

**I.P. Desai Memorial Lecture: 17**

**WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH  
LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH ASIA**

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Let me first pay my respects to the memory of the late Professor I.P. Desai. I met him first in Delhi in the early sixties. Being a friend of Professor M.N. Srinivas, he used to visit the Delhi University campus quite often. He was a member of the selection committee when I was a candidate for lectureship and later for readership. To the people of my generation he was a father figure. He used to take an affectionate interest in the intellectual growth of young people around him. In 1970, he asked for a copy of my Ph.D. thesis, gave detailed comments on it, and encouraged me to publish it. It is indeed a great honour and privilege for me to deliver this lecture in his memory. I sincerely thank the Centre for Social Studies for inviting me to give this lecture.

I have decided to speak on ‘Women’s Empowerment through Local Governance in South Asia’, a subject, I guess, Prof Desai would have appreciated. Beginning with the early 1970s the theme of women’s empowerment has attracted increasing attention of scholars, researchers, activists, and policy makers. During the last three decades there have been many seminars and conferences to deliberate on women’s issues. A large body of literature is now available describing and analysing women’s conditions, and problems faced by them in different parts of the world. Over a period of time, a broad consensus seems to have emerged that women have to be empowered if their social, political and economic condition is to be changed for the better. Among several ways of empowering women one suggestion has found wide support among thinkers and policy makers, namely, to provide for a reserved quota of seats for women in various structures of power such as legislatures and local government institutions. In this lecture I am concerned primarily with the latter. I will discuss the current state of various attempts in South Asian countries to give women a share in power in local level governmental structures, known variously as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), village development committees, union councils, or union

*parishads*. I will deal mainly with five countries in South Asia: India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The main focus of discussion will be local governance in India while the other four countries will be dealt with briefly for comparative purposes.

If we look at the priorities for development goals of governments in the world, or of international agencies such as the UN and the World Bank, or of development oriented NGOs all over, and even of most of political leaders, they all seem to be emphasising democratic decentralisation and women's empowerment. All policy makers seem to be in favour of decentralised government structures and giving to women a share in power. It is often pointed out that the old centralised state is an obstacle rather than a vehicle for just and fair development of the poor and the downtrodden. Similarly, it is argued that no genuine development can take place without involving women actively in the decision making process. Various measures are then suggested to achieve these goals, including constitutional or legislative provisions to create decentralised structures of power and assigning important and effective role to women. Almost all the developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America are moving in the direction of democratic decentralisation and women's empowerment. The timing and pace may vary in each case but there is no doubt about the direction in which they are moving and the measures they are adopting. I propose to examine some of these measures and their impact in the five countries of South Asia.

### **Women in Local Governance in South Asia**

Among the five South Asian countries, India is ahead of all the others in making legal provisions for women's participation in local governance. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Indian Constitution passed in December 1992 have brought about truly 'a silent revolution'. The PRIs are now a part of the Constitution and enjoy the status of institutions of self-government like the parliament at the federal level and the legislative assemblies at the state level. The revolutionary provision in the amended constitution is the reservation of one third of the seats for women in local bodies, along with the provision of reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their population in the respective unit: village, town, city, taluka or

district. Women's representation remains one third in every unit irrespective of their proportion in the population.

When the provision for reservation of seats for women was being debated in the parliament, several members were doubtful as to whether such a large number of women would come forward to contest these seats. But these doubts have proved to be wrong. In total, for over one million seats reserved for women in all the local bodies in the country, more than five million women candidates contested in local government elections held in 1995 and 2000. Thus, on an average, there were five women candidates contesting each seat. Moreover, some women candidates won unreserved or general seats, defeating their male as well as female rivals. Of course, such cases were not many, but they were no less significant.

It needs to be mentioned that the reservation of seats for women (and for SCs and STs) applies not only to members but also to office bearers of PRIs. Thus, not only one third of the elected members but also one third of the Sarpanches or chairpersons have to be women. In the country as a whole, there are 231,630 Gram Panchayats (Village Councils). Over 77,210 of them have now women as Sarpanches. At the intermediate level, there are 5,912 Taluka (or Block/Mandal) Panchayat Samitis. More than 1,970 of them have women as Sabhapatis or heads. And of the 594 Zilla Parishads (district councils) 200 have women as Presidents. In the urban sector there are 90 City Corporations. Thirty-two of them have women mayors. There are 1,430 Town Municipalities. More than 479 of them have women Chairpersons. In the areas in transition from the rural to urban sector, there are 2,009 Nagar Panchayats. More than 685 of them have women chairpersons. Thus, in the country as a whole, about one million women now occupy positions as members or as heads in rural and urban local government bodies. This may be unique in the world.

There are variations between states in the magnitude of women's representation. While most states manage to meet the constitutional provision of 33 per cent seats for women, in some this proportion has exceeded. For example, in Karnataka women occupy 43.6 per cent seats in local bodies. This means a large number of women have managed to

win general (unreserved) seats, defeating rival male and female candidates. This suggests a highly significant trend for the future.

Seats for SCs and STs are in proportion to their share in the population in each unit such as the village, town, city, taluka or district. In the country as a whole, there are 15 per cent SCs and 7.5 per cent STs in the population. So, about 22.5 per cent seats are reserved for these communities. One third of these seats have to be filled by women belonging to these categories.

It was feared that the reserved posts for women would be monopolised by women belonging to locally influential families of higher castes and classes, since the local elites enjoy the advantages of status, wealth, information, political skills, and influential contacts. However, representation has in fact, broadened in terms of social categories. Reservation of seats ensures representation of women from the SCs and STs also. Many of these women belong to families of small and marginal farmers or of landless labourers.

In terms of age, most elected women are forty years or older (Datta 1998). There are very few elected younger women. This is because older women enjoy greater freedom of physical mobility. They are also relatively free from the burdens of household chores and childcare. Depending on their availability, educated or literate women are preferred over illiterate ones. Even then, there are a large number of illiterate women, many of whom are even heads of panchayats.

Bangladesh comes somewhat close to India in terms of encouraging women's representation in political structures at various levels. Unlike India, the political elite in Bangladesh have been somewhat generous in giving reserved representation in the national parliament in addition to that in the local government institutions. The Constitution of 1972 reserved 15 seats for women for ten years. Through an amendment in 1978 the quota was increased to 30 seats and the period extended to fifteen years. However, the reservation ceased to exist in 1987 when the parliament was dissolved. Subsequently, thirty seats for women were restored in 1990 for ten years expiring in April 2001. In the

absence of reservation, women's representation in parliament has now declined from 11.20 per cent to 2 per cent.

Democratic decentralisation was introduced in Bangladesh with great enthusiasm by President Ershad after he came to power in a military coup in 1982: this was in line with other military dictators in neighbouring Pakistan (Siddiqui 1992). Bangladesh has a three-tier local government structure as in India. There are 64 district councils, 462 sub-district councils (similar to Tehsils) and 4,401 union councils or village panchayats (SAPI 2003). Currently, thirty seats are reserved for women in Dhaka City Corporation. While other important urban centres have ten seats reserved for them. In the rural areas, in every Union Parishad (Village Council) three seats were reserved for women. In 1997 there were 12,894 women (28.31 per cent of total) elected against the reserved quota. Moreover, 110 women managed to get elected on general seats defeating rival male and female candidates.

Being a poor and backward country, women in Bangladesh suffer from several handicaps such as illiteracy, poverty, poor health, and gender bias. Due to limited reservation in government, they have not been able to make an impact on Bangladesh society. This is inspite of the fact that women have been occupying top governmental positions (such as Prime Ministership) for the last few decades. This raises the question, how far women at the top of the political structure are interested and effective in bringing about a sense of empowerment among women in general in their society. We shall discuss this issue later.

In Pakistan women have achieved limited gains in the process of empowerment at the local level. It is also the case where military dictators such as Ayub Khan, Zia-ul Haq and Pervez Musharraf have tried to support decentralisation through local structures of power. I will discuss later why military dictators are keen to promote democracy and popular participation at the level of local governance.

As in Bangladesh, Pakistan has also reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies. In the national assembly 60 out of 357 seats are reserved for women. Similarly, in the four provincial assemblies, 128 out of 758 seats are set aside for women. As in India

there is 33 per cent reservation for women in the local government structures. It should be noted that the women's seats in the national and provincial assemblies are filled through nomination by the political parties in proportion to votes polled in favour of their candidates. There is no direct election for women's reserved seats.

The local government has three levels: Union Council at the village level, Tehsil Council at the middle level, and District Council at the higher level. At the Union Council level there are 21 members: 12 Muslims (including 4 women), 6 peasants and workers (2 for women), 1 representing minorities, and 2 office bearers (Nazim and Naib Nazim, like Sarpanch and Upa-Sarpanch in India). The Tehsil Council has 34 members, all indirectly elected: 25 general, 5 women, 2 peasants/labourers, 2 minorities (1 man + 1 woman). The district Council is also indirectly elected. In all there are 36,143 women representatives in local government. The majority of women are below 45 in age. Being a feudal society like Bangladesh and subject to Islamic restrictions on behaviour in public forums, women do not play a prominent role in local government. Their illiteracy, economic dependence on their patriarchal family, and other social and cultural constraints restrict their active role. Many of them act as mere rubber stamps (SAPI 2003).

In the case of Pakistan, the question arises: if there is military dictatorial rule at the national level, and democratic institutions are often fragile and unstable, is it realistic to expect a vigorous role by women in the local government? Being inexperienced in politics, women will need a lot of time to learn the political game and play an effective role in the local structures of power.

Among the five countries under our consideration, Nepal is the only monarchy with a parliamentary democratic system under its supervision. Three seats (5 per cent) are reserved for women in the Upper House with 60 members. There are 205 members in the House of Representatives or parliament. In the last election only 13 women were elected in a total of 265 members. Like Bangladesh, Nepal has a unitary constitution without any state or provincial legislatures. Again unlike India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, Nepal has only a two-tier local government system. It has 3,913 Village Development Committees

(VDCs), and 75 District Development Committees (DDCs). For cities and towns it has 58 municipalities. Women's representation is very low in VDCs (7.7 per cent) and DDCs (6.7 per cent). Every VDC is divided into 9 wards, each with at least one woman nominated to it if there are no elected women members. In urban areas there may be 9 to 36 wards depending on their size.

Nepal is a poor, backward and feudal country. The democratic structures of power from the local to the national levels are still dominated by powerful elites. Most of the elected members belong to higher or middle level castes, they are usually middle aged, and many of them are substantial landowners or otherwise rich people. Educated, young and lower caste men and women have not yet obtained a share in power. Following the examples in India and Pakistan, the NGOs and other activist groups in Nepal are demanding greater powers and higher representation for women. They are hopeful of achieving 33 per cent reservation of seats for women (SAPI 2003).

Among the five countries Sri Lanka is the only one which has no reservation of seats for women. They are very poorly represented at all the levels of the polity. In the Parliament women have only 3.79 per cent seats. In the seven provincial councils there are only 18 (4.7 per cent) women among 383 total members. Sri Lanka has 3 types of local authorities: Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas in rural areas. There are 14 Municipal Councils, 37 Urban Councils and 258 Pradeshiya Sabhas (similar to Indian village panchayats). Women are poorly represented in local bodies: 3.4 per cent in Municipal Councils, 2.6 per cent in urban councils, and 1.7 per cent in Pradeshiya Sabhas. The Colombo Municipal Council has only one female member. In the recently dissolved parliament there were only 10 women among 225 members. There was only one female member in the cabinet which existed before the recent elections.

All this sounds surprising and inconsistent with other indicators of development in Sri Lanka. It has the highest literacy rate (90 per cent) among women in the region. They enjoy better health and higher life expectancy than women in its neighbouring countries. Moreover, Sri Lanka was the first country in the world to elect a woman as Prime

Minister. What is more, it is the only example in the world which had a mother-daughter team as Prime Minister and President. The women's groups have been agitating for at least 30 per cent quota for women in various governmental bodies at the local and national levels. But, it seems the governments in Sri Lanka have been far too much preoccupied in dealing with the ethnic conflict and insurgency in the northern region of the country to deal with the problems of women's representation. In the current political climate, women's representation acquires a low priority. Quite a few women who are active in the parliament and provincial councils are widows, daughters or sisters of powerful political leaders. Women of such a socio-economic background do not consider working in local government bodies worthwhile. As mentioned earlier, we shall later discuss why women do not get fair and adequate representation even though women leaders occupy top positions in the country's political system.

### **Why Women's Representation Now?**

Prior to the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, there was no significant presence of women in India's local government. Nor were they conspicuous in legislative bodies at the state and federal levels. Even today, women account for no more than eight per cent of members of the Lok Sabha. For years, the federal government has tried to introduce a bill prescribing reservation for women in parliament. But so vehement was the opposition by some political parties that the government failed even to introduce the bill for consideration. Even the recent attempt (in June 2003) by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha to arrive at a compromise on this issue failed. How, then, did the two houses of parliament pass the provision for reservation of one third of seats in PRIs for women without a single dissenting vote in 1992? In the absence of any systematic study one can only speculate on this matter.

It has been argued that the easy consent by politicians in parliament to women's reservation in PRIs reflects their low valuation or indifference towards these institutions. Since these politicians do not consider PRIs as centres of power and authority, they do not care if women occupy one third of the seats in these bodies. Even though some men would lose their positions in the PRIs as a consequence of such reservation, the politicians did not consider it a great loss or sacrifice.

It has also been suggested that the politicians looked upon the women's reservation as an opportunity for women in their families and kin groups. Once their own women were elected to these seats, they could control the local councils from behind the curtain. In effect, the politicians did not see election of women to these reserved seats as much of a loss of their own power.

Some politicians, it is argued, looked upon women's reservation in the PRIs as a welcome chance to reduce bitter factional conflicts at the local level. They assumed that a contest among women would not be as fierce and expensive as among male candidates. Thus they could save their political capital for other, more serious, contests.

Another argument is that the politicians were influenced by the continuous discussions and debates, for over three decades in various fora, about gender equality and justice. They did not mind making a concession to a widely accepted principle and thus deriving the satisfaction of being seen as liberal and progressive on this issue.

The political climate the world over is in favour of giving a greater share to women in political bodies. Seeing India's example, women's groups and lobbies in other countries are agitating for similar reservation in their own local bodies. I have no doubt that all these countries, including Sri Lanka, will follow India's example of providing reservation of at least one third seats for women in local government bodies in the coming years.

### **Gains and Achievements of Women's Participation**

When women are in charge of local bodies, their programmes tend to be oriented to daily needs. Women think of tap water and toilets, while men think of roads and buses. Women are also keen on improving school facilities and seeing that girls attend school regularly (Datta 1998). They see the value of education in their daily life. Illiterate women often regret their plight and say how much more effective and efficient they would have been in their panchayat work if only they were educated.

Wherever women were in power they worked for community toilets, having experienced the daily embarrassment of going out in the open for relieving themselves. They also brought in smokeless *chulahs* (stoves). In most villages, both schemes failed because toilets could not be kept clean and the design of stoves was faulty.

Women are also innovative in their style of operation (Datta 1998). In some of the Maharashtrian villages with all-women panchayats, they established the practice of having water taps and pipes repaired within twenty-four hours, since women suffered most from delayed repairs. In a village called Vitner in Maharashtra, where people had encroached on common land, the women decided to release their cattle to graze there in order to reclaim the land for the community. In another village, women contributed labour to repair the road to the village school so that children could go to school without difficulty. In yet another village, where there was no teacher appointed to the school and endless paperwork did not help, twenty-two women marched to the Block Development Office and left it only when a teacher was appointed. Sudha Patel, a blind woman sarpanch of Changa village in Anand district of Gujarat, won a national award for her leadership qualities in 1999. In those local bodies where women are in power, there is less corruption. It is not that women are inherently morally superior to men, but their upbringing and outlook towards life seem to make them less prone to corruption (Datta 1998).

### **Some Problems of Women's Participation**

Patriarchal culture and social structures dominant in South Asia seem to inhibit women's participation in local governance. Some families oppose their women working in local bodies, saying women's place is in the home and not in the panchayat office. Thus, women are often excluded from playing legitimate and active roles in rural community life due to social and institutional constraints (UNDP n.d.). Examples of social constraints include restrictions on freedom of movement and action imposed by traditional family and caste norms. Women panchayat members are sometimes treated as mere proxies or surrogates for their husbands. In some states, such as Uttar Pradesh, husbands take over the role of their wives as panchayat heads -- so much so that the term *Pradhan Pati* is commonly used to refer to them.

(*Pradhan* is head of the panchayat and *Pati* her husband). In a typical proxy case, except for signing official documents, the *Pradhan Pati* does everything. He takes decisions, issues various documents, attends meetings, and in an interview he answers all questions on behalf of his wife. In some cases there are pragmatic arrangements between husband and wife. The wife does most of the panchayat work inside the village but the husband takes care of dealing with the world of outsiders such as teachers, contractors and officials.

Institutional constraints can be imposed on women panchayat members in various ways. In some cases, men conspire to oust women from power. A woman may get elected as sarpanch (head of panchayat) through reservation. Her deputy is usually a man. He joins hands with other members and gets a vote of no confidence passed against her, and starts acting as sarpanch in her place. Thus, what is given by law and the constitution is taken away by intrigue and chicanery.

Sometimes women are discriminated against even in seating arrangements at panchayat meetings. In some cases, women sit separately from male members. In one panchayat in Haryana, all members sit on chairs, while the female Scheduled Caste Sarpanch is made to sit on the floor because she belongs to a lower caste. There are also some extreme cases such as that of Gundiabai of Pipra village in Tikamgarh district of Madhya Pradesh. She belongs to a former untouchable caste and is a poor agricultural labourer. As Sarpanch of the panchayat she was to unfurl the national flag on the Independence Day, but the dominant caste men of the village did not allow her to do it. Not only that, they also beat her up for polluting the sacred national flag.

There are other bizarre examples of male domination. In some election campaigns, the husband's name is displayed more prominently on the banner than the wife's, even though she is the candidate. In one case, when the wife won the election, her husband was paraded in the victory procession with garlands around his neck, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Because many women are illiterate and uneducated they lack knowledge about accounts, rules and procedures. This weakness is often

exploited by bureaucrats working within the panchayat raj system who maintain records and accounts. There have been several cases of mismanagement of panchayat funds where the Gramsevak (village clerk) found it easy to misappropriate panchayat money thanks to the illiteracy of the woman sarpanch.

When the constitutional amendment was passed, men could not prevent women from being elected. Yet in some cases, they have been able to sabotage effective implementation of the law, sometimes by force, sometimes by stubborn consensus regarding patriarchal domination, and sometimes by exploiting women's ignorance and lack of experience.

### **Impact of Women's Empowerment on Rural Society**

When reservations for women in local government were first mooted, there were many sceptics about the idea. They feared that women from politically powerful families would grab the reserved seats. However, these fears proved to be unfounded at least in India. The sheer quantum of reservation quota (33 per cent) worked against such monopolisation. Studies have found that about 40 per cent of elected women belong to families below the poverty line (CWDS 1999). The majority of elected women are also from 'non-political' families with no previous experience in politics. Women from established political families are also elected, but they are few and certainly not in the majority. Again, the sheer numbers and also the requirement of filling SC and ST seats mean that rich and politically dominant families are not able to grab all the positions.

Moser (1993) makes a meaningful distinction between practical needs and strategic interests of women. She points out that as long as women work for water, toilets, schools and such other needs men support them, but as soon as women demand equality and an end to gender discrimination and subordination, there is opposition from men. Men support women when they agitate for fodder or water but not when women demand local bans on the sale and consumption of liquor.

One thing is certain: Women's participation in the public sphere of panchayats has enhanced their status in their families, castes, and

villages. Shubhatai of village Vitner in Maharashtra looks more confident, and her husband has stopped battering her, thanks to her enhanced status in the family and community. Women say that, thanks to women's panchayat work, many men have given up drinking.

Even more significant is the improvement in the self-image of women and their increasing confidence and experience in public life. They no longer obey orders from males unquestioningly. This is true of women in neighbouring countries also.

The most important impact is the recognition of the value of education by women. New panchayat members experience many handicaps due to lack of education. This makes them keen to educate their daughters. There is no doubt that female literacy and education will improve in the near future, thanks in part to women's participation in local governance. The next generation of women panchayat leaders will be better educated and, therefore, better equipped to manage panchayat affairs.

### **Conclusion**

I now discuss briefly two issues raised earlier in this lecture. First, why do authoritarian regimes encourage and support democratic decentralisation at the local level? Our explanation is that even a dictator craves for legitimacy and requires popular support to sustain and stabilise his rule. Take the cases of Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Mushraf in Pakistan. They were seeking legitimacy for their undemocratic rule in the eyes of foreign powers and their own people. Through encouraging popular rule at the local level, they wanted to assure the people in Pakistan and outside that they cared for popular support and would gradually expand the democratic system from local to higher levels. By obtaining some support at the local level they were also trying to reduce the transaction costs in ruling the country in authoritarian manner. The same argument applied to the attempts made by President Ershad of Bangladesh soon after he came to power through a military coup in 1982. The Nepalese monarchy's support to democratic local governance also indicates the same logic; it was also seeking popular support through similar measures at the local level which would not cost much in political terms.

Do women rulers show greater sensitivity and interest in women's issues and support programmes of empowering women? Do they work for giving a greater share in power to women at the local level? The evidence does not give any positive indication. The glaring example is Sri Lanka. As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first woman Prime Minister in the world. She was elected with impressive majority more than once. But she never showed any interest in empowering women. Her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga has been the President of Sri Lanka for a long time with convincing popular support in national elections including the recent one. She has not taken any steps towards women's empowerment. The reason could be that once you are in power at the top, gender issues take a back seat. The ruler is concerned first with his or her own priorities to stay in power and to sustain it as long as possible. Empowering women does not appear to be an effective instrument for achieving their goal. In India, Mrs Indira Gandhi enjoyed absolute power for over a decade, but did not contemplate any programmes for empowering women.

Have women acquired power through local governance? If yes, then in what sense and to what extent? There is no doubt that women have been empowered following their participation in local governance. However, the degree of empowerment varies from region to region and situation to situation. If a woman conducts panchayat affairs on her own, participates fully in the decision making process, and gets things done for the community by interacting with outside agencies, she is almost fully empowered. At the other extreme, if a woman does not come out of her house or remove her veil and signs on the dotted line (or gives her thumb impression) as directed by her husband acting as *Pradhan Pati*, it is a case of zero empowerment. In between there are many cases of varying degrees of empowerment. If a woman leaves her home, goes out in the public sphere to a panchayat office, and sits on a chair near other men and women, she is also on the road to empowerment, even if she keeps quiet in the meetings. These are her first steps on the road to empowerment.

In matters of empowerment one has to take a long-term view. What will happen ten or twenty years hence? I am sure, thanks to this process of participation, women representatives of the future will be

much more assertive, confident and competent. South Asian women are now on the road to increasing empowerment. The initial hostility of men towards this process is on the decline. Now men have accepted the change and are trying to use women to their own advantage. When seats were first reserved for women, in most cases men persuaded women to contest elections to retain their political power and status within the family. However, as time goes by, women will acquire the skills, learn the rules of the game, and work according to their own agendas. Whenever this happens, women would have helped create better village communities based on harmony and cooperation achieved through gender balance and justice.

**Note**

*I am grateful to Prof. A.M. Shah for his comments on the earlier draft.*

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