

Life Histories
of Women Panchayat
Sarpanches from
Haryana, India

Life Histories of Women Panchayat Sarpanches from Haryana, India:

From the Margins to the Center

By

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and Kavita Chakravarty

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to all the women Sarpanches in India who wake up every single day to do the jobs they were elected to do to the best of their abilities despite all the challenges they face.

“I want to fly but they will not let me spread my wings”

—A woman Sarpanch from the District of Rohtak referring to her husband and in-laws in the context of doing her job as Sarpanch

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This book is dedicated to the thousands of women Sarpanches in India who do their jobs every single day to the best of their ability. It was a privilege to get to know 295 women Sarpanches in Haryana. Each woman was inspirational in her own way. Most of them were learning about their roles and responsibilities on the job and were determined not to let this opportunity go to waste. Yes, their road is a hard one with many structural barriers, but did we expect it to be any different? If we had to fight for reservation, we will need to fight for the opportunity to do the job once elected.

The stories presented in this book narrate the life histories of ten elected women Sarpanches in Haryana. I do not focus on how effective these women are in their role as Sarpanches, what development projects they have undertaken or how they have impacted their Panchayats. The readers can draw their own conclusions as they read their stories, as told by them, instead I focus on the following questions—*Who are these women? What are their dreams and aspirations? Why did they choose to run? What has been their experience in this position? And what do they think about the future?*

Dr. Pareena G. Lawrence
Rock Island, IL

INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESERVATION

Throughout the past century, many countries have adopted the practice of setting aside political positions for members of disadvantaged minority groups. This measure, called reservation, is seen as a means to bridge inequalities among social castes and ethnic groups as well as between men and women. The need for reservation for women is the need for equal or proportional political representation in the form of elected female representatives.

There are several rationales for reservation in political participation. First, we must begin by recognizing the need for equality and empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and then we can move on to addressing the ways reservation can achieve these ends. To create a more egalitarian social structure, women must participate in politics. Due to cultural barriers, however, such as religious fundamentalism, women in particular are less able and/or willing to strive overtly for political recognition and rights. Reservation, then, is a vehicle for social justice, the representation of women's issues and progressive innovation.

The case for justice rests fundamentally and simply in that women deserve a proportionally equal voice in governing bodies and other public positions. If women are to be affected by policies in a democracy, they deserve an equal voice in designing and deciding these policies. An equal voice is necessary to secure the equal treatment of women.

An equal voice can sometimes be perceived as simply that women be heard by politicians and not necessarily that women assume roles of political power themselves. However, women's active participation in the political decision-making process guarantees that women's issues will be addressed. Evelin Hust (2004), in *Women's Empowerment and Political Representation in India*, argues the need for a "politics of presence" over a "politics of ideas" because of its effectiveness in transforming women's concerns and desired initiatives into real change and action. Moreover, female representatives can presumably better understand women's issues and therefore generate policy effectively.

Beyond what reservation does specifically for women, women's involvement in politics also introduces new methods for political action and conflict resolution in historically patriarchal political systems of governance dominated by the male voice. In contrast with the male voice, the woman's voice is often depicted as valuing cooperation, compromise, and communication in political interactions. Reservation, then, can be viewed as a stage for the advancement and transformation of political systems.

For reservation to achieve these ends, the following conditions must be satisfied: women and men have distinctly different vested interests, women work actively for women's interests, and women or other minority groups would be underrepresented without reservation (Duflo 2005). Empirical evidence confirms all of these conditions are met in vast parts of India. It is important here to highlight the last of the three requirements listed above. Without reservation, women would be underrepresented in Indian politics and governance. Because of cultural or political climates and the traditionally subordinate roles women are born into, women are less likely to pursue leadership positions in India. Reservation secures a means for women to overcome these societal barriers. Though these conclusions are derived from assumptions regarding the benefits of an egalitarian society, their derivation is logical and provides a strong case for reservation in currently unequal systems.

The History of Political Reservations in India

The dawn of the twentieth century brought the issue of social equality to the forefront of political spheres around the world. The early 1920s brought a wealth of restlessness within the Indian population in particular, and, in response, the British Raj introduced reservations on a large scale for government jobs and university positions. The fierce debate between the two opposing ideologies—traditionalists and progressives—culminated in the Government of India Act in 1935, which reserved 41 seats in provincial legislatures for women. After independence, however, these seats were lost and reservation would not reemerge in India for over 40 years.

The leader of India's independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi, was a firm and vocal supporter of the Panchayat system, or system of local, decentralized government within the states of India. Though he was sure to include it in India's new constitution, the guidelines were vague and lenient, granting states an abundance of freedom to designate funding and assign power.

The Balwantrai Mehta Study Team had a large amount of influence in shaping the current Panchayat system in India as well. The team studied

community development in India and submitted a report in 1957 recommending a three-tiered system of rural self-government. Many states began to act on this recommendation in 1958.

In 1993, the Indian government passed the 73rd amendment to the constitution, which introduced real reservation for women in India. The idea of reserving seats for women was not new in India, and those who argued that women were underrepresented in local government had plenty of support for their argument. For example, from the time the Panchayat system was introduced in Haryana until 1993, only 0.37% of all seats in Gram Panchayats had ever been held by women (Santha 1999, 33). Today within the Panchayat system, there are three tiers of government: the village, the district, and the block. The 73rd amendment brought reservations to the village level, called the Gram Panchayat or village council (along with the district and the block level). At the head of each Gram Panchayat is the president or chairperson referred to as the Sarpanch. The Panchayati Raj Act of 1992 reserved one-third of all Sarpanch positions for women.

The adoption of the Panchayati Raj Act followed a struggle between supportive and inhibiting forces. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, was against reservation for all groups because he believed that India was so far behind the West that the country could not take the efficiency loss that reservations would bring. The idea of women holding positions of power opposed the prevailing cultural climate, and many believed that reserving seats for women would simply result in the emergence of male proxies fulfilling the Sarpanch duties (Santha 1999).

However, both former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and former minister of women Margaret Alva were strong driving forces behind the 73rd and 74th amendments. Alva believed that gradual reservation would prove women's capabilities (Jenkins 1998). Gandhi's and Alva's efforts were aided by the Manelal Report, a study on reservation in India, which found that while women holding positions through reservation may be a "shade less competent, their first-hand knowledge of community problems compensates for their lack of training" (Upadhyaya 1998, 1061).

Along with reservation, the 73rd amendment also granted constitutional status to the Panchayat system and outlined its specific functions and jurisdiction. After its passage, the amendment eventually placed thousands of women in positions of power for the first time. During the first cycle, however, because recruiting women was difficult, few women ran (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 175). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) quickly stepped in to give leadership training to women in reserved seats, inform

them of their rights and responsibilities as Sarpanches, and aid them to become literate to better perform their duties (Pal 2004). Today, women still face resistance in their pursuit of political positions. Many women are denied offices or salary due to discrimination (Santha 1999). Over the amendment's short history, studies have revealed both compelling and discouraging results on the amendment's effectiveness.

Current Literature on the Panchayati Raj Act in India

The reservations put into practice by the Panchayati Raj Act have undergone extensive review since their enactment during the early nineties. Researchers have raised critical questions such as: *Are reservations effective in empowering women? Do women govern differently than men? What types of problems do women face? Do women have different policy and schematic agendas from men? Are women able to exercise their powers without fear? What are the limiting factors for women in positions of political power?* Most of the current literature addressing these and other questions draws upon surveys of men and women representatives in individual states across the country. The results from the research regarding the effectiveness of reservation in India identify several critical issues such as the difficulties women in leadership positions face, the “real” participation of women in these positions, and the positive and negative ramifications of reservation.

Analyzing the problems that women face in reserved positions is a key indicator of both the effectiveness of the reservation system as well as the source of ineffectiveness. As a result, reviewing the problems faced by women has been a popular measure in evaluations. B. Devi Prasad and S. Haranath conducted a study in 2004 of 9 Sarpanches [chairpersons or presidents of the village council or Panchayat], 48 ward members, and 68 villagers in the state of Haryana. Their results, drawn from reports by both participants and observers, found the major difficulties faced by female Sarpanches to be the purdah [veil] system, hesitation or apprehension about ability to perform duties, lack of education, lack of awareness about the Panchayat system, and restrictions derived from physical mobility.

Prasad and Haranath (2004) also outline the respondents' views of the positive and negative aspects of reservation. The creation of political space for women, the opportunity to come out into the public and interact, the ability for women to share their problems with women leaders, and the construction of a new social status for women were among the positive outcomes provided by respondents. As negative outcomes, subjects reported that existing leadership did not change with reservation and that

reservation created a dependency of women on their male relatives. These negative results raise doubts about the real participation of women and, therefore, the real effectiveness of reservation.

Nirmala Buch (2000) addresses this question in *Women's Experience in New Panchayats: The Emerging Leadership of Rural Women*. Buch interviewed a sample of 1199 representatives, 843 of whom were elected women, in all three tiers in the Panchayat system in three northern Indian states. Though Buch addresses many different issues, including socio-economic profiles and the development of aspirations and confidence in female representatives, most notable are the results regarding participation. Participation, which Buch defines in this study as Panchayat meeting attendance—weekly time spent doing Panchayat work and ability to carry issues into action—is of crucial importance when evaluating the effectiveness of reservation. Buch found that 65.5% of female representatives regularly attended meetings compared to 88.1% of men. Buch concludes from her research that women who are elected to serve in the Panchayat *do* show the early development of leadership skills (Buch 2000).

Another problem that researchers have identified as a major factor inhibiting the participation of women is the practice of male proxies performing duties for female family members who hold reserved Sarpanch seats. In a smaller study, results from D.P. Singh's surveys of three village Panchayats in Punjab found that 75% of elected female representatives report proxy participation by their husbands (Singh 2008). Singh's study also found that only 25% of female representatives surveyed had willingly agreed to contest the election.

Hust (2004) visits these problems in her book, *Women's Political Representation and Empowerment in India: A Million Indiras Now*. Hust stresses the importance of confidence and consciousness of not only female representatives but of all women. Hust studied the issue of reservation in Orissa, where she found that women were becoming more and more visible in public village meetings and stronger figures in their communities. However, Hust concludes that with respect to empowerment and changing the existing power dynamics between men and women, little headway has been made. She explains that women struggle to realize their personal capacities and still accept their traditional role as being primarily caretakers. According to Hust, though women do attend Panchayat meetings, their husbands largely solve village problems because women cannot be sufficiently relieved from their domestic duties to do so.

E. K. Santha (1999) conducted interviews in two districts of each of three Indian states: Haryana, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. Santha concludes

that reservations alone will not prompt effective participation and that both literacy and political action campaigns need to accompany reservation for it to empower and engage women in the work of the Panchayat. Santha finds that the quality of performance of female representatives is largely dependent on such social factors as literacy, education, and the tradition of social reform movements. In Kerala, for example, Santha concludes that reservation had a positive impact because of the state's rich tradition of social movements.

The ability of women's political participation to promote empowerment is the key issue in confirming that reservation in India has indeed achieved its goal. Researchers approached this issue in numerous regions and via different questions. Although a clear-cut answer has yet to be retrieved, and perhaps never will be, there appears to be a consensus that though there has been some success with reservation, women still face serious obstacles to achieve real empowerment. The mixed results from different states suggest that reservation has not been received unilaterally into varying cultural and political atmospheres. Both time and further research may expose more comprehensive results.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION IN INDIA

The Panchayati Raj system is India's system of rural governance at the local level. Each state is free to run their system as they wish; however, the Fortieth Article of the constitution (1949) mandates that they maintain a system. Most states have a three-tiered structure with village, block, and district level Panchayats.

The governing body for the village Panchayat is the Gram Panchayat, a body that is to have regular meetings of the Gram Sabha, which includes all the residents of the village. The Gram Panchayat strives for democracy through transparency in the decision-making process. The Gram Panchayat is headed by the Sarpanch, or village chief/leader, who is directly elected by the villagers. The Sarpanch is responsible for the executive and financial matters in the village (Misra 2004, 33). In addition to the Sarpanch, there are directly elected Panches, who serve as representatives of the people in making village decisions. The Gram Sabha is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the activity of the village Panchayat. The Gram Sabha prioritizes the village's needs, provides resources for projects, and is also involved in the selection of government beneficiaries in the village (Misra 2004, 17). The village budget is prepared by the Gram Sabha and then approved by the Gram Panchayat (Misra 2004, 50). The Gram Panchayat submits a report of the development work done in the previous year and the work to be done in the forthcoming year to the block level for refinement and approval (Misra 2004, 33).

The block level, also called the Taluk or the Samiti, is the intermediate level in the Panchayat system. The block level consists of both directly and indirectly elected officials. The block level serves a supervisory role in respect to the Gram Panchayats, reviewing the Gram Panchayat's development plans before they are submitted to the district level and making arrangements for development activities. The block level is also responsible for natural disaster relief as well as formulating and implementing development plans of its own (Misra 2004, 37).

The district level, or Zila Parishad, is the “organic link” between local and state-level governance. The Zila Parishad, consisting of both directly and indirectly elected members, supervises and organizes the activities of the block Panchayats within the district. The Zila Parishad answers to the state government, which may repeal any resolution passed by the district level if it is deemed illegal (Misra 2004, 42,43).

The Panchayati Raj system is structured as such to promote democratic decentralization. Panchayat elections encourage people’s participation in local governance and open the avenues of social change. These village level elections are unique in that each voter knows the contestant so there should be no empty promises. The Panchayat elections also promote democracy by serving as a sort of “practice round” for state and national level elections.

The Panchayats are seen as vehicles of change. With individual participation in the Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs), it is hoped individual empowerment will follow. This empowerment takes many forms. Traditionally, the Panchayats have been charged with maintaining agricultural infrastructure (Bandyopadhyay, S. Ghosh, B. Ghosh 2003), but lately they have taken on other tasks as well. The Panchayats are now chiefly concerned with the physical and social development of the village. Although recently amended, the two-child norm further promoted change by stating that an elected official may not have more than two children (Misra 2004, 114). In addition, there is also reservation for scheduled castes and tribes at all levels of the Panchayats.

Creation of the Panchayati Raj System

The Panchayati Raj system’s roots date back to ancient times when King Prithu colonized the Doab between the Ganges and Jamuna in western and southwestern Uttar Pradesh, a northern state in India (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 207). Ancient Panchayats were concerned with managing village and agricultural land, educating villagers, and settling quarrels in the villages (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007). These Panchayats were based on land ownership and offered little mobility under a caste and status-based system.

In the medieval period, Panchayats received legal recognition in the 1500s under the first Mughal emperor, Akbar (Cordrington 1943). He declared the Panchayats autonomous and gave them taxation and judicial powers (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 209). These Panchayats were similarly concerned with maintaining the village land and peace among villages.

The precursor to the modern Panchayati Raj system was established in 1857 by the British after a rural rebellion. The purpose of the original system under British rule was to establish an intelligence network so that the British could better control the countryside. There was also a push from the educated elite, who wanted power (Misra 2004, 26). These original Panchayats had no real powers (Misra 2004, 27). In 1870, the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act gave the local Panchayats the responsibility of collecting taxes to maintain local chowkidars [watchmen or guards], and agricultural infrastructure (Bandyopadhyay, S. Ghosh, B. Ghosh 2003). On May 18, 1882, Leed Ripon made his famous resolution in which he advocated empowering the Panchayats. He pushed for decentralization by training Indians in governance—giving them the chance to learn from experience—and by allowing the people to participate in politics (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 210). Unfortunately, the resolution was not successful, but further attempts to empower the Panchayats followed. The Royal Commission on Decentralization (1909) proposed that the Panchayats have a governing body that consists of elected members of the village with due representation for minorities. The Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1918 foreshadowed reforms to come by recognizing that Panchayat success depends upon local conditions, and thus the responsibilities and powers of the Panchayats must vary accordingly (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 211). All of these recommendations for empowerment took real form in the Government of India Resolution of May 16, 1918. This resolution attempted to revive the Panchayats by promoting an elected majority in local bodies as well as having an elected—rather than nominated—president. The government gave the Panchayats further power by allowing local government to prepare their own budgets, taxes, and assignment of tasks. However, the result of the resolution was “not remarkable.” As Ratna Ghosh and Alok Pramanik said, “No colonial rule can promote decentralization in the real sense” (2007, 212).

Changes in the 1920s and 1930s

In 1917, women’s rights organizations formed in India with the help of their British counterparts. This included groups such as the Women’s India Association, All India Women’s Conference, and National Council of Women in India. Around the same time, the independence movement began to gain momentum throughout India as well. Faced with a more restless population, the British Raj decided to introduce reservations on a large scale for government jobs, university positions, and governing

bodies (Jenkins, 1999); however, the British continued to monopolize the highest posts (Lewis 1962, 66).

Even though reservations eventually became law and are still in force today, the idea was fiercely debated for over a decade. The goal of the British Raj was to quell an increasingly restless population, and the end result was a system that gave jobs and positions to members from nearly every religious group and caste. Although “caste” is not recognized under the law and is legally termed “class,” the two are usually the same in practice (Jenkins 1999; Bandyopadhyay, S. Ghosh, B. Ghosh 2003).

Much like many other debates over affirmative action policies around the globe, there were two main camps in the Indian debate: traditionalists and progressives. The main argument of the traditionalists was that caste determines one’s role in society and that not everyone is fit to govern. Traditionalists also argued that reservations lead to inefficiency because they prevent a more skilled and qualified candidate from holding the position. It is much more likely that the traditionalists, who were the elite, or the *gavki*, did not want to lose their grip on power. Progressives argued that, to be fair, all segments of society should be represented and be able to acquire the skills to represent their group successfully.

In 1935, the debate culminated in the Government of India Act (GIA), which reserved government and university positions for scheduled classes (SC), scheduled tribes (ST), and other backward classes (OBC). SCs are social groups defined by income, mostly from urban areas; the STs are ethnic-based groups from remote regions of the country; and OBCs include religious minorities such as Muslims and Sikhs. The GIA also reserved 41 seats in provincial legislatures for women, seats they would later lose after independence. However, that reservation amounted to only one seat in each of the provincial legislatures, so although women were represented, they held only a small fraction of the legislative seats and power throughout the country. There is irony in the fact that women received reserved seats because some prominent women’s organizations in the country actually lobbied against it on the grounds that women should run for elections on the same terms as men, and personal identities should not prevail over national interests (Jenkins 1999). But even though women were given a place in the colonial structure of India, their place would erode during the drive towards independence.

The Independence Movement and Gandhi's Gift Horse

Colonial India was much larger than present-day India and, as a result, had more competing interests than modern India. British India included all of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and, as a consequence, the Muslim minority was a much larger proportion of the population than it is today. Therefore, the leaders of the independence movement emphasized national unity in their push for independence, pushing aside the concept of the village Panchayat. However, there was still one very vocal and prominent promoter of the Panchayat system: Mahatma Gandhi (Goel 2003, 13).

Gandhi believed that “the greater the power to Panchayats, the better for the people” (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 213). Gandhi envisioned an India where the national government received its power from villages, and the Panchayats would have full power to govern themselves (Buch 2000). This goal of *gram swaraj*, or village self-sufficiency, was not shared by most of the figures of the independence movement. B.R. Ambedkar was opposed to the idea of strong Panchayats because they would create “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism” (Lele 2001, 4703). Ambedkar only paid lip-service to the concept of village self-sufficiency when drawing up the constitution after independence. When Gandhi discovered this, he insisted upon including Panchayats in Article 40 of the constitution in 1949. The Article decrees that “the state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government” (Buch 2000, 2). Article 40 leaves the task of creating and funding the Panchayat system to the states. The vague mandate of the constitution has led to a variety of Panchayat systems throughout the country with different funding sources, and levels of independence and power.

Interpreting and Implementing the Constitution: A Mandate with respect to Panchayats across India

With the task of independent designs, the states did not truly reactivate their Panchayati Raj institutions until the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Study Team. The Balwantrai Mehta Study Team (1957) studied the progress and effectiveness of the Community Development and the National Extension programs, which focused on creating independence in the villages and increasing people's participation (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 41, 42, 47). The study team recommended a three-tier rural government structure and promoted including women in government.

They recommended that two women be included as Panchayat members in charge of programs for women and children. If the women were not elected, it was recommended that they be appointed (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 219).

These broad recommendations were not universally adopted. Most states did not appoint women. However, some states, such as Tamil Nadu, did appoint women if none were elected. Whether elected or not, the women were usually members of the local elite. At some point, all states have had a three-tiered Panchayat system (Santha 1999).

More recommendations for reviving the Panchayat system came from the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978). The committee thought the village was too small for effective planning and the block level too large. They recommended that there be a middle level comprised of ten villages to be involved in development work (Misra 2004, 12,13). The committee also recommended open participation of political parties in Panchayat elections (Singh 1994, 819). Women were included in this report as well: it suggested that the two women who got the most votes at the Zila level should be members of the Zila Parishad. Some states made reservations for women on the basis of this recommendation (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 220). However, since the two-tier structure of the Ashok Mehta Committee's recommendation fundamentally changed state systems instead of merely tinkering with them, most states did not adopt it (Misra 2004, 12, 13).

A Lapse in the System

Although the Panchayati Raj system operated throughout India in the 1960s, political, economic, and social concerns prevented the system from functioning properly from the 1970s until the 1990s. Numerous factors contributed to what became a system of administrative decentralization without sufficient powers. Several of these problems continue to inhibit progress in the current system.

The constrained relationship between local and state government largely led to the dormancy of the Panchayats during this period, and some of these problems continue today. The state government officials often saw PRIs as a threat to their power. As a result, many higher government officials did not treat Panchayat schemes with the same respect as others. State agencies would often move their most inefficient and incompetent officials to work on the bureaucratic side of the Panchayati Raj system. These bureaucrats were typically against the system and would often have Sarpanches removed if they did not agree with the state's policy (Singh

1994). Even today, state governments often issue highly complex rules for the PRIs, making it difficult for local bodies to adhere to them (Misra 2004, 73). There is the problem of flexibility when the Panchayats submit a plan and the State Planning Authority greatly modifies it (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 227). The state further undermines the PRIs by assigning the regional and district level officers much more work than they can feasibly accomplish while supervising the functioning of the Panchayats (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 228).

The status of the PRIs was worsened by a lack of regular elections during the period of dormancy. The states saw PRIs as liabilities and thus rarely held elections, leaving the states in complete control of local government (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 73). When elections were scheduled, they were repeatedly postponed for flimsy reasons (Singh 1994).

Another problem with the Panchayati Raj system is the federal and state-level programs that parallel the duties of the PRIs. One example is the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). This agency gives loans and grants for agricultural and social programs that overlap with the duties of the Panchayats, but the DRDA is a federal organization with access to more funding than the Panchayats (Singh 1994).

The Panchayats suffer from even more funding problems. The Panchayats receive their funding from the state, which prefers to allocate funding to its own programs (Singh 1994). Also, the application they must prepare for financial assistance makes it difficult for Panchayats to form plans far in advance (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 228). The power of taxation has little real meaning since Panches and Sarpanches do not wish to risk their popularity within the village, and thus most Panchayat funds end up being government grants (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 234).

Further compounding the issue, because most elected representatives of the Panchayats are not educated about financial rules, they often do not allocate funds efficiently. There is much wasteful spending due to ignorance or disregard of the rules and a lack of supervision and control by the administrative authorities. Studies found that wasteful spending was more frequent at the block level, while embezzlement and misappropriation of funds is more common in the Gram Panchayats (Misra 2004, 51). These financial issues greatly slow down the effectiveness of the Panchayat Raj system.

Corruption is crippling to progress and takes on various forms at all levels of the Panchayati Raj system. Due to a lack of education and training, Panchayat leaders often team up with bureaucrats at the local level. It is not uncommon for a Sarpanch to hold Gram Sabha meetings only on paper

and make all of the decisions alone or to choose government beneficiaries from only his or her caste. Corruption is very prominent within Panchayat elections as well. Elite contestants use money, alcohol, and muscle power to win. There have been reports of candidates using a private hired vehicle in order to cast votes in their favor, preventing people from voting, and sometimes smuggling in arms with which to create a disturbance (Misra 2004, 100, 101). Because of these threats, the weaker sections of society are afraid to contest elections. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the Panchayats were run by the *gavki*. During this period, most people in rural India were economically dependent on the *gavki* for their income (Lele 2001); as a consequence, most people did not participate in local meetings because their employer and the government were one and the same.

Participation is a continuing struggle for the PRIs. Most village members do not identify themselves with the Gram Sabha and many do not even know what it is (Misra 2004, 20). It has been observed that the villagers exhibit “visible apathy” toward Panchayat activities (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 46). The people’s indifference, aided by illiteracy, poverty, and social inequality, leaves a privileged few with decision-making power (Goel 2003, 239).

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Debate about Women’s Participation

The idea of reserving seats for women is not new in India; women had limited reserved seats in assemblies during colonial rule (Jenkins 1999). However, women were heavily underrepresented in local government in Haryana, from the inception of its Panchayat system in 1966 until the time when the new amendments took effect. Prior to the amendment, women held only 0.37% of all seats in Gram Panchayats, and no woman was ever elected to a seat at the block or district level (Santha 1999).

Despite these low participation rates, some still opposed reservations. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, opposed reservations for all groups because he believed that India was so far behind the West that the country could not take the efficiency loss that reservations would bring. Although he died in 1964, many people continued to use such logic into the 1980s and 1990s when the idea of reservations came to the fore (Upadhyaya 1998). There were also cultural objections to “forcing” women into politics. In some regions of the country, women still observe *purdah* (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004) and must keep themselves covered and out of the public sphere. In those regions, the idea of women holding positions of power challenged the prevailing social norm. Some

were also against reservations because they felt that women would simply serve as proxies for their male relatives and that it would be pointless to have a woman serve in the role as an intermediary (Santha 1999).

One of the driving forces behind the 73rd amendment was former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Driven by his belief in the system, Gandhi began pushing for a reinvigorated Panchayati Raj system in the early 1980s (Pai 2001). Former central government minister Margaret Alva also pushed for reservation on all levels in the 1980s while she was the minister of women and child development (an arm of the Ministry of Human Resource Development). She believed that gradual reservation would convince people of women's capabilities (Jenkins 1999). Gandhi and Alva's cause was aided by the Manelal Report, a study on other reservations in India, which found that while reservation candidates may be a "shade less competent, their first-hand knowledge of community problems compensates for their lack of training" (Upadhyaya 1998). Another paradigm shift was the end of the Cold War and the diminished military threat that accompanied it, which allowed social issues to become more important (Jaquette 1997). The changing world of the early nineties made the idea of women in office more acceptable and contributed to the passage of the 73rd and 74th amendments.

The 73rd amendment conferred constitutional status on the Panchayats on April 25, 1993 (Misra 2004, 15). The salient features of the amendment are:

- 1) Establishment of a Gram Sabha made up of all the eligible voters in the Panchayat area.
- 2) A three-tiered system of Panchayats at the village, intermediate, and district levels for states with populations over two million. It is up to the states to decide the size of the intermediate block level. Some states are too small to require an intermediate level (Misra 2004, 15, 16).
- 3) Direct election by the people for all Panchayat members.
- 4) Members of the Lok Sabha/Rajya Sabha (MP) and State Legislative Assembly (MLA) can be members of the Panchayats with voting rights at the village level, but they may not vote or run to be chairpersons at the intermediate and district levels.
- 5) Establishment of five-year terms for each Panchayat, with elections to be held by the state. If an institution is dissolved mid-term, an election must be held within six months.
- 6) Reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population in the Panchayat area. Reservation of

chairperson seats for SC and ST in proportion to their population, with one-third of the seats reserved for SC and ST women. One-third of seats at all Panchayat levels are reserved for women (Singh 1994, 824).

- 7) Continuous existence of a Panchayat, with a gap of no longer than six months.
- 8) An independent Finance Commission that reports to the State Legislature.
- 9) Local elections conducted by an independent State Election Committee (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 34).
- 10) Elected officials may not have more than two children (Mishra 2004, 78, 79).

The Eleventh Schedule of the constitution lists 29 functions of the Panchayati Raj system, with authority over items such as drinking water, roads, bridges, agriculture, land improvement, animal husbandry, rural electrification, etc. (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 126).

After the 73rd amendment was passed, the states were ordered to amend or repeal current laws concerning Panchayati Raj to meet the requirements of the new act. These changes were to be in place within one year from the commencement of the Act.

In August 2009, the Government of India approved 50% reservation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Individual states are implementing this new mandate based on their individual timelines (Bhat 2016).

The New Role of Women and Overcoming Inequality

The first elections after the commencement of the 73rd amendment placed thousands of women in power for the first time. In the first election cycle, very few women ran voluntarily, and recruiting women was difficult due to a lack of mobility and motivation (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 175). Often, a male family member would force the woman to run as his proxy to fulfill the quota (Narayanan 2003). However, in the most recent election cycle, a number of women ran on their own and won (Misra 2004, 120).

As new politicians, these women faced many problems. Often they were not educated about their roles, rights, or responsibilities, nor did they know very much about the functioning of the PRIs. This inexperience took away from female leaders' authority and decision-making power (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 220). NGOs quickly stepped in to give leadership training to these women, often helping them to become literate so they

could better understand their job (Pal 2004). There is resistance to women as politicians. Many women are denied offices or their salary or stipend due to discrimination (Santha 1997). It has also been observed that men dislike women running in unreserved seats and sometimes force these women to withdraw (Misra 2004, 120).

Women serve a special role as politicians due to several reasons, one of the most important being that other women and men trust them. Women in the community feel comfortable voicing their concerns to another woman rather than a man. This allows women to have a voice in the community that they did not have before (Raman 2002). Women are also seen as more trustworthy because they are seen as less corrupt and have better attendance records than men (Jaquette 1997). Female leaders play a special role as advocates of social justice, education, family planning, and health (Ghosh and Pramanik 2007, 185). Women continue to grow into their roles in the Indian governance system.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE WOMEN OF HARYANA AND THEIR LIFE HISTORIES

Profile of the State of Haryana

Geography

Haryana, established in 1966, is a landlocked state in the northern part of India. Its capital is Chandigarh and the state contains 21 different districts. Haryana is surrounded by the states of Uttar Pradesh in the east, Punjab in the west, Himachal Pradesh in the north, and Rajasthan in the south. On the western side is the Union Territory of Delhi. Haryana is also surrounded by natural boundaries, with the Shivalik hills in the north, the river Yamuna in the east, the river Ghaggar in the west, and the Aravalli hills in the south. These hills and rivers cause drastic climate changes between seasons. In the summer Haryana is very hot, and in the winter the temperature drops dramatically. With the exception of a few districts, there is very little rainfall in Haryana. There are two rainy seasons each year: the monsoon season from the middle of June until the end of September and the winter rains from December to February.¹

Culture

Religion is deeply rooted in Haryana. Today, approximately 87% of the population identifies as Hindu, 5% as Sikh, 7% as Muslim, 0.2% as Jains, and 0.21% identify as Christian.²

The population of Haryana is approximately 25.4 million people according to the 2011 census. Sixty-five percent of the population³ lives in the state's 7,000 villages and hamlets.⁴ This is a six-percentage point decline since 2001, indicating increasing urbanization in the state. The people of Haryana continue to place great importance on their caste or sub-caste; it is traditional to marry and socialize within one's caste. Some women continue to observe purdah, the tradition of covering oneself in front of men, although there is mixed use due to economic advances.⁵