before PRI to 25-40 percent after PRI. At the local level, the numbers of women representatives have increased from no more than 6 in each assembly, usually less than 1 percent in these bodies and that too as nominated or co-opted members, to a total of 330,000 and a presence sometimes in excess of the mandatory one third, the highest proportion being 43 percent. In other words, in some cases women have moved out of reserved constituencies.

Could these women have entered these elected bodies in such large numbers, without the reservation of seats, and the considerable pressure it put on the parties to field women candidates? There is evidence to suggest that women would not have entered these councils in these numbers were it not for this constitutional mandate. It was the pressure of national law, combined with the political imperative of winning elections, that changed political parties' perception of women's limited capacity for public office.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the genesis of the constitutional mandate. The legislative action which enacted the reservation of seats for women did not result from any significant campaign by the women's movement, nor from an unusually gender-sensitive leadership of a political party. There may have been some pressure from the women's wing of the Janata Dal party, in which there was a history of demanding more places for women in the allocation of constituencies for the central parliament.

Source: Participation of Women in Panchayat Raj: A Status Report, Institute of Social Sciences, 1995.

But this was less significant than the fact that, at that time, the leadership of the Janata Dal party was projecting an image of being "people-led" and progressive and whose political philosophy (which could be deemed an amalgam of democratic socialism and Gandhian philosophy) regarded the issues of justice between the genders as a part of their broader concept of justice. By contrast, in west Bengal, where decentralised government was also introduced at the same time, the political party in power (namely, the Marxist CPI(M) party) did not make this special accommodation for women in the first phase. In other words, PRI cannot simply be equated with progressive politics, as there was not a special place for gender within a Marxist political analysis of the class struggle.

Thus the story I am telling is a complex one. Its plot-line is not a conventional tale of excluded women fighting to gain entry into bastions of male power. Women's entry in large numbers into local government arose from a mixture of political opportunism and an ethical sensibility that regarded the implications of gender as integral, rather than peripheral, to the creation of a more just society. Critically, it arose from the actions of both women and men.

Nor should the effects of the PRI system be described simplistically. 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, particularly as surveys indicate that most of the women were elected because of the status of their husbands, fathers or sons and that such women often act as proxies for men's views at the councils, being advised by their male relatives. However, as one woman elected through PRI has noted:

It is true we came through our men the first time and are often proxies for them, but we know what it is about and will come on our own next time.

Thus, the positive discrimination of PRI has initiated a momentum of change. Women's entry into local government in such large numbers, often more than the required 33.3 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidates, has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics, and have no time to go to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes.

PRI has also highlighted the intersection between gender interests and social class, for its reservation of seats has enabled poor and marginalised women to demonstrate their deep political consciousness and interest in obtaining power. For them, politics and elections are very practical routes out of poverty and instruments of social change. The next two sections will explore the ways in which PRI is beginning to transform both women and the system of governance itself.

Box 3: 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" (Balwantraji 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.

PRI: Transforming Women

Women's experience of PRI has transformed many of them. 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 (Jain 1980; Anveshi 1993). Men and their habits, long outside the realm of female influence, seem to be a major concern of elected women. For example, Deviramma, a 50-year-old woman from the "Golla", or cowherd community, kept cattle and sold curd until recently. Today, she is president of the Yeliyur Gram Panchayat, one of the 5,611 Gram Panchayats constituted in December 1993 under the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1993. As quoted by Rai *et al* (1995), she states:

If we are outspoken, they - the men - call us brazen and dub us shameless. But now we don't care because we know we have access to people who will have to hear us. The day we have our Gram Panchayat meeting, the men and the people at home mock us - that's when we bring out books and show them what we know.

Nevertheless, Deviramma reports that: "Our secretary, who is a male, doesn't let us talk at the meetings", a complaint that she has already made to the Deputy Commissioner. Similarly, 50-year-old Sibamma has now become an articulate Scheduled Caste member of the Brahamasandra Gram Panchayat. She says (Rai *et al* 1995):

The men have always ridiculed us, and perceived us as incapable of the management of public affairs. We now make up one third of the councils. This adds to our sense of strength. We must be 50 percent or more. We must overpower them with our numbers.

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 funders of training, who have tended to assume in the past that the objects of their support must be women.

Women's empowerment challenges traditional ideas of male authority and supremacy. It is unsurprising, then, that PRI has been opposed by some men. Ratanprabha Chive (Ratna) is the *sarpanch*(head) of the seven *halets*(hamlets) that comprise the Ghera Purandar Panchayat. Ratna was beaten up as soon as she assumed office by her rival who could not accept the fact that a

female had outwitted him (Rai *et al* 1995). Today Ratna puts forward proposals in this male-dominated office and poses questions when she is unsatisfied. She says:

Whenever there is any tension in the villages, they come to me and I have learnt how to sort out the problem. Many people have realised that it is indeed a waste of time to make a complaint to the police chowki(station).

She has launched programmes for adult education, digging wells for drinking water and repairing school buildings. She seems to have tackled the political and bureaucratic system which is complicated for a woman who has studied only up to Standard 7 (the public education system runs from Standard 1 - 12). As Ratna says:

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 (Antrobus 1985; ISST 1992). 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.

We are better representatives than men, as we can always be found at home in the kitchen or in the nearby fields. Men wander about, they are either in the town or the beer shops.

Namma was an elected member, from a reserved constituency, but she won against a male Scheduled Caste member, which was a very unusual occurrence in the Panchayat Raj elections. The villagers in the area who were interviewed during this study were unanimous in their view that this woman was the most effective among all the female elected members of the mandal, a view which was also shared by the *Pradhan*(the head of the village).

Not all men have opposed PRI and the changes it has brought. Kultikori, a big village in West Bengal, elected an all-woman Panchayat in 1993. When it was time to decide on party candidates for the May 1993 elections, all the members of the male-dominated body stepped down. They asked their party, the CPI(M), to field the young women of the Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti (the women's wing of the party) who had done remarkable work in eradicating illiteracy in the village. The CPI(M) fielded women candidates in all 11 seats of the Panchayat, and they won (Rai *et al* 1995).

Understanding Politics

PRI has given many women a greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. Vijayalakshmi was a Congress-I member of the Mandal, a homemaker, of Munnuru village. She wanted party politics to operate in the elections to Mandals because the party bureaucracy (at the State level) usually controls its members in the Mandals. Without the party, no one else would be able to control them. The party functionaries and the leaders are well-informed of the activities of the Mandal members, and they take some care to see that they function in such a way as not to jeopardise the outcome of elections, which, since 1993, means that female members must be respected.

Kamamma is a Scheduled Caste member and belonged to the Janata Party. She used to roll beedis to earn some money, and remained at home most of the time. She says that the influence of the political parties is such that now...

...persons from deprived groups have a better chance of being elected members. Earlier, only persons with money and of the upper castes could be elected to any position of importance.

Affirming Identity

On the other hand, some women's involvement in PRI has helped them affirm their identity as women with particular and shared experiences. A woman at a Panchayat meeting in Karnataka stated (SSF 92):

When we meet we work together as women, for our lobby. We don't take much notice of our party identities.

Such women seem to be drawn to an identity above caste or party. 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. The men see these new political actors as women not as party colleagues. Party politics, a necessary condition for classical democracy, is competitive, but the women bring a non-competitive or cooperative ethic as they are drawn to work together across party lines and seem to have similar interests. 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.

Women Changing Governance

PRI has helped to change local government beyond simply increasing the numerical presence of women. There is now a minority of women who are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness, for example, the women who were formerly part of the *Sanghas* of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, an awareness-raising, group-based programme. Visible changes in the articulation of ideas and leadership qualities exhibited by this minority were noted in the survey between 1987, the first year, and 1990 (ISS 1994). The difference women are making to local government is becoming evident in different priorities and different values (Jain L.C. 1994).

Changing Priorities

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. For example, forty teams of women in Sonbhadra (Uttar Pradesh) area had carried out systematic *yatra*, or processions, covering ten villages each, or 400 villages in all, to explain the salient features of the 73rd Amendment and the place given in it to women. In the discussions that took place during these *yatras*, women voiced clear priorities. For nearly 90 percent of the women, the top priority was water. They expressed a need for clean water for fields, for their cattle and for their families. They said life was unbearable and cultivation impossible without developing the water resources of the area. Even as they were determined to prevent the outflow of water from their areas, they were equally determined to prevent the inflow of liquor into their area.

We have been ruined by liquor. We are being ruined day after day. The day's wages are drunk by the men-folk. There is no money for groceries, hence no cooking.

Alochana, a centre for documentation and research of women in Pune, found that only two of the nine members in Bittargaon could sign their names. However, in this village which has a 16,000 population, Alochana found out that the women have "learnt to keep accounts from the local school teachers and the *gram sevaks*(rural workers). They have put an end to gambling and have come down heavily on liquor dens." The policy they adopted was to "shut the door on every drunken husband." Any protest made by them or children is met by physical assault.

We will not bear it. Once we acquire some position and power, we will fight it out. We know that it is not going to be easy because this battle will be carried out in each home. But the fact that the Panchayats will have a minimum number of women we will use that strength for mobilising women at large and keep liquor out, as a priority.

Women are also taking action against child marriage and child domestic labour, whilst promoting girl-child education, as is evident from the many success stories from Nellore, the heart of the successful anti-arrack struggle (Rohde 1994; Anveshi 1993).

We want education for our children. There are schools and teachers who draw their salaries regularly. They mark the attendance of non-existence students in their registers.

But they scarcely come to the schools. With this sorry state of affairs, how can you have education for your children? We are going to tell those teachers: either teach or go.

As with education, women have used their elected authority to address quality health care as a critical issue. In Maharashtra, the Indian School of Political Economy organised 60 workshops at Pune under the project of "Leadership Training for Rural Women". The chief conclusion of these workshops was that family planning, drinking water, schools and bio-gas plants are the priorities of women, rather than the TV set or temple (Mahipal 1994). Women, too, have brought domestic violence onto the agendas of political campaigns. In these and other ways, the issues women choose differ from conventional political platforms, which are usually caste/ethnic/religion-based.

But not only do women choose different issues, they appear to choose less corrupt practices as well. Kogendranath Mohato, Panchayat secretary of Kultikori, says:

The men I had worked under formerly passed on their expenses in cigarettes and paan (bread) to the panchayats. But the didis (sisters) here are not only clean on this score, they are more dedicated.

Women value proximity, whether it be to a drinking water source, a fuel source, a creche, a health centre, a court of justice or an office of administration. Poor women have to walk to access these facilities, which is exhausting and consumes valuable time. Moreover, when there is an attack, a rape, a burning, a witch hunt or other violence against a woman, seeking redress from Councils, which are located far away, may not be feasible. But if these Councils and the people in them are near, the chances of redress and effective action are greater.

The decentralisation of government structures has, however, been regarded with suspicion and anxiety by progressive groups. Decentralisation can exacerbate lack of local resources and perpetuate regional disparities. It has often been misused by central government to offload social security provision. It has also been misused politically by dictators or single authority regimes to control from the centre through decentralised mechanisms.

But 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, for example, the anti-arrack movement. Thus women are helping to radicalise local government. If the critique of macro-economic policies is about equity, then what better response can there be but to put political power in the hands of those most inequitably treated, namely women? In this sense, PRI may be conceived as a macro-political adjustment whose effects are felt at the micro-level.

Women are beginning to change not only the issues and values of governance but are also adopting different methods to those of men. They do not let official protocol stand in their way. Narayanan (1993) recounts the story of one Panchayat official, Suman.

According to them (the officials) the area was not a catchment area and hence not suitable to construct a tank. They could not think anything beyond that. But Suman wanted to keep up her promise to the electorate of reviving the old tank. She mobilised necessary resources through other sources, and was able to fulfil her promise. After a good monsoon, the tank was flooded with water much against the scientific thinking of the bureaucracy.

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 (Jain 1994b, 1995a).

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 (Jain 1994a).

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 (Jain 1995b, 1995c). 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 (Jain 1992). 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.

An Agenda for Action

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.

Conclusion

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 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 our discussion of 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?

But I am not one to end with questions. Many of these questions can be answered through actively supporting the restructuring of politics as a key to economic growth with justice. The international community, which participated with such solidarity and clarity at the Social Summit in Copenhagen and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, should see these types of arrangements as a means of moving beyond postulating goals and providing critiques, to offering a substantive, viable alternative for action.

Box 4: The Women's Movement and PRI

The women's movement continues to support the PRI "revolution".
Examples of this support include:

- facilitating their meetings across districts, offering women representatives fora 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;
- pressing for South Asian regional economic cooperation amongst women to be based on regional support to empowering woman's role in local and national governance;
- 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.

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