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Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Pakistan

RASHIDA PATEL

oath to the police and the accused woman would remain in prison for several years pending trial. She writes, 'Instead of working effectively to eliminate violence against women, they put obstacles in the way of the victim's right to seek justice. Corruption and gender bias dominate investigation and prosecution of the perpetrators of violence against women. Many police personnel and law enforcers do not consider wife beating as a crime or even wrong' (p.20). It is suggested that violence against women in whichever form it occurs is not only a problem of human/women's rights but at the same time a significant health and welfare issue

ch the state is incompetent to curb. To quote, 'the dismissive official attitudes toward violence against women reflect the institutionalized gender that pervades the State machinery, including the law enforcement apparatus. Partly as a result of deep-seated and widespread biases against women, the criminal justice system does not operate as an avenue for redress and justice for women victims of violence. Victims who turn to the system confront a discriminatory legal regime, venal and abusive police, trained medico-legal doctors, incompetent prosecutors, and skeptical judges. The deplorable level of medico-legal service in the country is itself a sign of the government's lack of will to tackle the problem of violence against women' (p.30).

The role of Pakistan Women Lawyer's Association (PAWLA), where over 1000 clients come every year for advice, meditation and legal assistance is a legal aid centre. The Centre made recommendations from time to time during various regimes for reforms but was hardly considered by the governments. A national alliance of six organizations was established in 2003 known as the Alliance Against Sexual Harassment at Workplace (ASHA) but till now no law has been enacted for the equality of women in the workplace. There is need to adopt strategies against sexual harassment in the workplace like instituting awareness programmes, enhancing employer's responsibility and providing publicity through media, feels the author. Many measures have been suggested by her to eliminate violence against women like tackling gender discrimination which include state intervention programmes and the role of international agencies. The author feels that the negligence of the State can actually lead to increased violence against women but an active government intervention can be a catalyst for changing the historically unequal power relations between men and women which lie at the root of the problem.

However, the theoretical part of the book seems to be weak. The role of women's movements do not get a place in the book. Though data on violence against women is given there should have been a comparative analysis of the changing political regime and violence against women. The author is silent on the issue of inadequate implementation of the international conventions especially, the CEDAW and the reasons for incompetence of the state to stop violence against women particularly that are made in the name of religion. There is no explanation on the role of the National Commission on the Status of Women established in 2000 and how it has helped women in claiming their rights. The author suggests many measures to curb violence against women but does not mention how these measures can be implemented where the traditional forces are active and playing an important role in stability/continuity of the regimes, and where the tribal customary laws are still in a strong hold on the community.

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Intricacies of Empowerment

Francesca Refsum Jensenius

FROM OPPRESSION TO ASSERTION: WOMEN AND PANCHAYATS IN INDIA

By Nirmala Buch
Routledge, New Delhi, 2010, pp.199, Rs. 495.00

PARADOXES OF EMPOWERMENT, DEVELOPMENT, GENDER AND GOVERNANCE IN NEOLIBERAL INDIA

By Aradhana Sharma
Zubaan, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 260, Rs. 596.00

What happens when efforts are made to empower a traditionally unrepresented group? This is the question addressed in both the books under review, although they approach the topics in very different ways. *From Oppression to Assertion* is an empirically based book that aims to bring forth some truth about the many myths related to the entry of women into representative positions in the Panchayati Raj (local government) institutions in India. *Paradoxes of Empowerment*, on the other hand, is a detailed ethnography of the complexities and unexpected consequences of a women's empowerment programme in Uttar Pradesh.

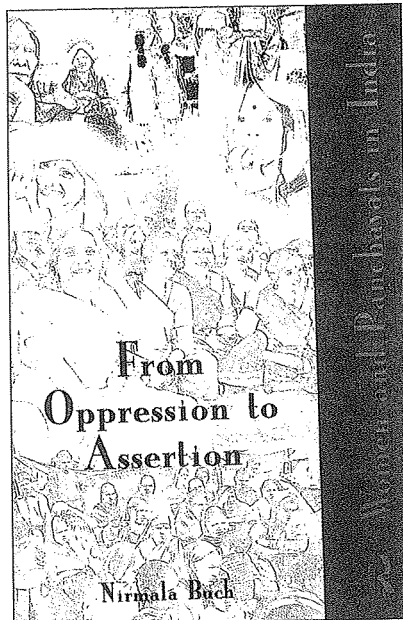
The starting point for *From Oppression to Assertion* is the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution, which granted women the right to 'not less than one-third' of the seats and leadership positions at all levels of local government (the Panchayati Raj system). This amendment has received much praise and attention, both within and outside India, as a huge step forward for women's equality in India. Opponents of the reservations have pointed to the inefficiency of the Panchayati Raj institutions in general, and of female politicians in particular.

The author, Nirmala Buch, is a former IAS officer as well as the Chairperson of Mahila Chetna Manch in Bhopal, the Center for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi and the Child Rights Observatory in Bhopal. It is clear that she has extensive practical, as well as historical and theoretical, knowledge of the development of the Panchayati Raj and the reservation system.

Buch sets out to refute several myths about women's reservations in India by providing survey data and extensive anecdotal evidence. The study comprises nine districts spread across Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Within each of these districts, a sample was selected of mainly female political representatives. Since specific groups have been purposefully oversampled it is hard to evaluate the external validity of the study. The author should be commended, however, for having made such an effort to bring data into a debate that has been ridden with unfounded normative statements.

The first main myth to be refuted is that women supposedly are not interested in politics. This, Buch argues, is clearly not the case, since less than 1 % of seats reserved for women lay vacant after the reservations came into effect (p. 50). The focus then shifts to the myth that women representatives are mainly relatives of people already in power and are exclusively from upper strata in society. It is shown quite clearly that the women in the sample tended to be from lower-caste and lower-class backgrounds and that they were generally *not* related to people who had previously held political positions. In fact, from the small number of men in the sample it looks like men were much more likely than women to enter politics because of family connections (pp. 69-70).

The next myth under attack is that women function only as 'namesake' politicians. It is shown that women representatives show quite a high level of knowledge of panchayat matters. Interestingly, it is pointed out that about 86.1 % of the female representatives know when panchayat meetings take place (p. 72). Not knowing the corresponding numbers for male representatives, it is hard to evaluate whether this number is high or low. This part of the book could therefore have benefited from a more direct comparison between female and male representatives. It is clear from the data presented that many female representatives receive help performing



their political duties. The author argues that women see this as a natural learning process and that people are too harsh in evaluating this as being just namesake politicians (p. 92).

Following the statistical chapters comes a series of short vignettes about the personal experiences of women representatives. This is in some ways the most interesting part of the book. The fieldwork team has clearly done an admirable job of accessing the women politicians. The stories give the reader plenty of anecdotal evidence of the kind of challenges faced by female politicians in rural India. However, it

is not clear how common each of the stories are, and there is a lack of an overarching narrative or analysis bringing structure to the vignettes.

The author's voice is much more present in the concluding chapter, which summarizes the main findings in the book and makes several policy recommendations. One is that the Panchayati Raj institutions, particularly the Gram Panchayats, need to be given much more power in order to be effective. Another is that the rotation system of reservations should be made more predictable and transparent, in order to enable politicians to run for re-election.

Overall this book is a very important contribution to the debate about reservations. Being comparative, it gives brilliant examples of how dangerous it is to conclude much from single case studies. For example, while 81% of the female panchayat members in Madhya Pradesh feel that their political participation has had a positive impact on the practices in their family, only 19% of women in Uttar Pradesh felt so (p. 102). But can we conclude from the book that women have been empowered? The author has chosen a title that suggests the success of the reservation system, yet many of the findings are ambivalent. Clearly, there is some truth to the myth of husbands ruling in the name of their wives. At the same time women report a positive impact of reservations in their family and about half the women politicians report to have other women come to them to ask for help in solving issues (p. 81). This suggests that female citizens have a place to go with issues they wish to address and also that the female representatives are seen as able to help with these problems. Thus, although it is not entirely clear from the evidence in the book, I would agree with the author that the glass is half full rather than half empty and that the results from this study give reason to be optimistic about the effects of women's reservations in India.

In *Paradoxes of Empowerment*, Aradhana Sharma sets out by explicitly stating that her purpose is *not* to evaluate the empowerment programme she is studying, but to critically explore the paradoxes surrounding its implementation. Sharma is currently an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Feminist Studies at Wesleyan University. This book draws upon extensive fieldwork she conducted while she was pursuing her PhD in anthropology from Stanford University, the bulk of which was conducted in 1998 and 1999.

Empowerment, says Sharma, is the buzz-word of neoliberalism. In a neoliberal world, welfare programmes are seen as negative because they create dependency on the state. Sharma argues that the Indian state's sponsorship of empowerment projects is a way for the state to reconfigure itself as a "facilitator of self-actualization" in line with its recently acquired neoliberal profile (p. 59). But what happens in the meeting between this ideal of empowerment and the real life-powerless dalit women in an Indian

village?

The framework for the discussion in the book is the careful conceptualization of the complicated idea of empowerment. The author refers to four types of understandings of empowerment: a feminist, one following the pedagogic theory of Paulo Freire, a Gandhian and a neo-liberal. All of these can be seen as governmental techniques since they see the goal of empowerment as 'shaping certain kind of subjects and remaking society' (p. 22). The first three are seen as counter-hegemonic because empowerment is seen as an end in itself, while the author refers to the neoliberal idea as hegemonic, where women's empowerment is seen as a tool to improve economic productivity.

The running example in this book is the implementation of the Mahila Samakhyas (MS) programme in Uttar Pradesh. This programme was supposed to be different from others in that it was not giving handouts like a welfare programme nor any material incentives for participation. Rather, it was meant to provide knowledge and information to poor and powerless women in order to empower them (p. 56-57).

The strength of this book lies in the ethnographic detail of the events described. Through examples from interviews with MS officers and government officials, Sharma does exactly what her title promises to: she points to a number of paradoxes in the implementation of the MS programme. One such paradox, which she discusses in detail, is the choice of making the MS programme a collaboration between the government and an NGO. Doing so creates all sorts of confusions about ownership. It also leads to MS workers choosing to be unclear about their work to government representatives, because patriarchal officers often are not interested in women learning about how to challenge the state. Similarly, as is explored in chapter 3, the MS workers at times choose to present themselves as NGO-workers to villagers in order to avoid the association to a repressive state, while at other times, they use statist language and imagery to put pressure on villagers to act in a desired way.

While empowerment is about an ability to think critically and self-assert, demands for deliverables from governmental and international funding agencies makes it necessary to operationalize empowerment as something more concrete, such as number of literate women or number of female politicians. The possible absurdities resulting from the need to impress donors is brilliantly exemplified by how the MS workers choose to clean up a village, bring in the best MS workers from the surrounding area and *simulate* a preschool for children in order to impress a delegation from the World Bank.

Yet another paradox is described by the author who narrates how an attempt to build a women's center ends up in a violent fight between several women. This fight exposes how membership in the empowerment programme itself has become a new hierarchy in the village and how in the end people's actions are determined by old feuds and economic incentives. This gives a bleak image of the results of the MS programme.

Overall, this book adds to the study of development by unravelling some of the layers of complexity to the attempt of empowering subaltern groups. The introduction and theoretical chapters are dense, while the ethnographic chapters are likely to be more accessible to most readers. Readers who are not theoretically inclined should consider jumping straight to the empirical chapters. The encounters described in the empirical chapters are beautifully narrated and give a clear sense of the difficulties in trying to implement empowerment top-down.

Both books under review provide great insight into the intricacies of empowerment efforts in India. A key take-away message from Buch's book is that the enormous variation across Indian states makes it essential to conduct comparative studies. From Sharma's book, it becomes clear that disempowered individuals are not a passive and homogenous group waiting to be enlightened by benevolent donors, a lesson it is well worth to remember.

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