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Women as Proxies in Politics: Decision Making and Service Delivery in Panchayati Raj

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Has reservation for women to head elected panchayats worked in favour of their empowerment, or does power continue to rest with men who rule by proxy? Early results from a field study in Haryana show mixed results. File Photo: K. Bhagya Prakash

*The effectiveness of reservation for women in positions at elected Panchayats has political and social implications. In this article, **Uttara Chaudhuri** and **Mitali Sud** examine whether women's reservations for the post of sarpanch, or the village head, influences the delivery of public services for other women. They base their findings on a comparative study of two villages in Haryana — one each with a female and male sarpanch. They find that women's reservation is not a sufficient condition for politically empowering women and that women's access to public services are influenced by a variety of factors apart from gender.*

In 1992, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were mandated as local self-governing bodies by virtue of the 73rd Amendment ¹. The legislation aimed to improve the delivery of social services by bringing decision-making closer to the people and constitutionally empowering local village leaders. It also ensured reservations for women and Scheduled Castes and Tribes to prevent historically powerful groups from claiming political, economic and social resources. Specifically, the amendment mandated that one-third of the *sarpanch/pradhan* (head of a village's directly elected decision making body) positions were to be reserved for women in every State ².

Two differing, almost divergent positions emerge from the literature available on the efficacy of this landmark reservation policy. Some scholars have proposed that reservation can have the unintended and adverse consequence of weakening local democracy ³. They believe that women, who are elected from reserved constituencies, serve as proxies for their male relatives—exercising nominal power while the men retain the real work of governance ⁴. Reservation, they therefore argue, intensifies the problem of gender inequality by giving it the veneer of a solution ⁵.

The last decade, however, has seen a wave of scholarship opposing this view. These scholars argue that even if women are pushed into power with the intent of being proxies, they are eventually able to influence the delivery of public services ⁶. In particular, research has shown that women's needs are better addressed in villages where there is a female *sarpanch*.

We aimed to examine the effect of the women's reservation policy by closely comparing two villages in the vicinity of Ashoka University—one each with a female and male *sarpanch*. Specifically, we wanted to understand the impact, if any, of reserving the post of *sarpanch* for a woman on the delivery of public services for other women in the village.

Though we certainly cannot draw general conclusions from localised inferences, our research yielded a perspective that departs from the binary framework set up by the existing literature—of a female *sarpanch* either being a complete proxy or positively affecting the delivery of public services to women. Three observations in specific helped to inform this position.

First, we believe that though the reservation policy was aimed to correct the imbalance of power between castes and genders in local communities, it perhaps underestimated the degree to which these inequalities pervade social and political life. Secondly, and significantly, we realised that women's access to public services is complicated by a variety of factors apart from gender. Lastly, though it appeared that women in the village headed by the female *sarpanch* were more favourably situated regarding certain aspects of public life, this cannot necessarily be attributed to the gender of the *sarpanch*.

We were confronted with the pervasiveness of gender inequality at the very beginning of our fieldwork, when we sought to interview the *sarpanch* in both villages. In the village with a female *sarpanch*, our first visit was perhaps the most illuminating. Upon asking a male resident where the *pradhani*, Kamala Devi, might be, he firmly declared that the “real *pradhan*” was her son, Pradip. When we found Pradip and requested him to introduce us to his mother, we were told that she was unwell. In the course of our conversation, we probed further about the division of political duties between them. He began by telling us that people in the village speak to him about their demands because his mother is illiterate. Finally, he said, “My mother does the work, and I give her support.” After this point, he refused to engage with the subject any further. In the middle of the conversation, he inquired, somewhat abruptly, about our castes. When he learnt that two among our three-person party were Brahmins, he proudly told

us that he too was one, after which he proceeded to declare his love for all Brahmins. The interview ended with him assuring us that we could contact him at any time.

A week later, we called Pradip to arrange a meeting with Kamala Devi. Upon hearing our request, his initially warm tone changed as he told us that she was away for a couple days. When we called again some days later, he brusquely told us that he was busy and could not talk. Two weeks after this conversation, the third time we called him, he disconnected the call as soon as he recognised our voices. After this point, he stopped taking our calls completely.

Our first visit, the sudden change in Pradip's attitude and his refusal to allow us to see his mother made us question whether Kamala Devi wielded any political influence. We thus decided to begin our survey by asking women who they thought the *sarpanch* was. This turned out to be a crucial modification because, of the 12 women we surveyed, drawn from five castes in the village, *only one* mentioned Kamala Devi. The woman, however, immediately specified that they were related. The rest said that Pradip, her son, was the *sarpanch*.

In this same village, we were taken one evening to a small colony occupied by Valmikis, a sub-caste among the Dalits common in Punjab and Haryana. We began speaking with a group of women sitting together on the steps outside their homes. Just as one woman began saying the *sarpanch* was Pradip, her husband, wearing little other than a towel wrapped loosely around his waist, stepped out from behind her. He firmly placed his hand on her shoulder, and said, "Say Kamala Devi." She modified her answer immediately. It was disconcerting that all the men on the street were barely clad while the women not only had their bodies and heads covered, but would also hurriedly cover their faces with their *dupattas* whenever any men passed by.

The stark contrast in public exposure between men and women presents a powerful metaphor for their differentiated position in public space. The way that women dress effectively removes them from public sight. Conversely, men's complete bodily exposure is an assertion of their domination of space in a way that does not seek approval or consent. This mirrors their situation in the political sphere: Pradip's aggressive public presence regardless of the law, Kamala Devi's complete absence from the public domain.

The situation was captured most wittily and precisely by another Valmiki woman sitting near this couple, at the very end of our interview. She said, barely able to stifle her giggles:

"*Kamala Devi ka naam hai, Pradip Ji ka naam hai!*" (Kamala Devi's has the name, but Pradip plays the game). After asking women about the *sarpanch*, we asked them about how they perceived their access to certain public services — their opportunities to air grievances to the *sarpanch*, access to water, and assurance of personal safety. We were attempting to determine whether, as one line of research suggested, having a female *sarpanch* positively impacted these aspects of their lives. Instead, we realised the difficulty of drawing a simple correlation between the gender of the *sarpanch* and women's access to public services. In particular, we saw that regardless of the gender of the *sarpanch*, women's access to public services is influenced by a variety of factors apart from gender.

For instance, we hypothesised that it may be easier for women to air grievances to a female *sarpanch*. However, we found no correlation between the *sarpanch* being a woman and women's opportunities to air their grievances. Instead, in both villages, access to the *sarpanch* appeared to be restricted to the local elite.

Most women had never aired their grievances, with one woman actually responding to the question by pointing to her husband and saying, "I have a man in the house, so why do I need to go? However, those who had aired their

grievances before the *sarpanch* either belonged to the dominant caste, or the *sarpanch*'s family. For instance, in the village headed by a male *sarpanch*, a spirited woman, Santosh, told us, "I am like a *Chachi* (aunt) to him, why should I be scared to ask for something?"

Alternatively, proximity to the *sarpanch*'s house had also enabled greater access to him/her. In the village headed by a female *sarpanch*, a family who ran a shop on the lane of Kamala Devi's house told us that their request to install a drain had been duly met. A man who overheard this conversation immediately interjected, "Why would a 'raja' (king) build something that doesn't benefit him as well? Since they run a shop on his street, of course he will do work for them." Though these same factors came into play in the crucial question of women's access to clean water, women in the village under a female *sarpanch* appeared to be more satisfied than those in the village under the male *sarpanch*.

While most people in both villages had resorted to installing a jet pump with their own money, women in the village with a male *sarpanch* reported their deep frustration with their water situation. Many told arduous stories of requesting the *sarpanch* to install a drain or pump to no avail. As one woman rather dramatically put it: "I have gone to the *sarpanch*'s house to ask for drains but he doesn't do anything. During election time, he will bow down and touch your feet and after he gets elected the *sarpanch* beats you with the very same sandals."

When we asked women about their safety, we saw the influence of broader socio-economic factors. An overwhelming number of women in the male *sarpanch* village reported feeling unsafe due to their husbands' alcoholism. We were told that this was because the money acquired from selling land to nearby universities has suddenly and drastically increased men's capacity to spend on luxury items. This was not only a cause of physical violence, but also compromised a woman's emotional safety. As one woman told us after a long and emotional conversation in her courtyard, "If there is a problem between my husband and me, I do not like it to spread around the village. I think we should keep it between ourselves. But my husband goes drinking with his friends, and says things about me under the influence of alcohol." Women in the village with a female *sarpanch* did not report any such specific incidents of violence.

Our data thus showed that women in the village with the female *sarpanch* are in a better condition than their counterparts in the village governed by a male *sarpanch* regarding certain aspects of public life. Therefore, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of the female *sarpanch*'s influence. On the other hand, our experiences in the village show that we cannot attribute these differences to her gender either as it appeared from all accounts that her son was ruling by proxy. We, therefore, differ from both the existing positions in the literature, and argue, instead, that the effect of a female *sarpanch* on the delivery of public services is complicated by several factors aside from gender — namely caste, family background, geographical location, and the broader economic situation. This then calls for a more holistic, qualitative framework to understand the ways in which various social systems intersect and affect a female *sarpanch*'s influence on the delivery of public services.

Our research emphasises the reality that mandated representation is not a sufficient condition for women's political empowerment. The systematic inequality that infuses every aspect of social expression will have to be addressed for the 73rd Amendment to bring about true local democracy.

(Uttara Chaudhuri and Mitali Sud are students of political science at Ashoka University. This article is based on preliminary findings from a field study for a student project in political science and sociology.)

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3. [^] *ibid*.

4. [^] George Mathew, "[Panchayati Raj Institutions and Human Rights in India](#)," Economic and Political Weekly 38, no. 02 (2003): 156.

5. [^] Sudha Pai, "[Pradhanis in New Panchayats: Field Notes from Meerut District](#)," Economic and Political Weekly 33, no. 20 (1998): 1-2.

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