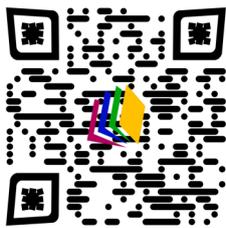


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## **Gender Inclusive Governance at the Grassroots in India: Inclusion through Exclusion**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Inclusive governance rests on the involvement of different strata of society in the political and administrative processes. It not only ensures institutional efficiency and democratic spirit but also empower the underprivileged sections and enlist their contribution to the overall development of a society. Increasing numerical representation through reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions was intended to pave way for inclusive governance and empower women at the grassroots. However, mere entry in local bodies is not suffice for inclusive governance and effective exercise of power by women as the disadvantaged across all social categories. Considering that inclusive governance is intended to give women a voice, access to decision making and capability for social transformation, inclusive governance could be ensured by excluding overbearing patriarchal presence and voice in existing political structures. The concept of All Women Panchayats is an off shoot of this line of thinking. Women long denied public spaces and public presence also are discomforted in the presence of males in local bodies. Left to themselves to discuss, debate and take decisions, women have been able to display leadership capabilities and also affecting change in their communities. Has this experiment really been able to bridge gender divide in the countryside and ensure inclusive governance is what this paper attempts to explore.

**KEY WORDS:** Exclusion, Inclusion, Gender, Empowerment, Representation, Reservation, Panchayat, Participation, Social Change, Women.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The crux of discourse on inclusive growth and inclusive society is inclusive governance (IG). By involving people belonging to different social orders in the political and administrative processes, IG seeks to mainstream them to facilitate their contribution to the composite life of a society. This not only ensures institutional efficiency and democratic spirit but also fosters equity and empowerment of the underprivileged sections. The highlight of IG is political participation and

empowerment of women being the disadvantaged across all social categories. Thus, based on gender equality in public life, IG becomes akin to good governance. Gender IG ensured through reservation of seats for women is a distinguishing feature of South Asian decentralized governance structures. It is centered on the conviction that elected women representatives (EWR) will **tend to be more responsive to their constituencies in general and women in particular. It has ensured participation of more than 15000** women in Bangladesh, over 35000 in Nepal, about one lakh in Pakistan, and over 10 lakh women in India in local bodies.

Does entry of women in governance structures alone indicate IG? Is it necessary that women and men both enter political bodies? Or is it more important that the hitherto disadvantaged are brought to the center stage to enable their effective exercise of power to wring in societal change? IG can be ascertained by including both women and men in governance but in this arrangement those who already have a voice dominate and thus the process of change is slow. Considering that the core of IG is a system that enhances odds of women's access to political power and capability for social transformation, inclusion can be brought about by exclusion of those who have a predominant presence or louder voice in existing political structures. All women Police Force, All Women Banks and All Women panchayats are offshoots of this line of thinking.

This paper is a modest attempt to understand if inclusion is possible through exclusion. It attempts to examine how far over three decades of (Panchayat Raj) PR since the 73rd amendment enabled women to effectively partake in rural governance, development, and social change, build

their social and human capital and steer attitudinal changes among women and men. It intends to explore signs towards IG and challenges to socio-economic transformation of women in the rural areas. It is divided into five sections.

1. Section I provides an introduction to political participation of women in India.

Section I.1 deals with exclusivity in terms of creation of AWP.

2. Section II delves into efficacy of political empowerment of women.

Section II.1 affirms socio-economic change as indicative of women becoming forerunners of change.

Section II.2 underlines attitudinal changes brought among women elected representatives (EWR) as a result of their inclusion in political processes.

3. Section III indicates reverse flow of educated women back to the roots to take up leadership positions.

4. Section IV points to challenges for inclusive governance.

5. Finally, conclusion is presented in Section V.

## I. Introduction

In India since independence, women in general were excluded from local government, whether elected or traditional caste panchayats. At best, states allowed cooption of two women members if they could not find a berth in panchayats through election, which of course they did not, except in a few states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Maharashtra. Earlier attempts of inclusion in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) had failed owing to prevailing social milieu in which power to local bodies translated into entrenchment of rural elite, caste or land based in local government. Hence, reservation for women and others living peripheral

lives was considered significant in the direction of gender and social justice. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment (1992) to the Constitution of India mandating 33 per cent reservation<sup>1</sup> for women in three-tier PRI, intended to make local governance gender inclusive. It also sought to bring women into leadership positions by reserving one-third of the chairpersons' seats at every tier for them. As a lot was left for the states to fashion and implement PR by devolving funds, functions and functionaries, the experience of gender IG and female empowerment through PR across different states of India remains quite varied.

### **I.1 All Women Panchayats (AWP)**

AWP where men are excluded and only women are elected and participate are sometimes crucial to enlist female participation in governance. Women who have been socially attuned to keep aloof from men in their daily lives find it a handicap in interacting with men in their public life. Male environment, the style and modes of working within political institutions that are acceptable to men actually limit the extent to which women can raise their concerns and issues of social justice.<sup>2</sup> Many women find that their working alongside men is socially unacceptable to their communities. At times, women face resentment or outright hostility of men who find their power slipping away with women making it to decision making bodies. So both for women in charge and women in general, it is discomfoting to be in public domain along with men. They feel easier to articulate their concerns to women. The presence of women in position of authority has a wider ideological impact and women especially but not only in purdah practicing communities are more likely to take their grievances to women representatives rather than to all male bodies.<sup>3</sup> AWP in some states have thus abetted sprouting of women's common identity and

leadership, where they are not proxy representatives but actually affecting change in their communities.

AWPs had sprung up on their own volition in some states based on caste and class hierarchies. Sometimes women just congregated to pool their resources, recognized their potential of dealing with problems independently while the government kept on looking at their issues in isolation and doling out welfare subsidies without accommodating their concerns in local budgeting. In 1976, the Committee on Status of Empowerment of Women also recommended setting up AWP at village level to manage welfare and development programs for women and children. In 1985, women of village Indoli, district Satara, Maharashtra put up an all women penal for local elections but was defeated due to male resistance. Subsequently, nine AWP came up in Maharashtra with the efforts of the women wing of the Shetkari Sangthan of Sharad Joshi. Later AWP started functioning in Madhy Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh (AP), West Bengal (WB), Tripura and Gujarat. These AWP successfully enlisted female participation for setting up informal schools and women's bank that provided credit to women and men for small businesses, controlling alcoholism, demonstrating outside the houses of abusive men and, other important activities.

With reservation of seats for women, most informal AWP have given way to regular panchayats. In some states however, there are elected AWP. In Gujarat, under Samras scheme, the state government offers monetary incentive to those villages where the candidates for panchayats are elected unopposed with the objective of curtailing election expenses and bolster mutual cooperation. Villages that elect only women members for panchayats receive a prize of Rs.3 lakhs, if their population is less than

5000 and Rs.5 lakhs for population above 5000. There were 254 elected AWP in villages in Gujarat in 2012. Village Siswa in district Anand, taking advantage of Samras, has an AWP consisting of 11 young educated women who are the pallbearers of change in rural landscape. They have successfully undertaken projects relating to sanitation, rural roads and provision of computers in schools.<sup>4</sup>

The AWP elected in 2005 in village Neemkheda in district Mewat, Haryana,<sup>5</sup> is a testimony to the power of this exclusively women body. In this village, having to look after an average family size of about 10, women were excluded from public life. As the tradition bound community (79 percent Muslims) and male led panchayat system was averse to female education, girls did not attend school. With poor basic infrastructure in the village, women were walking distances to collect water and fuel-wood. The government grants were frittered away in unproductive activities by male dominated panchayats. In 2005, because of the system of rotation, the seat of chairperson of Neemkheda panchayat happened to be reserved for women. Ashubi Khan, whose husband was a former sarpanch, was selected by her influential family to contest, to keep political power ensconced in the family. She was very apprehensive but agreed to take on the responsibility provided all elected members were women, otherwise she would not be comfortable in her new incarnation. When women did agree to contest panchayat elections, they became laughingstock of men in the community. Overwhelming opinion wanted to see women indoors and considered it demeaning for women to go out and work. The women, excited at the prospect of elections also were clear that if women bring dishonor by going public, why should they go

out even to procure water and fuel, instead men should protect their honor and do this job.<sup>6</sup> Taking umbrage at women entering male bastion by agreeing to participate politically, most of the male villagers decided to boycott panchayat elections. However, under Ashubi's family's persuasion, men relented. Finally, ten illiterate EWR with no previous experience of administration formed an elected AWP. Neither village men nor male officials, tehsildar, patwari, local health workers and others extended any cooperation to this AWP. Frustrated due to recalcitrant attitude of men and disdain of local administration, these women decided to resign en masse.<sup>7</sup> Central government intervention resolved the matter, and they took their resignation back.

Now this AWP was determined to function. Its most important contribution was to install twenty pumps and get the water scarce village connected to a canal<sup>8</sup> solving their irrigation problem. Fifty houses for the poor were built. AWP raised nearly Rs.60000 for panchayat from the use of 25 acres of common land. A school for girls was started as parents would not send their daughters to coeducational schools and upgraded a primary school to a high school. The village has since seen spiraling enrolment of children especially of girls.<sup>9</sup> It has set up a Village Education Committee to ensure attendance and performance of teachers. The EWR displayed their leadership and order maintaining capability by devising innovative ways of justice and reform. Village women mostly complained of gambling and drinking habits of their men who used to sell their jewelry and other household articles and beat women. EWR discussed the issue in the panchayat and decided to stop 'hukka-pani' of such men. It meant that neither the family nor anybody in the village will offer them food, water (and tobacco) till they conceded. EWR

succeeded and generated awareness on negative impact of gambling and drinking on family lives. These women also rounded up young boys who would skip school and secretly indulged in gambling. Women persuaded and coaxed them to mend their ways. The bureaucratic tantrums still bothered them, pipelines for drinking water were laid but water did not start flowing through them for long. The village lauded the achievements of these emboldened women. Neemkheda experience is a pointer to indicators of IG that can also be appreciated, as manifest in the working of PR in general.

### **Effective Political Participation**

PR since the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment has enabled the marginalized groups including women, a share in political processes. It resulted in integration of about 34 lakh elected representatives of which over 10 lakhs are women in 2.52 lakh PRI. The average number of women in panchayats across the county is about 37%<sup>10</sup> indicating that numerous of them have also been elected through open category seats. In several instances after constituencies ceased to be reserved due to rotational principle, introduction of women to politics enabled them to re-contest and get elected to leadership positions. This improved the male perception of ability of female leaders, and political parties were also convinced of winnability of women.<sup>11</sup>

Representation through reservation by itself cannot lead to IG unless participation is effective. In the initial stages of PR, female participation had been in name only as frequently they entered political bodies to proxy for more powerful male members of their families. Illiteracy and integration in the collective life of their community prevented them from effective participation and they mostly signed on the dotted lines. This necessitated political

socialization of women before elections and during the campaigns to nurture aspirants for contesting both reserved and non-reserved seats. This would help assimilate gender perspective on issues and policies to be adopted. 'Strengthening Women's Empowerment through Electoral Processes' organized under the aegis of UN Women in various states is such a pre-election campaign. Its success can be gauged from the fact that in 2011 Bihar panchayat elections, pre-election support resulted in 90% of the existing EWR re-contesting and half of them actually winning.<sup>12</sup> In several cases women are not keen to re-contest elections due to rural dynamics, while in many others they are forbidden because of rotation principle. Hence after a struggle of a couple of years they turn back to their hearth disheartened, while others fight back with a vengeance and some become a source of inspiration.

The grassroots leadership in the backdrop of their internalized reticence, illiteracy, ignorance, and their familial responsibilities is a big challenge for women. Therefore, post-election support to bolster their skill, knowledge, awareness and confidence to participate in discussions and activities through systematic training and orientation is important. With caste configurations in the villages, women are not able to reinforce their social category as women and find it difficult to align with women of a different social category/caste. Thus, gender IG also requires assault on social stratification and community recognition of women's capabilities in community management of resources. Their involvement in social and developmental networks, whether formal like government supported self-help groups or NGO-directed or informal like membership of women groups, would boost their collective bargaining. Effective participation is then manifest in the strength and assertiveness of

emerging women leaders, in the way they handle power, manage institutions, and resolve women-centric issues. In case of Neemkheda AWP, support in the form of government reassurance for their uninterrupted functioning enabled it to carry on its responsibility without resistance from the patriarchal structures. Moreover, women considered contesting panchayat elections convinced of a congenial atmosphere in the panchayat and their potential contribution. The effectiveness of their participation was evident in the way they raised and resolved issues of the village and carried on development work.

## II.1 Socio-economic Empowerment

Empowerment generated by effective participation is a pointer to IG as it encourages further participation. It would imply, first, an access to human and physical endowments reflected through education, health care, income, access to private and public resources etc. Second, it reflects in garnering of self-respect and enhanced social status, the ability to make choices and make a difference in individual and collective life of the community. Thus, there seems to be a correlation between political and socio-economic empowerment. So, has political empowerment through IG paved the way to bridge gender divide that exists in socio economic development in rural areas? India lags behind many countries in economic indicators in general.<sup>13</sup> However, with economic growth, and several Central and State governments and NGO initiatives, there are marked improvements in the status of women, both urban and rural, in terms of their education, employment and other pointers. However, it is difficult to segregate data from the general trend to say how much change is due to female participation through PR and one will have to look at the way EWR are actually affecting change to see if IG has led to inclusive growth.

Micro level studies and individual cases indicate EWR **changing discourse of governance from being beneficiaries to harbingers of change**. For long, rural women were not engendered in the development process and treated merely as beneficiaries of government largesse through various schemes. In the patriarchal social structure, men wield power on behalf of women because they feel that the latter are handicapped by illiteracy and may be implicated if anything goes wrong as she does not know the intricacies of book keeping or law making.<sup>14</sup> But now their involvement with decision making processes, planning and implementation of economic development and social justice schemes is turning them into forerunners of change. In district Churu, Rajasthan, EWR have ushered in change in remote rural areas and displayed ability to uplift the village by providing basic necessities through a master plan of the village. This composite master plan targeted infrastructure and education under which roads and school buildings were constructed and bridge course for the drop outs was chalked out.<sup>15</sup> Thus they were able to broaden the focus of development to include women-centric issues. EWR who are articulate about their development priorities are more visible. Failures comprise not more than 5% of the cases but these are reported more than the success stories.<sup>16</sup> Neemkheda Panchayat's attempt at getting the village connected to a canal and bring water close to home improved living of the entire village community. They got access to common property resource and were able to use the funds generated for welfare of the village.

Realizing that illiteracy handicaps them, the EWR are determined that their suffering is not passed on to the next generation<sup>17</sup> and therefore ensure that girls attend school. Through their proactive

approach they bring a difference in the lives of girls in villages. Many villages in Uttarakhand lack access roads and schools in the vicinity and little girls and boys have to walk an hour downhill and two hours uphill to reach school and back home. For higher studies they have to go to cities. Its inhibiting for girls who drop out of school after a few years of schooling. Lack of toilet facilities in schools debar many girls from schooling in their growing up years. Where there is absenteeism among teachers, parents prevent their children to attend schools unsupervised by a teacher. Nandi Bhandari, chairperson of Galai Gram Panchayat, district Bageshwar has introduced non-formal education for girls and women, she opened her own house to be used as a school without any charges, and many of these school educated girls started pursuing higher studies with assistance from EWR.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in Neemkheda earlier women were domesticated and subjected to abuse, they are now able to voice their grievances and get redressal from the Panchayat. While earlier the village had no faith in educating its girls, the AWP built schools for girls who enrolled in increasing numbers thus improving literacy ratio in the area.

One fourth of EWR are illiterate and panchayats have little autonomy for planning and low resource base so how do EWR ensure that gender specific needs and concerns get reflected in development concerns. For this one will have to look at the cogent role that women are playing in the Gram Sabha (GS), i.e., the general assembly of all adult members of the village or group of villages.<sup>19</sup> Earlier, influential few did not allow meaningful role to be played by this institution. Now women are organizing, attending and participating in deliberations of GS and impressing others to question and interact. Though EWR have not been able to mobilize many women to attend GS in

compelling numbers that could become an expression of emerging women power, yet about a quarter of women do participate in GS meetings and many more in areas with higher literacy. In district Solan, HP, an innovative way of fostering female participation in the process of development was to organize **women GS** prior to regular GS.<sup>20</sup> In these women GS they discuss problems, and formulate their agenda which is later passed on to the regular GS to be integrated in village plans. It results in a more gendered analysis of issues at local administration albeit slowly and sporadically. Emerging women leaders thus motivate other women for political participation, and this is what the chairperson of Neemkheda panchayat was also able to do. This panchayat could sensitize policy agenda to women's concerns such as opposition to domestic violence and alcohol abuse, availability of water sources and female education closer home, and effective functioning of schools and midday meal program.

In participatory rural appraisals, the brunt of carrying and collecting water and sanitation needs is what women face the most. Water resources are continuously depleting due to environmental degradation and women now walk greater distances to fetch water. They go through the ordeal due to lack of private or public sanitation facilities. These specific gender needs were perceived and addressed through panchayats with the involvement of international donors who also helped them plan and implement. This is suggestive of the close relationship between strengthening local bodies, gender equity and women empowerment.<sup>21</sup> In an agreement with TN government, the Danish International Development Agency funded a water facility and sanitation scheme in Cuddalore district on the precondition of involvement of the village panchayat and women in participatory learning and action exercises. Women were an integral part of

planning for overhead tanks, public taps, hand pumps, and toilets etc. The beneficiaries contributed towards funding half of the total cost and the funds were released to women in village panchayat meetings. The panchayat selected women to be trained as masons and mechanics for construction of toilets and repairs of taps and hand pumps. Later these women mechanics were readily available for repair work, earned additional income and, village women also were more comfortable with them. User groups of five to ten members were created at all public water points and minimum usage charges were collected. Women also kept accounts and deposited the money thus collected in the bank and undertook minor repairs. Major expenses were borne by the panchayat. Thus, integration of panchayats and women in learning, planning, and implementation and maintenance exercise of development of village infrastructure made such schemes sustainable. Quite revealing is the story of Kamalamma, who was impoverished being deserted by husband. By becoming a part of this project, she ensured economic security for herself and her family.<sup>22</sup> Similar narratives of women who earlier could not enter structures of power due to social, economic and cultural constraints are now evident in many states. In Baruan GP, Dhenkanal district, Odisha, Nayna Patra with support from other women helped in setting up a school for girls in the village and conducted anti-liquor campaigns in which panchayat fined men for drunken and violent behavior. The fund thus collected was utilized by them for constructing public toilets.<sup>23</sup>

Gender mainstreaming efforts by panchayats also point to the inclusive approach adopted by some panchayats in some states. Patriarchal kinship structures succinctly captured through the concept of missing women<sup>24</sup> have defined role of women at

home and society at large. Yet many panchayats have tried to motivate and instill confidence among women by introducing female friendly moves into panchayat activities. In district Khandwa, MP, GPs celebrate birth of the girl child in any family and honor the mother.<sup>25</sup> This is a big stimulus towards giving life and dignity to girls and women. Marrarikkulam South GP, Kerala, has set up a girls' army to equip girls to prevent physical harm to them. Martial arts training is imparted to high school girls for them to resist threats and attacks. It is proposed to gradually include even younger girls in this program of confidence building.<sup>26</sup>

## II.2 Enhanced Social Status and Attitudinal Changes

Inclusiveness can also be measured by changes in self-perception of women and how others view their role. Participation in political structures has contributed to women's elevated self-respect and admiration in their families and village communities. 77% women and 83% men felt improved self-esteem, 65% women and 74% men felt improved worth in the household and 79% women and 88% men sensed enhanced level of respect in the village community due to their entry in panchayats.<sup>27</sup> A study of two village panchayats in Odisha found that women's entry into governance has not led to any dramatic changes yet women have gained in terms of their increased mobility and self-confidence.<sup>28</sup> In a survey of participation of women in Haryana, 56% women respondents did not know that reservation in political bodies exists for them yet 97% of them believed that participation in panchayat elections would elevate their social status.<sup>29</sup> In Karnataka, engineering elections through gender quotas has made women more visible and increased their self-sufficiency and decreased corruption levels in PR.<sup>30</sup> Dalit women feel proud with respect coming from upper caste men. Support comes from the families that had not shared power in traditional rural social

structures and now see elected women bringing prestige to the family.<sup>31</sup>

A study of AWP's of three villages in Maharashtra proved that women's attitude towards themselves and their daughters changed after their participation in panchayat activities. Their respect in their families enhanced and incidents of domestic violence declined. Women continued to perform their dual role of caregiver at home and a wage worker outside but their burden lightened as a result of their greater access to fuel, fodder, and water due to their own efforts.<sup>32</sup> Likewise in Neemkheda, women's mobility and access to resources and recognition increased and they could generate attitudinal changes among men and the community by performing concrete work leading to wellbeing of all stakeholders. The experience of election and power through reservation has given village women confidence to contest against men from general category later and convey demands of their village to the officials. About 86% were new to political power in 2008, while 14% managed to win a second or third time. Entry of women in governance was a symbolic recognition of women's political role and women in general found a new access to their elected representatives.<sup>33</sup>

### **III. Reverse Flow**

It is not easy for women to challenge existing family and societal structures that restrict her entry into local politics due to entrenched family, cultural and religious values. Abusive political environment deters women from occupying public spaces and publically raising issues. Studies indicate that purity of women is a big deal in the cultural milieu of the subcontinent which prevents women in the age group 13-45 years from entering public life. These reproductive years are also crucial part of women's lives and a major determinant of their inability to

play an active political role.<sup>34</sup> However, increasing grassroots assertion of women has a positive impact on the reverse flow of new generation of urbanized, young and educated women to the villages. They are reverting to their roots after pursuing higher education and taking keen interest in panchayat activities which is reflective of changing social dynamics in rural India. Their knowledge and awareness levels enable them to talk upfront to those in charge and the latter also take them seriously. They have also helped the rural women and men learn computer and internet skills. They have also engaged in online global fund raising for village uplift. Chhavi Rajawat, was the first woman sarpanch with an MBA degree in village Soda, district Tonk, Rajasthan.<sup>35</sup> In 2010, She was overwhelmingly elected without regard to caste, class, religion and gender. She left the corporate world determined to alter rural social landscape. Her priorities included provision of drinking water, improved health services, education, rural electrification and proper roads in the village. In village Thana, district Dehradun, UK, Archana Rawat, a post graduate sarpanch succeeded (2011),<sup>36</sup> in transforming the lives of large number of villagers who were earlier unable to procure state assistance because of their ignorance and inability with paper work. At times these educated women also feel circumvented by corruption and bureaucracy that does not respond to the needs of the EWR. However, this impediment is not specific to women; panchayats typically suffer from lack of cooperation of officials. In 2005, Shama Khan, a Law Graduate, was elected a member of Chohtan Panchayat Samiti in district Barmer, Rajasthan.<sup>37</sup> She became its unopposed chief in 2010. This water scarce area of minority Sindhi Muslims and mostly scheduled castes did not send girls to school. Women were domesticated and walking over 10 kilometers, for fetching water. Shama Khan with her commitment and leadership ability actually raised issues and

addressed Zila Parishad meetings rather than handing over written notes. In her random visits to the villages, she met families, encouraging them and their girls to attend school, resulting in improvement in school-enrolment of girls. Under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) she coaxed the unemployed for construction works for underground water tanks and opened wells for rainwater harvesting as a solution to water scarcity in the village. Thus, availability of irrigation facility has helped a large number of poor farmers to cultivate and be financially secure. She also earned huge support of male members of her community. She was among 500 panchayat members selected by the government to visit cities in China to learn best practices of local government. Later she was also awarded 'Panchayat Sashaktikaran Puraskar' and Chohtan panchayat was adjudged the best performer under Panchayat Empowerment and Accountability Incentive Scheme.

#### IV. Challenges to IG

Signs of IG are dotted both with assertion and subservience; some women have to negotiate their gender to claim their rightful place in political structures, others have created a niche for themselves in political arena. While the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment facilitated political inclusion of women in governance, many challenges remain. Paucity of time due to household upkeep and care, and male reluctance to let women occupy public spaces, preclude women from devoting more time to panchayat activities. They are also infused with the guilt of neglecting their family and children. In a study of AP, 80% of respondents felt that they face difficulty as women leaders and therefore irregular in attending to panchayat activities. They also face shortage of funds midway and not even aware of funds for rural development.<sup>38</sup> Those who do

participate in decision making, are not assertive and only endorse the decisions taken by the male members of the panchayat. Male interference in local administration continue to bring home to women that they are in political positions owing to beneficence of men who first allowed them to participate and then used their influence to make them win. As leaders, women are expected to be available all the time, yet the social system inhibits them from venturing out at ungodly hours and that too without permission of the family-elders.

Neemkheda panchayat was initially impeded in its work due to obdurate men in their community and male officials who doubted capability of women to manage public affairs. Its chairperson could have her way of having an AWP elected due to her family support to the novel idea. Thus, family support or lack of it, is vital to ensure female participation and IG. Women's entry in politics is not necessarily determined by their education or conviction of participation but influence or pressure of family members. Many times, after a woman actually starts executing her political role sincerely, family support wanes and she is accused of spending too much time outside, neglecting family responsibility. Studies on participation of women in panchayats in Alwar, Rajasthan, Mysore, and Karnataka established that women were very keen on participation in elected bodies but they were dependent on their family's support to do that.<sup>39</sup> Many women plunge into local politics aided by their family, later in some instances, their husbands take over, relegating women to backstage. In district Alwar, Rajasthan out of 192 women sarpanch, half the time, their husbands wield power.<sup>40</sup> To prevent interference from male relatives of EWR, it is the duty of panchayat functionaries to prevent relatives to proxy for them.

Other social layers of domination also determine the extent of female participation. Caste and religious

identities often subsume gender identity. No wonder women fail to be assertive in their identity as women. Among women as a separate category of the disadvantaged, experiences differ depending upon the social hierarchy women belong to. Illiterate women suffer because they do not have enough information while educated women suffer because men do not accept educated women as their bosses. Despite awareness and information, educated women confront the same issues as men face while dealing with a recalcitrant officialdom. There also exists, the abusive political environment that deters women from challenging traditional power structures. Dhoola Ratnam of Srungvruksam village, AP was targeted by the rich upper caste Kapu community as she dared challenge them in the panchayat election. Once elected, taking her job seriously, she challenged fair-price shop dealer to stop diverting rations intended for the poor to the market. The corrupt retaliated first by burning her paddy fields, and as she remained undeterred, she was murdered along with her grandson on 14 July 2007.<sup>41</sup>

The allowances that women receive for attending to panchayat work also do not give them much monetary incentive for effective performance. Many women are dissuaded to recontest for lack of economic benefits accruing as a panchayat member, foregoing a day's wages and family work. There is variation among states in regard to remuneration for panchayat representatives which vary from RS 300 to 600 for the lowest level and higher for intermediate and Zila panchayats. They also receive some sitting allowances which are sometimes much lower than even the daily wage rate under MGNREGA. And many women do not receive even that. In a study of four districts of Odisha, it was found that close to 94% women attend panchayat meetings but all of them felt that the

compensation paid did not even cover the expenses they incurred while 28% do not even know the amount they should be getting as sitting fee.<sup>42</sup>

The principle of rotation of reserved seats was intended to slowly empower women in all geographical areas. However, in many instances, it forces women to revert to their domestic roles, once reservation is over, even though they now have both training and experience. This is so because societal and mind set changes take much longer to change. So, it becomes difficult for women to contest from general seats on their own and parties and men do not want to give them another chance and women disappear from politics.<sup>43</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Increasing numerical representation and empowering women through participation was intended for rural governance to become inclusive. Has it really increased female access to political power and resources so that the gender divide that exists in rural areas could be bridged? The experience of women varies across regions and states. Overall, PR has enabled women to partake in political processes, engage in development activities and usher in social change of sorts in many rural areas. IG through exclusionist approach is evident through Neemkheda AWP experience.<sup>44</sup> It signifies the proactive approach taken by women themselves in the absence of systemic recognition of their concerns in policy making and, efficacy of this approach to female empowerment. Effective participation, socio-economic change and change of perception of, and about women are indicators of IG as exhibited by the Neemkheda AWP. It reaffirms that panchayats, where only women participate, better address gender needs and bring in development, social and attitudinal changes. Forces loath to change attempt to break a woman's resolve by violating them or harp on feminine roles. Yet overtime social system gets

used to seeing and accepting more women in local bodies. In myriad ways, the lives of rural women have undergone change, and to some extent through political participation. The individual stories of women who have wrought difference in their lives and community life at large are many. Yet it would be naïve to say that gender gaps in physical and human endowments have closed in rural areas. Patriarchal and caste based socio-political landscape continues to define the role of women in India.

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