

ENDANGERING RURAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA: LESSONS FROM RESERVATION OF SEATS FOR WOMEN IN RURAL LOCAL BODIES

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Engendering the processes of governance is an exercise in reconstituting institutions and relationships of civil and political society to achieve gender justice. It is now widely recognized that women's representation and voices in decision-making bodies -- as leaders and participants—can contribute to changes in laws, policies, service delivery, cultural perceptions, and social norms that over time will improve and enhance women's agency.¹

Engendering governance forms part of the core of what is called good governance and inclusive governance. In fact democratic governance does not make any sense unless it focuses on and ensures a situation where everybody takes part in the processes of governance. Engendering governance as an essential component of inclusive governance assumes special significance because women have for long been denied effective participation in governance. It is now strongly argued by a growing section of the scholars and institutions that inability to engender governance would lead to endangering development.

The matter has gained considerable currency since the United Nations (UN) awakened the world through its conference in 1975 followed up by different supportive activities and deliberations in a series of conferences in Mexico in 1980, Nairobi 1985, in China in 1995. It now forms part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDG 3 indicators track key elements of women's social, economic and political participation and guide the building of gender-equitable societies. And “From a gender perspective local government, as the International Union of Local Authorities has argued “is the closest and is the most accessible level of government to women. Local governments traditionally provide services utilized by individual households such as electricity, waste disposal, public transport, water, schools, health clinics and other social services. The decisions of local governments therefore have a direct impact on the private lives of women, because they are traditionally responsible for caring for the family and the home in many countries. Women also have important and unique contributions to make to the development and appropriate management of these services. Until the interests of women have been represented at the local level, the system is not fully democratic.”²

It may be recalled that it was agreed upon in the Cairo Conference organized by UN as a part of the Women Development Decade that there was need for reservation of seats in different political bodies as an effective measure for ensuring gender justice. In 1990, the United Nation's Economic and Social Council endorsed a target of 30 per cent women in decision-making positions in the world by 1995. This target was far from being met by 1995, only 10 per cent of the world's parliamentarians were women. According to the latest information in 2015, around 22.5 per cent of the world's parliamentarians are women, still far from the target of 30 per cent. This figure implies that politics is still predominantly a men's business, with men making up 77.5 per cent of parliamentarians. Underrepresentation of women is now a serious global concern. This has led to a situation where around 40 countries have introduced gender quotas in elections to national parliaments either by means of constitutional amendments or changing the

electoral laws. Significantly in more than 50 countries major political parties have voluntarily set quota provisions in their own party constitutions and documents ³In Asia, increased female political participation has largely been achieved through the use of a “female reservation quota” (reserved seats for women). Countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal have allocated 30% of seats for women in national parliaments, while others like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan have a 33% reservation quota for women in local government bodies

India is one of the countries where there is massive underrepresentation of women in national parliament In the present 16th Lok Sabha (First Chamber of the Indian Parliament) there are only 61 women, constituting 11.23 per cent of the members of House and in the Rajya Sabha (Second Chamber of the Indian Parliament) female members account for 10.06 per cent of its total members .

The State and Women in India

In ancient India women were treated at par with men even in many aspects of political and philosophical spheres. However, down the centuries, the position of women in society deteriorated and politically they were pushed to the background. It was only in the twentieth century, particularly during the freedom movement under the charismatic leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, that involvement of women was accepted as the natural course in India. The social condition of women was quite appalling in those times and it was primarily due to the conscious efforts of the leadership, at the forefront of the freedom struggle, that women fought against the might of the British empire in partnership with men. Writing in Harijan on 21 April 1946, Gandhi emphasized the need to “enroll women as voters, impart or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind them so as to bring about a change in them...If they will do this, they will purify the present unclean atmosphere.” ⁴ He prophetically said, “as long as the women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country.”

Our freedom struggle was viewed by the national leaders in a wider perspective of restructuring the socio-economic and future political set up, to provide in it, among other things, equality of both men and women. It is important to recall that way back in 1920 Smt. Sarojini Naidu and Ms. Margaret Cousins led a group of women to demand equal rights of representation for the fair sex in the Indian Provincial Legislatures. The attitude of our national leaders was evident from the Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Programme which was adopted in 1931 by the Indian National Congress. The Congress declared that it could agree to a Constitution which provided for equal rights and obligations of all citizens, without any bar on account of sex and provided for adult suffrage. Thus, although the British Government turned down the demand for women’s franchise, the Indian National Congress in 1931 adopted a resolution in favour of women’s franchise and representation

Constitutional Provisions

Adoption of our Constitution heralded a new era of equality for women of India. It guarantees equal political rights including the right to vote to women. Also, almost all the provisions contained in the UN Convention on the 'Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' are there in the Indian Constitution. Not only does the Constitution guarantee equal political status to women, there is even a scope for 'positive discrimination' in their favour as is evident in Article 15(3) of the Constitution. There are many other provisions in the Constitution which lay stress on equality between men and women. For example, Article 14 provides for equality before law. Article 39 (a), states that the state shall direct its policy towards securing equally to men and women the right to an adequate means of livelihood, and 39(d) enjoins the state to direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42 provides for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief and Article 51(A) (e) refers to the fundamental duty of citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

Approach of the state

We can try to analyse the approach of the Indian state to women with reference to the Plan documents. The First Five Year Plan document looks at the issue of women and their development from the point of view of their welfare. The same approach continued in the Second Five Year Plan document. In 1960s women's education began to receive priority along with measures to improve maternal and child health and nutrition services. There was a significant shift in 1970s when women came to be viewed as participants in the development process. The cumulative effect of the UN International Development Decade and other initiatives was visible in the Sixth Plan document which provided for a separate chapter for women and development. The Fifth Plan, however, did not make any policy statement although the State had to set up a Committee on the Status of Women⁵. The Committee Report brought forth the issues of gendered socialization process inherent in the hierarchical society as well as asymmetrical resource and asset distribution located in the diverse cultural milieu of the country. In 1980s the special emphasis was laid on health, education and employment. It may be mentioned that in early 1990s training and skill development programmes merited attention of the state with a view to making women self-reliant.

The National Perspective Plan (1988--2000) for women dwelt on the question of political participation of women at the grassroots democratic institutions.⁶ The Core Group set up by the Government of India pointed out that political power and access to position of decision-making and authority are critical prerequisites for women's equality in the process of nation building. The recommendations of the Core Group are as follows:

- (a) There should be reservation of 30 per cent of seats for women in all rural local self-governing bodies at all levels from the village panchayats to the zilla parishads;

- (b) There should also be reservation of 30 per cent of the executive heads of all bodies from gram panchayats to zilla parishads for women; and
- (c) A more effective step would be to declare a certain percentage of constituencies in the lower tiers of panchayats as exclusively women's constituencies and all executive positions in a certain number of territorial jurisdictions reserved for women candidates.

This decade was marked by the passage of two land mark constitutional amendments such as the the Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Amendment Acts which provided for reservation of seats for women. It reflected a paradigmatic shift in the perspective of the Indian state about women. Earlier women were viewed as objects of development now as subjects of development .This change was also found in the Ninth Plan (1997-2002). Empowerment of women was declared as one of the nine objectives. The Plan also attempted convergence of services available in both women -specific and women related sectors. The Tenth Five Year Plan focused on empowerment of women. It may be recalled that 2001 was declared as Women's Empowerment Year which saw many activities and programmes including the rise of women's Self help Groups. Incidentally, the idea of empowerment of women through programmes like self help groups is a product of the neo-liberal policy India opted for in 1990s. There is a strong view that reduction of the role of the state in the process of empowering women in a country with a strong tradition of patriarchy has negative implications.

Against this backdrop this paper seeks to analyse the background of reservation of seats for women in rural local bodies called panchayati raj institutions in India and the constraints experienced by women elected representatives in playing their roles in these institutions. It is argued that although there are some basic inherent constraints in effectively engendering local governance through the quota system as evident from the experiences of little more than two decades in different states in India, the fact remains that it has some significant positive lessons and consequences. These positive and negative experiences seem to be useful to those countries having similar background and are committed to promote engendering governance in general and local governance, in particular by resorting to such measure as positive discrimination through reservation of seats in local political institutions

The Constitutional Amendment

The Seventy-Third Constitution Amendment provides for reservation of seats for women. The relevant provisions are as follows:

1. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and allotted by rotation of different constituencies in a panchayat.

2. The Act also provides for reservation of one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the panchayats at all levels for women including women from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The constitutional provision of reservation of seats for women in the three tiers of panchayats has resulted in a remarkably significant presence of women in panchayat bodies. As per the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, in 2008 the gram panchayats had 37.8% women members, the intermediate panchayats 37 % women members and the district panchayats 35.3% women members. The total representation of women in all three tiers of the panchayat amounted to 36.87 %.

The Impact of reservation of seats on Women

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) studied women leadership in panchayats in six states, namely, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Kerala, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh after about a decade of introduction of provision for reservation. They had also conducted studies on the experiences of women panchayat members with a focus on the role of the pradhans (heads of the village bodies) vis-a-vis their entry in the political arena and the progress they have been able to make in terms of their participation in gram panchayat meetings, mobilising support in the community, dealings with the government officials, linkages with other tiers and community groups.⁷ The profile of the elected women leaders as brought out by the studies is given below:

- Majority of them are in the age-group of 35-45 years
The proportion of unmarried women is negligible
- Only 20 to 40 per cent of the women are literate
- Incidence of joint and nuclear families is almost equal
- Less than 20 per cent of them are heads of the domestic households
- About 40 per cent of the members work in the field
- The educational and economic background of the chairpersons are better than the ordinary members
- More than 20 per cent come from the families of past Panchayati Raj members
- About 40 per cent stood for elections on the insistence of their husbands and 20 per cent on that of the community (caste) etc.
- 25 per cent notice change in their status in the family after having elected
- About 60 per cent would like to encourage women to contest elections
- About 60 of these elected would contest next elections

The findings as summarized above, present a picture about the emerging patterns of women leadership at the village government level and indicates that despite the inherent social constraints like male domination, elected women representatives in panchayat bodies have started observing and experiencing change in their family and social status. And significantly case studies done by PRIA team tend to show that the simple fact of their being in the public institutional fold in good numbers has changed their motivation and stamina.

The Seventy Third Amendment seeks to institutionalize participation of the villagers through a constitutionally mandated body called gram sabha to be constituted in each panchayat area. The study shows that gram sabha meetings are rarely held and when held, are conducted by the male relatives of woman pradhan. Participation of women in these meetings is minimal and issues concerning women rarely come up. In Kerala, however, the participation is higher in women-headed panchayats as compared to men-headed panchayats. Discussions are diverse and rich in content. Issues and concerns of women get highlighted and discussed. The reasons given include women are more sensitive and encourage discussion. Similar trends are visible in Madhya Pradesh where women pradhans have been able to establish a credible and active leadership.

Significantly, the members of the gram sabha view these women as effective. They feel that women are more sensitive to the needs of the marginalised and want to work for their development. Thus women have been able to bring about some change in the popular social perception about them that they are incapable of running the government, through their remarkable performance wherever they have got an opportunity. Mention may be made of a study done in Pune. There was a debate in the panchayat about whether bio gas plant would be installed in the village or the self-raised money that was lying in the account of the gram panchayat, would be utilized for the purchase of a TV set in the office. Women members voted for bio gas plant and it was finally accepted. Bio gas plant had given two fold benefits to women. First, it could be used as a fuel thus reducing the use of coal or wood. Second, it helped illumination of the village at night making the movement of the women safer and increasing mobility of all the villagers after sun down^{7a}

Gram panchayat meetings in the cases where women pradhans are active and effective have witnessed greater presence of women members and higher-level participation of the women representatives. Concerns of women in gram sabha meetings get discussed and more schemes and programmes related to women find their way into the panchayats. These trends are visible in all the states.

In all the states the panchayat secretary is male and a government employee. Social customs and traditions often hinder their interactions. However, it has been seen that in situations where the women leaders are effective, these patterns are also undergoing a process of change.

The women pradhans have been able to establish linkages with the block level government functionaries as well as panchayat samiti. Initially they had some problems due to lack of proper exposure. Later on, their confidence has increased as they kept on interacting with them.

Nirmala Buch did a study on women's experience in panchayats in three states, namely, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh⁸. The study has highlighted that the level of participation of women is very high, though not similar to that of men. Women's attendance in the panchayat meetings ranged from 55.5 per cent to 74.4 per cent as against men's average attendance range of 68.7 per cent. Majority of the respondents showed good level of awareness and knowledge about the working of the panchayats. In order to argue their case in the meetings many of them take others into confidence and hold informal discussions. This implies that

gender relations are undergoing a process of change leading to empowerment of women and greater acceptance of women as being capable of running the government

The National Commission on Women did a stock-taking study in six states, namely, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh in 2001. Each study contacted one hundred women. In order to elicit males' reactions to women in politics and decision-making the study focused on a few male members of the gram panchayats. The study indicates that political participation has enhanced the status of women at home and outside⁹.

Another nation-wide study on the elected representatives in PRIs done by AC Nielson on behalf of the ORG-MARG for the Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj brings out some remarkable silver linings. The study shows that becoming a pradhan or ward member augments respect within the family as well as in the community at large besides increasing their self esteem, confidence and decision-making ability¹⁰.

Barriers to Participation

A close and critical examination of the findings and insights gathered from the macro and micro level studies tends to demonstrate that besides the positive changes that have taken place following reservation of seats in the panchayat bodies identified above , women are experiencing a lot of difficulties while playing their roles as elected members of the panchayat bodies. An attempt has been made here to identify these constraints which operate prominently at the lowest rung in the ladder.

Level: Individual and family

- Most of them are first timers--no experience
- Financial dependence on the husbands or on the other members of the family
- Domestic duties remain unaltered and pressure on time
- Lack of required education
- Lack of self-confidence

Level : Social and Political

- Lack of adequate political support after the elections are held
- Holding meetings at inconvenient hours and often without notice in time
- Lack of solidarity as women members are divided either on caste, community or political lines
- Social norms and customs constraining women's rights
- Strong tradition of patriarchy as is evident from the emergence of new class of male village leaders called panchayat or sarpanch *pati* (males projecting them as of the husbands of the elected women members and showing that they are the wielders of real powers) in states like Uttar Pradesh. In such cases as Mathew clearly mentioned in his study on panchayati raj and human rights , women have to act as rubber stamp^{10a}.
- General social perceptions about the women

- Lack of strong women's organizations

Level : Legal-Institutional

- Male non-co-operation --males often do not allow to speak--males often ridicule them making them reluctant to speak
- Males arrive at consensus--women to consent
- Working of the parallel bodies without insignificant or any representation of women The existence of the male dominated traditional panchayats in the name of *Khap* panchayats and *Gavkis* acting as parallel bodies with greater political strength, has been a great threat to the process of engendering governance in rural India. A Khap comprises village elders grouped along caste or community lines and by the need to perpetuate a feudal and patriarchal order Prevalent in Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan it is as old as 14th century and it was started by the upper caste Jat community to consolidate their power and authority There have been many occasions when their decisions have directly affected women but they are helpless because there is no effective representation of women in these bodies. Many honour killings of women take place under the guidance and instruction of the Khap panchayats. They survive and dictate terms because they are backed by political parties as they have political clout and act as vote banks Gavkis which are found existing in some parts of Maharastra, are constituted by the upper caste, rich and village patriarch excluding women . In the villages where they operate they decide things bypassing the constitutionally mandated panchayat bodies. Referring to the role of these bodies Lele observes” reservations which were intended to empower the marginalized sections in rural governance are being made ineffective by the established powers in the rural areas “¹¹
- Lack of experience to make speeches and hesitation
- Lack of information
- Lack of decentralisation through sub-committees
- Allotment of insignificant portfolios
- Bureaucratic resistance
- Arrangement of rotation for the reservation of seats
- New law stipulating qualification for the contestants The states like Rajasthan and Haryana have passed legislation fixing educational qualification for those who would be contesting elections . It would exclude a large swathe of the poor and the marginalized sections of the population more particularly women because their level of literacy, not to speak of educational qualification is lower than those of males
- Two children norm. In two children norm as formulated for aspirants to elected posts (a) a person having more than two children / more than two living children after a specified date is not eligible for entry or continuation in panchayats, and (b)having more than two children does not attract disqualification on the date of coming into effect of the law introducing this disqualification or upto the end of one year thereof if an additional child is not born thereafter. The basic assumption behind this norm is that it will encourage couples to adopt contraceptive measures. When it is applied to the elected leaders they

will be considered models .and others will follow their examples. Others argue that the community leaders should practise what they profess.

But this legislative measure has been causing serious concern because the norm directly or indirectly impacts entry and continuation of exactly those sections of the society which were included in the reservations mandated by the Constitution. Again, very often it is being implemented in a non-equal opportunity environment. It is also argued that the basic inspiration for this kind of legislation was derived from the experience of China but the fact remains that in our country Tamil Nadu and Kerala have achieved much faster decline in fertility than China.

A study conducted in Andhra Pradesh (AP), Haryana, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Orissa and Rajasthan by the Bhopal-based Mahila Chetna Manch in 2002-2003 revealed that proper information dissemination on the norm was not in place. Economically and socially vulnerable sections were the worst affected. Also, the rule was seen as a potential tool for misuse, with women facing a double-edged challenge¹².

Specially Disadvantaged Women Elected Members

Dalit women i.e women belonging to the most marginalized sections of the society are facing special difficulties There is discrimination in the seating arrangements for dalit women in the offices of panchayats . For example, in one gram panchayat in Haryana all members sit in chairs while the female dalit sarpanch (head) is made to sit on the floor because she belongs to the lower caste. In a village called Gundaibhai in Madhya Pradesh the sarpanch of the panchayat who belongs to the lower caste and a poor agricultural labourer, was not allowed to unfurl the national flag. She was beaten up by men for ‘polluting’ the sacred national flag. The same had happened for dalit sarpanch in the Nasik district of Maharashtra.. Sunita Baburao was not allowed to furl national flag despite her repeated request. In order avoid the recurrence of the similar situations the Government of Maharashtra had to issue order those women sarpanch would hoist national flag¹³ Leela Chauhan who was the sarpanch of Kakria in Raigarh district of MP was not initially allowed to sit on the chair although there were chairs in the room. She did not agree but her arguments fell on deaf ears. She did not stop there and filed an FIR leading to which the Thakurs who did not allow her to sit, were put behind the bars for 24 hours As she led the campaign for water and could seek her rightful place in the panchayat two non-confidence motions were brought against her It may be noted that having received complaints from some states the Indian state has asked all state governments to ensure that no-confidence motions are not allowed to be moved against women sarpanchas within one and half years of their elections¹⁴

A dalit woman panchayat president rarely gets the male vice-president to countersign the cheque without some resistance from the latter. When the roles are reversed, women vice presidents are forced to sign the cheque even if they disagree with the expense.

The cases of violence against dalit women panchayat members are also raising a number of questions regarding empowerment of the marginalized women through reservation of seats in panchayat bodies . Buri Hembram of Rampur village in Bardhaman district of West Bengal was beaten by her husband badly because she wanted to unite the women of her village to fight

against alcoholism. Jarta Rambabu a tribal sarpanch of Peda Mallapuram Village in East Godabari district was killed reportedly by the PWG on June 18, 2010 for frustrating her attempt to take over the control of women's thrift societies in Peda Mallapuram¹⁵

Some critics suggest that women are mere proxies for men who still make the actual decisions.¹⁶ Despite these concerns, studies from different states¹⁷ have shown that women in the panchayat help address concerns that impact women directly, such as education or those related to public goods like water, especially in areas with higher gender differentials.¹⁸ They also have an empowerment effect such as lesser house-work hours, control over reproductive choices and an increase in women's overall participation in politics.

The studies indicate that a good percentage of women themselves has started realizing that they have to live upto the expectations of the society and learn how to play their roles effectively. It is also brought out from the studies that their effective participation is bringing about a change in the development agenda and they do not any longer sit quietly in the meetings but assert themselves, if required. It is sort of what can be called silent revolution through positive discrimination

Elected women representatives (EWRs) now have a clearer vision of their needs and responsibilities in the PRIs. This has been remarkably noticed amongst those who have been elected more than once because they have learnt through experience and the training that was conducted by the state governments and the non-governmental organization¹⁹

.Reservation of seats for women has changed the social composition and domination pattern of the panchayats in terms of bringing in not only women from the lower stratum of society but also standing in the way of traditional domination of political families. The studies reveal that a good number of the elected women members belong to the families below the poverty line. And majority is from non-political families. Thus it is breaking not only the monopoly of the rich and politically powerful but also domination of rural governance by some families having established political background .

The networks of elected women representatives (EWRs) that have come up in the southern states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka , Kerala , Gujarat, thanks to the intervention of the civil society organizations, are worth mentioning. The formation of these networks as emphasized by Amitabh Behar, has a number of merits.²⁰ These networks promote solidarity among EWRs who are otherwise divided by caste, religion, geographical boundaries. In this process of working together women also learn from each other and are exposed to each other's work, problems and private life resulting in solidarity. Second, it empowers women because the very act of going out of the village to attend the meetings of the network is itself an empowering process

Concluding Observations

The analysis of election data about women elected representatives reveals that women have expanded their representation to unreserved seats. Women who are entering into the process

of governance confront, negotiate or succumb to power structures at different levels and spheres- , family, community, society, institutions of governance and state. The important question to understand and unravel is the relation between the 'politics of presence' of women in the governance and the ways in which these are translated into meaningful processes in the democratisation of democracy and engendering of governance

It is important to note that women empowerment in rural India largely depends on breaking the hegemony of the rural rich over the villagers and the hard rock of patriarchy. And, as Batliwala reminds us, "----women's empowerment is essentially a political task. It cannot be achieved until and unless a critical mass of women access formal political power by entering political institutions on a large scale. However, they will have then to confront the reality that gender justice and social justice are inextricably linked and require a synchronised approach. The task at hand is undoubtedly onerous and complex but we cannot dismiss the fact that the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution is that one small step for women which, wisely and strategically exploited, could well become a giant leap forward for mankind." ²¹. It is hoped that existing large band of women elected representatives will prepare themselves for higher level leadership. They would one day "storm the bastions of the male domination and until then some form of affirmative action must fill in" ²². Women's entry into governance through reservations is expected to be a longer term, complex process of fostering gender equality as is evident from an analysis of a workshop in Kerala exclusively for newly elected male representatives ²³ It has signaled the advent of winter. And if winter comes the spring is there to follow It has to be kept in mind that it is a sort of civilisational change and thus time- consuming

The constitutional amendment has given the women a space which belongs to them as a group What Rabindranath Tagore wrote in 1929 remains valid even in India today that the crux of women empowerment is that they do not have their own houses. During their childhood they live in the houses of their father, after marriage they live in the houses of their husbands and therefore they spend their lives in houses which are not owned by them. It was this hard realization of Mrinal who represents the community of women in Tagore's novel *Strir Patra* (wife's letter) and Kumudini. who features in Tagore's novel , *Jogajog* (Communication) They badly need houses of their own ,as Virginia Wolf hinted in 1929 in her *A Room of One's Own* where they feel free to talk and decide things about themselves as far as possible within the existing other constraints in the society .The provision for reservation of seats in the political institutions is like getting a piece of land for the construction of a personal house. Women have to construct their houses themselves. They need bricks, mortar steel etc to build their houses. Given the strong patriarchal tradition of the society these mean that the state has to come forward pro-actively to facilitate the processes of construction. There remains the billion dollar question : will the state which has still not been able to arrive at consensus on the question of reservation of seats for women in higher level elected bodies like parliament, be able to stand by the side of the women effectively? Society has to change its age-old untested perception that women are not suitable for holding positions of governance Will the male dominated society be able to live upto the expectations? Women have also to prove that they are no less competent than men in running the machinery of governance deftly and dexterously²⁴.

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Notes

Panchayati raj is three-tiered democratic structure of village governance in India. In the structure of the Panchayati Raj, the Village Panchayat is the lowest unit. There is a Panchayat for each village or a group of villages in case the population of these villages happens to be too small. The Panchayat chiefly consists of representatives elected by the people of the village. Every Panchayat elects a President or Sarpanch and a Vice-President or Vice president or Upsarpanch. The Sarpanch occupies a pivotal position in Gram Panchayat system. He supervises and coordinates the various activities of the Panchayat. The Panchayat Samiti is the intermediate second tier of the Panchayati Raj. Usually a Panchayat Samiti consists of 20 to 60 villages depending on area and population. The President of the Panchayat Samiti is the Pradhan, who is elected by an electoral college consist of all members of the Panchayat Samiti and all the Panchas(members) of the Gram Panchayat falling within the areas. Besides the Pradhan (head of the Panchayat), the Up-Pradhan(Vice head) is also elected. The Pradhan convenes and presides over the Panchayat Samiti meetings. He guides the Panchayats in making plans and carrying out production programmes. The Zilla Parishad stands at the apex of the three-tier structure of the Panchayati Raj system. Generally, the Zilla Parishad consists of representatives of the Panchayat Samiti; all the members of the State Legislature and the Parliament representing a part or whole of the district; all district level officers of the Medical, Public Health, Public Works, Engineering, Agriculture, Veterinary, Education and other development departments of the government. The Chairman of the Zilla Parishad is elected from among its members.

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