

BEYOND ELECTORAL POLITICS: Women in Local Governance in Haryana



Encouraging women to stand for elections to the local bodies is one step forward; empowering them with knowledge and skills in planning and decision-making must necessarily follow if women need to be active creators of their own future and not figure-heads and proxy figures for the men in their families

IN 2016, THE FIFTH GENERAL Panchayat Elections of Haryana witnessed the election of a greater percentage of women despite the dwindling pool of eligibility due to the introduction of new rules such as the education criterion. The overall representation of women across all levels of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was 42 per cent as compared to 36 per cent in the previous term.

In addition, the 2016 panchayat polls had more educated members in PRIs because all the women

candidates, who secured seats in the elections, fulfilled the mandatory education criterion. This, of course, can be considered as an achievement in a state such as Haryana, where the sex ratio of women to men is 879 : 1000, and the literacy rate of women is still as low as 64.94 per cent.

Despite the increase in the number of women at the village-level governance in Haryana, some of the questions worth reflecting upon are: Does the improved percentage of women in the PRIs of Haryana also ensure their active and effective political participation? Do they have any real power

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to influence democratic decision-making?

To answer these questions, we started out by looking at what happens to the elected women representatives beyond the electoral politics. For the last two-and-a-half years, after the elections of 2016, have these women exercised the power bestowed upon them or have they gone back to their household cocoons after their electoral wins?

We interviewed 12 *sarpanches* (village council heads) and 10 *panches* (members of the village council) from five districts of Haryana, namely, Faridabad, Mahendergarh, Nuh, Sonapat and Yamunanagar. Some interesting conversations and revelations emerged. Let us consider a few case examples in this regard.

Anita Yadav, *sarpanch*, Sihar village, Mahendergarh district, has studied up to Higher Secondary and is not only very conversant with the major functions of the *gram panchayat* (village council) but also with the important government programmes designed for the benefit of rural citizens. Despite having good knowledge about her role and responsibilities as the *sarpanch*, she says she feels

stifled and is unable to voice her opinions freely in the presence of male community members.

“A *sarpanch* can be a change-maker and can create linkages between the government and the villagers,” says Richa, the *sarpanch* of Sugh Majhri village in Yamunanagar district. She is highly qualified, with an MBA degree in Finance and is competent to handle difficult functions such as accounting and audit. The residents of Sugh Majhri, however, think that she, being rich, elite and educated, does not have much connect with them and is not concerned about holistic village development.

Raveena, another *sarpanch*, has a Masters degree to her credit; yet, she did not know about the mandatory education criterion when her elder brother asked her to contest for the position of *sarpanch* in Kota village, Nuh district. Her educational qualifications were used by the men of her family, to secure power for themselves because they wanted to work on her behalf in matters of village governance. To date, all her plans regarding the functioning of the *gram panchayat* await the approval of her elder brother.

Belonging to the Other Backward Castes (OBC) category, Rajbala of Khedla village, Nuh district, had to experience both electoral as well as social strife. The men of the opposing party in her village filed a case against her in the District Court, alleging that she had submitted fake educational qualifications. Besides, rumours were spread to malign her character. Despite such challenges, the villagers elected her as the *sarpanch* because of the proven transparency of her work, her confidence and her decisiveness. As the village head, she aims to work for the improvement of the impoverished and weaker sections of society, and faces stiff resistance at every step because she belonged to the OBC category.

An expert in martial arts, Heerni Sharma of Tilpat village in Faridabad district could not continue her studies beyond the secondary examination. After being elected as *panch*, she has not only been able to identify the major issues such as sanitation, drinking water and electricity that troubled her fellow villagers but has also persuaded the *sarpanch* to incorporate the same in the Village Development Plan.

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Heerni radiates hope when she says, “Non-government Organizations (NGOs) or community-based organizations must provide training and help in the capacity building of elected representatives, especially because government training programmes are not enough.”

This is in striking contrast to the story of Mukesh, the *panch* of Nizampur village in Mahendergarh district, who despite having the necessary education criterion, has no clue about her role and responsibilities as an elected representative. She has not received any direction from the *sarpanch*, nor does she have any insights or ideas with regard to developing her village during her tenure.

Look at the facts presented in these examples of elected representatives: An aware woman paralyzed by patriarchy and the structural inequalities associated with it; a highly educated woman unable to stand up for the disadvantaged due to the diversity of interests related to class and caste differences; a young, educated girl forced to be the mere front while her male relatives wield power and take decisions; a woman belonging to the OBC category fighting caste

and class barriers, and displaying self-esteem and agency; a young bride, despite not being highly educated, overcoming her lack by using her skills of observation and reflection; a newly elected woman *panch*, who has no support or guidance of the *sarpanch* or the other *panches*.

Elected women representatives can play a critical role in two major tasks of the *gram panchayat*, namely, preparing development plans, and implementing and monitoring government programmes. Unfortunately, most of the elected women representatives, despite having the requisite educational background, are unable to influence decision-making, with regard to these two tasks.

One of the foremost reasons behind this limited success of elected women representatives is their lack of awareness about the functions of the *gram panchayat* and the roles and responsibilities conferred upon them. These women, despite having the required educational criterion, are unaware of the regulatory functions of a *gram panchayat*, the processes of participatory planning and budgeting, and the provisions of government-

sponsored schemes and projects, and their management. They are also not well-prepared to support and supervise local institutions in their accounting and audit functions, or to maintain and manage their office space. Besides, the lack of computer application skills and their lack of understanding of the Right to Information lead them into additional backwardness.

Yes, structural and caste inequalities still matter. And because of these, women are subjected to discrimination regarding access to opportunities and resources such as education, health and other services. Women, who are elected as representatives, are also no exception, and as a result, are often seen lacking in confidence and agency, in skills of articulation and comprehension. Often, they do not believe they can work independently and depend on either their male relatives or influential men of the village community for decision-making, accounting and maintaining financial records, the use of technology and for matters that require physical mobility such as attending meetings and trainings. These factors cumulatively restrict the elected

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women from becoming dynamic leaders; in effect, they are token representatives and do not really play an active and effective role in village governance.

What can be the panacea for these problems?

No doubt, creating structured training programmes, exclusively designed for these elected women representatives, is one of the most crucial requirements for capacitating them to perform their roles and responsibilities well. Such programmes can also serve as platforms for women to meet, interact and learn from each other. The involvement of not-for-profit organizations, which have regular experience in working with rural communities, will add value to the training programmes organized by the government.

The example of the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), which is an autonomous training, research and consultancy organization under the Ministry of Local Self-Government, Government of Kerala, is worth mentioning in this regard. The many capacity building interventions on local governance and decentralization

of KILA include training, action-research, publications, seminars and workshops, consultancy, documentation, hand-holding and information services. It also runs a one-month certificate course on Panchayati Raj for the elected representatives for capacitating and preparing them to function well on the ground.

Equally or even more important is to make elected women representatives digitally literate. This becomes singularly relevant because the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, through its *E-panchayat* Mission Mode Project, is willing to use information and communication technologies (ICT) for not only automation of internal work-flow processes of *panchayats* and improved service delivery to citizens but also to increase capacity building of *panchayat* representatives and officials, and improve the efficiency and the right to information (RTI) compliance of *panchayats*. On the whole, digitization of *panchayats* will lead to local self-governance becoming more inclusive, responsive, accountable and transparent. With the *panchayats* being at the interface of rural citizens and

governance structures, elected representatives of *panchayats*, including women, who serve as the lynchpins in all the development activities in the villages, must learn and equip themselves with skills to use computers to manage their work-related responsibilities. Hence, sessions for basic digital literacy must be incorporated in their training curriculum.

An off-shoot of digital literacy is mobile literacy; a majority of women representatives seem to be uncomfortable in handling smart phones, either because of they do not know how to or because it is a social taboo. Educating women representatives to use smart phones is extremely critical, especially now when the use of mobile-based apps for information dissemination is a well-known approach, even in government circles.

The collaborative initiative, 'E-Shakti', by the Government of Madhya Pradesh and the telecommunication service provider Bharti Airtel, is an exemplary move in this respect. The programme was launched to create Internet awareness and literacy among rural women, which included a few elected

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women representatives as well. Even women employees of various government departments were included in the programme. The training empowers women with knowledge of the Internet and helps them adopt it in their daily lives. Besides a basic knowledge of the Internet and email, the training includes an introduction to various government portals and mobile apps, IRCTC and so on, and how to access these through mobile phones.

Efforts of not-for-profit organizations in building the capacity of these women through separate training sessions is an additional and very valuable accompaniment. The SM Sehgal Foundation, a not-for-profit organization, working in Nuh district of Haryana since 1999, has introduced specific training programmes for women representatives in village-level institutions such as *panchayats*, school management committees, Village Health, Nutrition and Sanitation Committees by forming *mahila sangathans* (women's collectives). Through these collectives, the message of the importance of collective action is reinforced among women representatives, besides

generating awareness about their roles and responsibilities as members of these institutions.

Complementary to this initiative, the Sehgal Foundation has also designed Women Leadership Schools (WLS), exclusively for women community members, to train and empower them to become advocates of their own development. WLS provides women with information about government programmes through which women learn about crucial issues, such as food security, health and nutrition, RTI, and social security programmes.

In addition, in order to ensure better delivery of public services, women in WLS are also trained to apply for, and claim, their entitlements and to appeal to the appropriate government officials, in case their rights are delayed or denied. This instills in them a sense of agency to work for their own as well as the common good.

The trainees of WLS in Khan Mohammadpur village in Nuh district, Haryana, stood up against the corrupt practices of the local ration dealer, who was not distributing the stipulated amounts of subsidized food items as promised under the Targeted

Public Distribution System (TPDS). The women complained to the *sarpanch* and, later, to an officer of the Food and Supply Department. This alarmed the dealer, who hurriedly distributed food grains to approximately 1,000 beneficiary households.

Investment in creating a sense of agency and empowering women with skills to form coalitions and alliances, to voice their views fearlessly and to negotiate with the patriarchal restrictions imposed upon them better, perhaps, is the only way to restore women's dignity as elected representatives despite differences in class, caste and economic status. And this can be achieved, not just by attending training programmes conducted by government and non-government institutes but with the holistic support of the family and the wider social environment.

Making PRIs more inclusive for women functionally, and not just constitutionally, is a constant endeavour. The much-celebrated mantra of 'women's empowerment' that is limited to only providing parity in access to opportunities and resources to women, although having the potential to address some of the

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existing challenges for elected women representatives is, beyond doubt, a limited approach.

There is need, therefore, to broaden the notion of women's empowerment. Only when elected women representatives are able to prioritize their own agency will they be able to realize their full potential and expand their opportunities and choices. This will also enable them to focus effectively on issues such as child marriage, female foeticide and infanticide, improved access to daycare and schooling for children, an area that all-male *panchayats* are inclined to disregard.

Exemplary stories of women sarpanches such as Sheila Devi from Jharki Bisalpur village located in the forest-dominated Koderma district of Jharkhand are immensely inspiring in this regard. The perseverance and courage she showed in overcoming patriarchal and caste-based distinctions, without getting diverted from her sole objective of village development, is unparalleled.

Sheila Devi works as the *sarpanch* independently. She maintains a lot of caution in dealing with men, especially those from the upper-caste. Her enthusiasm and honesty brought to light issues such as child marriage, female

foeticide, the improvements required to make schooling and day-care accessible for the girl child and other issues, often ignored by all-male *panchayats*.

Examples like hers testify to the fact that developing confidence and a sense of agency are the prime factors that help women representatives overcome hurdles and make local self-governance more effective and inclusive. The case of participation of women representatives in local governance in Haryana is also no exception.

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