

One of the three variables used in the formulation of the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) is the relative proportion of women in administrative and managerial positions (*Human Development Report*, 1995). Women need to be involved in decision-making in order to include their demands in the national agenda. It is generally believed that when they become part of this process, restructuring of institutions in which they can play a significant role will become possible, leading to potential solutions of problems of women's rights.

The Indian government passed the 73rd constitutional amendment, mandating reservation of one-third of the seats for women in all village, block and district level elected bodies. Reserved quota also applies for the post of chairpersons and deputy chairpersons in these institutions. Since the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) plays a vital role in ensuring people's participation in the development process, it is felt that political empowerment of women through reservation of seats in PRI will train them to exercise their power in decision-making and minimise, if not remove, social and economic discrimination against them.

How far these goals have been achieved in reality, needs to be examined on the basis of empirical findings. This paper examines the role of women in the Panchayati Raj Institution on the basis of data collected by interviewing female *panchayat* members of Bolpur-Sriniketan block in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal.

Profile of Women Members

Bolpur Sriniketan block consists of nine *panchayats*. In 1997, when this survey was conducted, there were 65 elected women *panchayat*

REPORT

Against Heavy Odds Women in W. Begal Panchayata

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members. They were the first group of elected representatives in the reserved quota in the 1993 polls. These members held their posts for five years, from 1993 to 1998. Of the 65 women, 64 were covered by our survey. One member could not be contacted because of her absence from the village.

Caste/Tribe/Religion: Of the 64 women members, 40 were Hindu, 14 belonged to Scheduled Tribes (ST) and ten were Muslim. Among the Hindu members, 16 were from the General Caste (GC) group and 24 from the Scheduled Caste (SC) group.

Age Composition: The number of women in the age group of 20-40 years was 59. Of these, 26 were in the 20-30 age group, and 33 were 30-40 years old. The other five women were above 40 years of age.

This shows that women over 40 years were not very interested in contesting for the *panchayat* seats.

Land Size: A majority (55) of the women members were either landless or belonged to households with land holdings of marginal size (less than 2.5 acres). Eight women were from households with small farms (more than 2.5 acres but less than five acres) and only one belonged to a household with over five acres of cultivable land.

Educational Status: Of the 64 members, 24 were just literate and two could only sign their names. These two learnt to sign just before the *panchayat* election; they had no knowledge of the alphabet. Twelve had completed primary education (up to class V) and 12 others had different stages between class VI and class X. Nine women



Women *panchayat* members from a Maharashtra village

had passed the School Final (SF) examination and seven continued their education beyond the SF level. Of these seven, two discontinued their education before passing the Higher Secondary examination, three obtained BA and two, MA degrees.

Political Affiliation: A majority of the women members (49) were affiliated to the CPM party, four to the Indian National Congress (ING), three to CPI, three to RSP and one to the BJP. Four contested as independent members.

Performance of Women

The performance of the women *panchayat* members has been studied as per attendance in *panchayat* meetings, participation in developmental activities, and level of awareness about their political responsibilities.

Panchayat meetings are generally held once a month, from 1p.m. to 4 p.m. During the period of this survey, each member received Rs.20 for attending this meeting. It was found (Table 1) that 14 (21.87 per cent) members attended less than 25 per cent of the meetings, 10 (15.63 per cent) members attended 25-50 per cent of the meetings, 8 (12.50 per cent) members attended over 75 per cent of the meetings. Thus, 24 (37.5 per cent) members

Table 1. : Distribution of women members according to percentages of meetings attended and their caste / tribe / religion.

Meetings Attended	0%-25%	25%-50%	50%-75%	75%-100%	Total
Caste/Tribe/ Religion					
GC	2 (12.50)	2 (12.50)	1 (6.25)	11 (68.75)	16 (100.00)
SC	5 (20.83)	1 (4.17)	5 (20.83)	13 (54.17)	24 (100.00)
ST	3 (21.43)	6 (42.86)	2 (14.28)	3 (21.43)	14 (100.00)
M	4 (40.00)	1 (10.00)	—	5 (50.00)	10 (100.00)
Total	14 (21.87)	10 (15.63)	8 (12.50)	32 (50.00)	64 (100.00)

(Figures within brackets denote row percentages)

attended less than 50 per cent of the meetings and 40 (62.5 per cent) members attended over 50 per cent of the meetings held during one year preceding the date of survey.

From Table 1 it is quite clear that 25 per cent of the GC members, 25 per cent of the SC members, 64.29 per cent of the ST members and 50 per cent of the Muslim members attended less than 50 per cent of the meetings.

The above analysis determines that the level of attendance was comparatively low among tribal members. However, for the first group of elected women members, attendance was not too low. One

woman from the GC group and another from the SC group attended all the meetings.

Since education plays a vital role in awareness building, an attempt has been made to examine the effect of the educational status of the members on the percentages of meetings attended.

Although Table 2 does not show a very clear association between education and the level of attendance in the *panchayat* meetings, it is obvious that of the women who had higher levels of education (those with SF and higher degrees), percentages of members attending over 50 per cent of the meetings are much higher than those with lower levels of education.

The main reasons for irregularity were:

i) **Shortage of time** : Household chores and rearing of children took up so much time that it was not possible for most women to attend meetings regularly. This was true even for some educated and employed women from tribal and Muslim communities.

ii) **Loss of a day's wage**: Since a large number of women members worked as agricultural labourers or

Table 2. : Distribution of women members according to their levels of education and percentages of meetings attended.

Meetings attended Level of education	50% or less	More than 50%	Total
Just literate	10 (41.67)	14 (58.33)	24 (100)
Up to Class V	6 (50.00)	6 (50.00)	12 (100)
Class VI to class X	5 (41.67)	7 (58.33)	12 (100)
Passed SF	1 (11.11)	8 (88.89)	9 (100)
Above SF	2 (28.57)	5 (71.43)	7 (100)
Total	24	40	64

(Figures within brackets denote row percentages.)

daily wage labourers, they had to sacrifice a day's wage (which was much higher than Rs.20) for attending *panchayat* meetings. Moreover, in most cases, husbands or adult sons had to escort them to *panchayat* offices, thereby incurring an additional loss of earning on those days. Some tribal women reported that since they were able to find employment for a major part of the year, either in agriculture or in the non-farm sector, attending *panchayat* meetings meant economic loss for them.

iii) Poor transport facilities:

Some villages are not well connected with *panchayat* offices via bus routes. Women members from these villages had to walk long distances to reach either the nearest bus stop or *panchayat* office. Of 64 women members, 21 had to walk or cycle more than three kilometers to reach *panchayat* offices.

iv) Superstition : Two tribal women reported that they considered involvement of women in political activities as ominous. They believed that they had lost their husbands only because of this participation. After their husbands' deaths, they stopped attending *panchayat* meetings. One SC woman could not attend any meeting because her husband's elder brother was also a *panchayat* member and, according to their community's custom, it was not possible for her to sit and speak in the meeting in presence of her elder brother-in-law.

Level of work done: Generally, *womenpanchayatmembers* perform the following developmental activities development of village roads; installation of tube wells; identifying IRDP beneficiaries and signing loan forms; running training centres under the programme of Development of Women

Table 3. : Distribution of women *panchayat* members according to their educational status and level of participation in developmental activities.

Education Activities	Just literate	Up to Class V	Class V to Class X	SF	Above SF	Total
1	2(40.00)	3(60.00)	—	—	—	5(100.00)
2	9(37.50)	4(16.67)	6(12.50)	3(25.00)	2(8.33)	24(100.0)
3	9(64.28)	1(7.14)	2(14.29)	1(7.14)	1(7.14)	14(99.99)
4	4(19.05)	4(19.05)	4(19.05)	5(23.80)	4(19.05)	21(100.0)
Total	24	12	12	9	7	64

(Figures within brackets denote row percentages).

1. Did nothing; 2. Something was done by husbands, relatives and party members; 3. Did something on their own; 4. Did a lot and wanted to do more.

and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA); monitoring the activities of *anganwadi* centres; settling family disputes; counselling married couples about small family norms and formation of the women's organisation in the village.

Table 3 shows that five (7.81 per cent) women did none of these activities. In the case of 24 (37.5 per cent) women, some work was done by their husbands, relatives and party members; 14 (21.87 per cent) women members did some work on their own, and 21 (32.81 per cent) did a lot and were willing to do more.

Education and Awareness

Table 3 does not show any clear correlation between the level of work done and the educational status of the women members. However, in group 1 (women who did nothing), members are either just literate or educated only up to the primary level. In group 3 (women who did something on their own), the percentage of just literate women is the maximum and in group 4 (women who did a lot and liked to do more), percentages of women in different educational categories do not show much difference. Thus the level of education does not seem to have much impact on the level of

participation in developmental activities.

The main reasons for non-participation/low level of participation of women members in developmental activities are:

➤ **Shortage of time :** A majority of women members were so heavily burdened with household chores that they did not find sufficient time.

➤ **Inadequate cooperation from villagers :** In a few cases, women could not do much developmental work due to lack of cooperation from villagers.

➤ **Lack of interest :** In many cases, the women were either requested or forced by family or party leaders to contest *panchayat* seats. They themselves were not interested and had no idea what the position would entail. This is still quite common.

➤ **Political violence:** Clashes between different political parties scared some members, who stopped doing developmental work in their villages.

➤ **Political affiliation :** In two cases, members felt that they did not get adequate help from *panchayat* officials and local leaders because of their affiliation to opposition parties.

Table 4. : Distribution of women *panchayat* members according to their level of political awareness and caste/tribe/religion groups.

Level of awareness Caste/tribe/religion	Unaware	Aware	Total
GC	2 (12.50)	14 (87.50)	16 (100.00)
SC	11 (45.83)	13 (54.17)	24 (100.00)
ST	10 (71.43)	4 (28.57)	14 (100.00)
M	2 (20.00)	8 (80.00)	10 (100.00)
Total	25 (39.06)	39 (60.94)	64 (100.00)

(Figures within brackets denote row percentages)

➤ **Lack of awareness :** Many of the women were not completely aware of their rights and duties as *panchayat* members. They did not know about or did not have the training or education to perform these activities. Some SC and ST women reported that they could not do much developmental work due to poor knowledge of government programmes, lack of training and low level of education. According to them, political awareness was very important for proper functioning of women *panchayat* members. The relationship between the level of awareness and the level of work done has been discussed subsequently.

Level of awareness: The level of awareness of women members has been graded:

a) Unaware: women members without any knowledge about their duties and development programmes;

b) Aware: women members with knowledge about their political duties and/or development programmes.

More Aware, More Active

The percentage of women who were aware of their political duties and/or development programmes in the area, was highest in the GC

group and lowest in the ST group. In this regard, Muslim members occupied second position and SC members, third.

Table 5 shows that of the women who did a lot and liked to do more (group 4), the percentage of fully aware members was as high as 95.24; of those who did nothing (group 1), the percentage of aware members was as low as 20 per cent. This implies that a member can perform better if she is aware of her political responsibilities and of the development programmes in operation in the area. Hence, awareness building through training camps is very important for proper functioning of women *panchayat* members.

Concluding Observations

Although 35 of the 64 women did some developmental work in their villages, many disliked the job. Only 43.75 per cent liked what they had to do. Unwillingness to perform developmental activities was most prominent among tribal members. One reason behind this lack of interest in *panchayat* activities, as reported by a few SC and ST members, was lack of adequate education and training to understand the objectives, scope and method of implementation of development programmes.

According to some women, lack of knowledge of English and poor knowledge of Bengali were also factors that hindered their activities. Superstition, lack of time and poor transport were other important factors responsible for the poor performance of women members.

Reservation for women in different political bodies aims at giving them empowerment not only in the political decision making process, but also in the domestic sphere. The present survey, however, reveals that within households the situation has not changed. A majority of women members did not have the freedom to respond to interviewers. Most questions were answered by male members of the households and, in a few cases, by the interviewers.

A vast majority of women members were not willing to contest the *panchayat* seats. They had to do so under pressure from their husbands, relatives or party members. They did not have any prior knowledge of their political responsibilities. Many confessed that in the beginning their husbands attended the meetings on their behalf—that practice was later discontinued. In order to reap the benefits of reservation, participation of women in *panchayats* must be spontaneous. If the wives, daughters, sisters and other female relatives of *panchayat* members and party leaders are inducted into the Panchayati Raj system, the purpose of reservation is lost. There should be a constant search for leadership among women, from tribal or other sectors, who must be identified and trained to fulfil political responsibilities. This requires identification of their problems, customs and traditions,

and designing the training programmes accordingly.

An important factor is cooperation from the men of the households involved. Ideally, they should not try to retain political control by making their wives, daughters or sisters *panchayat* members, but should share household chores so that the women have the time to pursue their political activities. Attempts must be made to inculcate a sense of confidence among these women-which can only be done with the support of the family.

Reservation is not an end, but only a means, to enable women to be empowered as independent individuals. The present survey shows that, as the first group of elected members in the reserved seats, the performance of these women is not too bad. They are gradually becoming aware of their responsibilities, as well as of development programmes. But a lot remains to be done. It is expected that in future, education, training and cooperation from family will help rural women to emerge as successful political leaders.



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Upper Caste Panderings...

(On coming across Dalit Literature for the first time)

He cursed the mother-fucking God,
I couldn't blame him.
Not because he cursed Him,
but that he used 'motherfucker'
Somehow, the blood didn't boil in this case.
How can I blame you for anything
when all that I did
from my private little oppressed space
Second from the bottom
Second to first sex
Was watch your brother stand outside my door
Asking for water
Nose wrinkled, separate jug,
my mother pushed it in the driver's hand
(a Rajput, incidentally)
To give it to him.
"Keep the jug outside", firm orders.*

*Squeals of gutter pigs, loud, loathsome, piercing,
make me look from the window
"Why are they taking the poor animal away? "
"To eat it, disgusting, filthy people."
Shook my head in disapproval
Shed some tears for the wailing pig
Gutter ridden, helpless
Am talking about the pig, dammit!!*

*Sat at my dining table laden with food
Dad lovingly called his friend 'chamaar'
Teasing him on the telephone
My fascination for guttural made me pick it up
I used it lovingly, the way my Dad did,
Not intentionally though, of course.
Lovely ring to it, though.*

*Filling up forms
Tick boxes, general category
Forget, go on,
Don't ever think, don't need to
Cursed those lowly reserved for taking up
Your chance
Unmerited, undeserving, uncouth lot,
No wonder the corruption
The inefficiency in the system.*

*God won't help me get rid of my guilt
I don't believe in Him (never did)
Agnostic, I proclaim(ed)
Could you forgive me, at least?
I plead guilty, on all accounts.*

* Namdeo Dhasad in "I Cursed the Mother Fucking God"

Nupur Jain