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# Agents of change march on

Meenakshi Kumar | TNN

India has more elected women representatives —1.2 million — than any other country in the world. And they're the gentleface of a silent revolution sweeping the villages

Beena Devi, the diminutive, soft-spoken *sarpanch* of Laharpura village in Bihar's Nauvada district, is feisty. She can debate with a fierce confidence. Yet, till about eight years ago, Beena Devi had never stepped out of the house or been unveiled. Today, she presides over countless meetings in the village, interacts with civil servants and politicians and travels across the country. The veil, she laughingly says, has long been cast aside.

Beena Devi is one of many. More precisely, she is one of 1.2 million. That's the number of elected women representatives in rural India, the largest anywhere in the world.

It's not just about numbers. Village women appear to be genuinely empowered by election to panchayats. Or so says the first AC Nielsen-ORG Marg study commissioned by the ministry of Panchayati Raj. The study has found that 15 years after the 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution reserved one-third of all panchayat seats for women, they are a force to reckon with. Even more encouraging, it found that they have emerged from the shadows of their male patrons.

Rita Sarin, country director of The Hunger Project, an NGO working to empower women, sees this as a natural progression. "In the initial stages of panchayati raj, it was common to have women as proxy members. But with time, those numbers are gradually decreasing. Though, there are still many who are 'panchpatis' or women whose husbands take all decisions." But Sarin is confident that as more women come forward, they will be less dependent on husbands or other male relatives for decision-making.

The initial 33% reservation in panchayats helped force women out of their homes. Once they realised the change they could bring to their lives and villages, they voluntarily - and happily - contested the next round of elections. Many won a second time. But those who lost were a far cry from their former inhibited selves. As Mani Shankar Aiyar, minister for panchayati raj says

Photo courtesy: The Hunger Project



## GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE

- 1 A three-tier panchayat system exists in states
- 2 The gram sabha or village assembly is the life-blood of local democracy. The meetings are chaired by the pradhan and attended by elected members
- 3 The meetings discuss village problems
- 4 Most states reserve 33% of all seats for women but some, like Bihar, allocate 50%
- 5 Nearly 26% of all representatives are scheduled caste, 13% are from scheduled tribes
- 6 Almost 19% of the elected women are illiterate; only 48% are educated to middle or high-school level
- 7 54% are above the poverty line

proudly, "This scale of socio-politically empowered women cannot be found anywhere. Women have done much better than we ever envisioned."

Perhaps. But does this empowerment translate into effective governance? Not really, say some activists. "While they are coming out in large numbers to be part of the panchayats, how many really take part in deliberation or negotiations?" asks Professor Babita Verma, whose research on panchayati raj has brought her into extensive contact with the elected women. Verma argues that in the traditional village milieu, it is hard for a woman, particularly younger ones, to speak up or be seen to make decisions.

She adds that women also continue to face discrimina-

tion and harassment, which only makes it harder to exer-

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cise her powers. Verma offers the female *sarpanch* of an Uttarakhhand village as a good example of a woman who was victimised for being better than the men. The *sarpanch* was very effective and when her

panchayat member, there are many who are agents of change. There's the formerly veiled Beena Devi, scheduled caste and widow, who ignored threats from "upper caste politicians" to contest - and win - twice from an unreserved seat. "People want me back because they can see the work I have done for the village," she says.

Sarin says a female panchayat head is very good because women are more conscientious than men. Their concern for sanitation, drinking water, immunisation and education means they prefer to spend panchayat money on this rather than the typical boys' projects such as building a panchayat *ghar* or a road.

Fatima Bi, from a small desert village near Bikaner, is a good example of this. She received money for a water pump but found her husband insisting she build it near their house. She was deeply uncomfortable at the thought, remembering the long treks with other women to fetch water. Fatima Bi finally consulted the panchayat and the water pump was built at a convenient location.

Aiyar says panchayati raj has enabled the world to hear the voices of women they never would have. Women have been able to participate and this has made them vocal and more confident. "Public empowerment is leading to family empowerment, and that's a big social change".

This is bringing many of them to think of political careers. Sarin says that this is the beginning of a revolution. Women "will take this country out of malnutrition, illiteracy, female foeticide and other ills", she says.

VITAL STATS: THE GREAT INDIAN DIVIDE		
<b>Total women population   49.6 cr (48.26%)</b>	<b>Sex ratio change between 1951 and 2001:</b>	<b>Literacy rate</b>
• 9.2 crore women are living in urban areas while 39.1 crore live in rural areas	• Rural   -19 points (From 965 to 946)	• Urban areas   63.32%
• Work participation rate   25.7%	• Urban   + 40 points (From 860 to 900)	• Rural areas   38.33%
<b>Average amount earned by women labourers per day</b>	<b>Exposure to media</b>	<b>Out of total women married around 2005-06, 44.5% married by 18 years</b>
• Rural   Rs 29	• Rural   54%	• Rural   52.5%
• Urban   Rs 37.7	• Urban   87%	• Urban   28.1%
		(Source: 2001 census; NFHS-3)

