

CHAPTER - 6

IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

We have three somewhat heterogeneous sections in this Chapter. Section 1 documents significant information as to the reasons why and how women have now joined PR and to grasp their mental disposition. Effort is also made to the extent possible to see any association between women's induction and socio political variable. Section 2 examines the extent or bearing of family obligations on their PR participation. In the third Section the nature of male reception of women in PR and the extent of role women play in hastening women development are looked at. At the end brief summary of this chapter is appended.

1. WOMEN'S ENTRY TO PR

Even without factual data it can safely be asserted that women's credential in earlier PR elections was never prominent and this district is no exception. As we have noted earlier only 21 women got elected and number of women contested is not available. Only 11 (12%) of our women respondents contested for PR posts before 1993 (majority from PS) and only one won it at PS. On this backdrop pertinent question will be to note the perception of present women incumbents what was the real deterrent.

Table No - 6 ;1

Why women did not contest earlier PR Election

Tire	Not Interested	Not Told by Husband	Not Told by Party	Underage	Non Reservation	Total
GP	2	2	3	-	24	31
PS	3	2	2	-	24	31
CP	-	-	2	1	14	17
Total	5 (6.3)	4 (5.0)	7 (8.9)	1 (1.3)	62 (78.5)	79 (100)

Table 6.1 divulges that 20% (because dictation of husbands and party also connotes lack of own initiative) were not interested at all. And absence of reservation is cited as the singular cause of their invisibility. Prior to statutory reservation none - party, family or themselves - contemplated about contesting election. All these imply that pressure of extraneous forces has now driven women into the political arena.

Table 6:2
Reason for Contesting 1993 Election by Women

Tier	Fill Reservation	For Party	For Women Development	For Village Development	Total
GP	7	-	2	23	32
PS	2	-	3	34	39
CP	1	2	3	13	19
Total	10 (11.1)	2 (2.2)	8 (8.9)	70 (72.8)	90 (100)

If reservation policy was that sort of stimulus (Table 6:1) next information appear somewhat contradictory. Here the main reason offered is not reservation (11%) but village development (73%) (Table 6:2). Transition from reservation to the cause of village development may be due to their on the job exposure. They have perhaps realised that only to fill reserved seats would do little justice to the enormous aspiration of villagers reposed on them.

Table No 6:3
Selection of Women's Candidature

Tier	By Husband / in Laws	By Party	By Themselves	Total
GP	1	26	5	32
PS	1	38	-	39
CP	1	18	-	19
Total	3 (3.3)	82 (91.1)	5 (5.6)	90 (100)

Mitra¹ suggested that most of the women candidatures in West Bengal were virtually by default as women were selected from where men of the families could not make it for reservation. In our case only 6% (Table No 6:3) tried to contest by own effort. It in fact implies that they spontaneously volunteered to be at the fray and party backed them up. It should not be taken to mean that anybody contested independently. In view of party based election almost all have invariably to embrace party support and it is supported by the Table. Nevertheless, the fact remains that because of reservation, parties had to field hundreds of women and for this party leaders first approached the family/husband of the woman and they in turn persuaded the woman to contest election.

Table No 6:4
Nature of Confidence of Women in Successfully Performing PR Roles

Tier	Confident	Partially Confident	Uncertain	Not Confident	Total
GP	18	12	-	2	32
PS	28	9	1	1	39
CP	13	4	2	-	19
Total	59 (65.6)	25 (27.8)	3 (3.3)	3 (3.3)	90 (100)

1. Mitra, Amit (1993 : 22). Changing Role of Women in Bengal Panchayats. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 2(4)

Awareness is more materialistic in regard to confidence nurtured. Any preemptory disposition from respondents is bound to disclose present trend of role performance and future course of action as well. As it is (Table 6:4), majority (66%) are found to possess that trust necessary for public roles.

Table No 6 :5
Confidence of Women and their Socio Political Status

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	X ² Value	DF	Table Value (0.05% Level)
Own Education	Confidence	8.34	6	12.59
Family Education	"	7.45	"	"
Caste	"	7.08	"	"
Marital Status	"	3.62	"	"
Party Membership	"	4.06	"	"
First time from Family	"	3.17	3	7.81

(For base Tables see Table 1:1 to 1:6 in Annexure 2)

Effort to relate such psychological confidence with socio political variables suggests that no statistically significant correlation with women's mental confidence can be deduced. (Table 6:5).

2. DOMESTIC AND PUBLIC ROLES

Because of traditional values, segregation of society along sex lines women in rural India have no other alternative "than that of wife mother" ² role where family is the hearth and haven and anything beyond it has to be despised. Women's predominant role as wives and mothers has direct bearing on limiting assumption of other role³. Duverger (1955:129) is still convincing in arguing that men are the medium between women and political world.

If women are handicapped by wife and mothering roles, any additional role assignment would surely upset the delicate balance in sex based division of labour and roles. It is no doubt true that by now women have joined in various socio economic and political activities. But almost everywhere they are caught in a dilemma of role adjustment. The data of Bhoite (1987:17-18) proved that genesis of role conflict lies in unchanging role expectation in families and its magnitude can only be lessened if there is corresponding change in family structure and value. Against this backdrop it is worth examining whether public roles are at variance with domestic roles for PR women.

2. Souza'D Alfred (ed). (1975:X) *Women in Contemporary India*. Monohar. New Delhi.

3. Lipsset SM (1980:92) *Political Man*. Doubleday: New york.

2:1 Women and PR Works: Regarding the twin questions whether women have joined PR taking consent of families or defying them, it is derived that all of them have taken consent and none has defied. Moreover all of them resolutely deny any disturbance in familial role for the PR works or preoccupations.

Table No 6:6
After Family Obligation Time for PR Works for Women

Tier	For most works	For majority works	Not at all	Total
GP	23	9	-	32
PS	36	3	-	39
CP	18	1	-	19
Total	77(85.6)	13(14.4)	-	90(100)

No doubt women are not divested of domestic duties to any remarkable extent. They as before have to shoulder most of the family obligations and this is likely to take out time and energy for PR works. Table 6:6 discloses that domestic engagements are not proving stumbling blocks and majority are finding time for almost all PR works. Those who are not finding it for most of the works explained that because of geographical distance of PR office, nature of occupations of husbands (Service and Business) they are unable to devote all the time.

To the question whether other family members are extending cooperation in domestic works while they are busy outside for PR works, almost all admitted that such help is forthcoming. It is not that husbands share in child caring, cooking etc. Other family members like mother in law, daughter and to some extent husband are cooperating. It is also disclosed that whenever required - PR Meeting for example - doing all domestic duties beforehand women are up for PR office. We have evidences⁴ that even family mishaps and economic contingencies can not deter them. In one instance one GP woman attended GP meeting when one relative was in Hospital.

Cooperation of husbands is also evident in several other instances. It was noted that husbands cooperate by way of accompanying them in late hours of evening (or sending son etc.), going to PR office to deposit forms or bringing information about latest PR schemes for examples. However, honestly speaking there are some hitches in family relations also. It is found that villagers come to women for advice/works mainly in the evening or early in the

4. Similar observation is found in Mukherjee. A (1995:6-7). Role Conflicts in PR Members. *Panchayati Raj*. March April

morning and as husbands are usually unable to look after education of children, they in some cases allege that wives' otherwise involvement may ruin children education. This sort of strains are entirely confined among educated respondents. Strained relations are also admitted in a few cases when women take keen interest in PR works and neglect family obligations grossly. Nonetheless, proportion of such discontent is discrete and not a fiery ordeal.

To ascertain whether women are puppet of respective families we feel that it is very trying to pinpoint the exact influence and no members having had 3 years work experience would spontaneously acknowledge it (after all experience has moulded them to be smart!). And to verify such influence it certainly requires intensive issue to issue investigation.

Table No 6:7

Acceptance of Advice of Family / Husband in PR Affairs by Women

Tier	Accept it	Partially Accept it	Refuse it	Reject with Debate*	Total
GP	12	7	2	11	32
PS	13	6	5	15	39
CP	1	2	2	14	19
Total	26(28.9)	15(16.7)	9(10.0)	40(44.4)	90(100)

* Rejection of advice only after submitting reasons why such could not be accepted.

Information in Table 6:7 are absorbing. 29% concede such advice, while 17% retain freedom of choice by accepting it partially. It seems that 46% have overt or covert influence of family and remaining 54% are able to shake off the shadow of subordination.

Table No 6:8

Reaction to Advice of Family and Socio Political Status of Women.

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	X ² Value	DF	Table Value 0.05% Level
Own Education	Acceptance of Family Advice	3.7	4	9.49
Family "	"	7.53	"	"
Caste	"	6.9	"	"
Party	"	9.59	"	"

(For base Table see Table 2:1 to 2:4 in Annexure 2)

It is found that large number of Congress Party respondents (52%) do accept such family advice, less of CPM (22%) accept it and more of CPM (60%) and other parties try to convince about their own point/conviction. Accordingly chi square test of significance (Table 6:8) establishes that only party is related to acceptance or rejection of such advice.

3. GENDER BIAS

One of the preconditions for efficacious participation of women is the hortative environment where bias against them or injustice, hatred, non cooperation is either non existent or less of it. It is universally conceded that women at best can provide supportive service to men in politics. This dimension assumes critical evaluation now because men have been deprived of at least 1/3 seat and power to the women they so long wished to regard as their appendages and in fact never apprehended as potential adversaries in politics.

On the other hand, the general credence is that because of women's underrepresentation the basic needs of women have been neglected in development decisions. And women's participation in decision- making can correct the imbalance. What is implied is that women would accentuate the pace of decisions bringing about important bearings on gender development. It may also be emphasised that women incumbents would do justice to the rationale for their induction or reservation policy if they can annex or augment gender development. Any discrimination against panchayat women may be regarded as 'bias against' and hastening of women development by women themselves as 'bias for' women.

3:1 Bias Against :

Table No 6:9
Women Feel Discriminated in PR

Tier	Yes	No	Total
GP	4	28	32
PS	11	28	39
CP	11	8	19
Total	26 (28.9)	64 (71.1)	90 (100)

It is found (Table 6:9) that 29% have experienced male antagonism in PR. CP group in particular (58% of total 19) has been the most notable victim of it.

May be because of minority political status as opposition party members some women may have such grievance. But only one GP and seven PS opposition party women note this neglect. It is worth mentioning that all members in 2 PSs and all 4 women of ZP refer to their alienation.

Table No 6:10
Male PR Members attitude towards Women

Tier	Cooperatng	Not Cooperating	Antagonistic	Total
GP	28	3	1	32
PS	29	-	10	39
CP	9	3	7	19
Total	66 (73.3)	6 (6.7)	18 (20.0)	90 (100)

Table 6:10 indicates that though cooperation from male PR colleagues is the usual trend, non cooperation has no mean proportion and its extreme form of antagonism is for 20%. Like earlier occasion, non cooperation is also voiced by one GP and seven PS opposition party women and all women of two PSs.

Table No 6:11
Males are Hiding Facts/Figure from Women

Tier	Yes	No	Total
GP	8	24	32
PS	17	22	39
CP	10	9	19
Total	35 (38.9)	55 (61.1)	90 (100)

Discrimination in the form of concealment of schemes, loans etc. is not scarce indeed (Table 6:11). This complain is noted by four women in one GP and five of one PS alone.

It is found that bias against is in descending order. In Zilla Parishad and two PS complaint of unpropitiousness is more widespread. In these cases all respondents, irrespective of parties, unanimously not only concur but also vociferous in such allegations. In the Haldibari PS bias against and resolve to fight it out is most aggressive. Charges, countercharges are often hurled against each other. Male members claim that women have been given due share of what they deserve. Women, they allege, are "difficult to be saturated". Effort to verify such vindication unfurls that Karmadhyakhas (ironically 4 out of total 6 women members) are not usually allowed to convene meeting of Standing Committees. Even if there is meeting males are united to pass resolution according to their sweetwill. And there are instances to modify decisions of standing committee in Annual General Meeting. As such frustration - though significantly absent in ZP members - among PS women is looming so largely that they feel that they have betrayed electorate by not being able to represent local aspiration. However, when inquired whether they have ever acted collectively to establish gender justice they nodded negatively. But hopefully from now onwards they may have realised potentiality of collectivity.

It may be contended that had women been assertive they could not have been so aggrieved and education might have played important role here. Data reveal that among those who complain, 37% have low, 38% medium and 26% have high educational attainment. Yet another contention might be that those who come for the first time from families are more likely to be bypassed. In this front only 46% fresh recruits do voice such complain. Bias against is not only confined to some specific PR bodies but almost all members are venting it - all these suggest that causes of bias is somewhat exterior to socio-economic variables.

At PS level particularly it is perhaps correlated with political configuration- where there is coalition of parties there is such grumble. In both PSs no single party has unilateral control but have uneasy coalition(CPM+AIFB(S)+ BJP) of parties of diverse hues the main cementing force being to keep Congress out of power. May be to appease important leaders or factions of it or fallibility in decision making that women are being sidetracked. However, women allege, though unsubstantiated, that males are reluctant to concede power mainly for financial gains involved in various PR works/schemes (such as 30% commission from contractor).

Equally plausible may be that in ZP and PS prominent party leaders are elected and women find it increasingly difficult to convince or win over their point because of hierarchical party position.

Relative absence of male bias at GP level may be due to following reasons; narrower constituency area creates a sense of geographical affinity and also individuals at village level have informal relations among themselves. Compared to PS and ZP, it has greater transparency, demanding nature of works, lesser bureaucratic control over works, direct accountability to Gram Sabha. And in most cases unilateral control of single political party thus suppressing all for fear of political wrath may also be impetus for gender tolerance.

What is more striking is that i) a sizable portion has been victimised by male bias, ii) such complain is in no case confined to opposition party members rather majority come from ruling parties, iii) it is at best localised in nature. Total male apathy in the district is not found pointing out that somewhere all is not well enough for women.

3:2 Bias For : Respondents unanimously assert that they are not in favour of exclusive women issue/cause, rather they try to work for collective village interests. Only as and when it is possible to prefer women within this broad parameter of collective interest they would try to secure it for women. Regarding the preference in selecting beneficiaries for Schemes/ loans they solely act on economic criterion of poorness and not definitely on party affiliation, familiarity or gender. Though they can now realise its utility, they are, for several reasons, unable to act in a block. Admittedly members of same party may have better prospect but they inform that generally they come to PR office only during meeting and when absolutely necessary. In

most cases they hardly have any time to consult with fellow women and it remains their primary concern to finish the preoccupations or bargaining for own area problems. Also the geographical distance, particularly at ZP & PS, lack of time and energy they seldom meet or sit together so as to settle for united stand. Neither they have formed nor joined in any other organisation to champion women cause. This is not to deny the existence of Mahila Samity to which most respondents have affiliations and such Samities very often try to settle family disputes in villages like wife beating, divorce etc.

4. SUMMARY

It is evident that women candidatures were not seriously considered by parties or others and only with statutory reservation they are compelled to sponsor women. A portion of women are not so confident in manning PR roles successfully.

In the present rural cultural context role conflict to some extent at least is inevitable and only with encouragement, accommodation and cooperation of family/husbands women would find public roles less onerous, If the cooperation of husbands/family is so essential, is it possible for women to deny influence of family in deciding public affairs? One PS woman sums up their position " it is not possible to live peacefully by antagonising husbands: after all we are to live with them and have to abide by their wishes as far as possible".

Paramount roles of husbands have worsened the independent postures of women elsewhere. It is by and large not perceivable in our case. In fact women here are not trapped viciously in role dichotomy. The main reason being that political parties convinced families/ husbands to sacrifice for greater cause. As because family/husband had been instrumental in women's induction any trouble on their part is obviously minimised. Even if there are some unforeseen strains they are isolated cases and tolerated as well.

Rural society has been exposed to several types of tensions ; somewhere by demonstration or conciliatory effects, by political process, somewhere by structural process like PR and the latest by reservation policy. Reservation has essentially squeezed women in two fronts simultaneously - the domineering male section is hard pressed to accept the hitherto subdued half at par and it is not unlikely to stir them to concede it forthwith, the outcome of which is the manifestation of bias against women. And even in the face of such hostility women are called upon to stand for gender development.

Bias against women is likely to slow down only gradually. For our respondents it is remarkably localised. As it is unanimously supported, its cause can not be explained by socio economic variables. However, perception of such bias against and their determination to seek redressal suggest that it would not last long. The expectation that women would expedite the momentum of women development is not authenticated. It is perhaps reassuring that representation of overall societal interests would do more justice to their induction.