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Engendering Grassroots Democracy: Research, Training, and Networking for Women in Local Self-Governance in India

JOTI SEKHON

The author discusses efforts to promote women’s effective participation in electoral politics in rural India as an illustration of feminist politics and participatory democracy. She argues that feminist rethinking of politics and democracy can catalyze women’s effective participation and challenge the structures of patriarchy that limit political action and social mobility. The opportunity for women’s widespread participation in local elections came as a result of the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1993, reserving 33 percent of elected seats in village councils for female candidates. That alone, however, is not enough, as women are limited by a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political factors, such as traditional gendered expectations of the role and position of women in the family and community, caste and class inequalities, lack of education, and lack of knowledge of the laws. In this article, the author analyzes the role of social movement organizations engaged in participatory action research, training, advocacy, and networking with and for women at the grassroots level. Detailed exposition of the work of Aalochana, a feminist organization in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, provides insight into the possibilities and challenges of feminist politics to engender grassroots democracy.

Keywords: feminist politics / grassroots democracy / participatory democracy / women in politics / women’s community-based activism / women and political participation in India / women in panchayati raj or local self-governance in India / feminist networks / gender and grassroots politics

In 1993, the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India granted the reservation of at least 33 percent of elected positions in village councils to women, resulting in the election of nearly one million women every five years. In spite of many imperfections, this is a significant institutional step in promoting grassroots democracy in India where about 70 percent of the people reside in rural areas (Sekhon 2000, 9). However, translating a legal measure into effective change at the grassroots level remains a key issue in empowering women as independent agents in the democratic social process. For this reason, this paper explores women’s participation in panchayats, as these village councils are called, with an analysis located in feminist politics and participatory democracy. I specifically discuss how feminist rethinking of politics and democracy can be a catalyst for effective women’s participation.
for women’s effective participation in local politics in India, particularly by redefining community involvement and activism as political work. I also discuss the possibilities for challenging structures of patriarchy that limit women's political engagement and social mobility.

I begin with a description of the context in which the constitutional amendment was passed in India and follow with an analysis of the work of social movement groups and organizations, particularly one women’s organization, that are working to effect participatory democratic change at the grassroots level. I argue that feminist action research, training programs, and networking constitute an effective strategy for enabling political and social change and enhancing democracy. My analysis underscores the contribution of feminist scholarship and activism to the theoretical understanding of politics in the social sciences and Women’s Studies. Feminist activism discussed in this paper bridges the gap between formal electoral politics and women's political participation in women’s movement groups and organizations, focusing on women’s participation in electoral politics at the local grassroots level. Furthermore, this study contributes to the comparative understanding of feminist politics and women’s political participation.

**Feminist Politics and Grassroots Democracy**

Women’s community-based grassroots organizing and actions signify the profoundly political nature of these forms of activism [Bystrzycky and Sekhon 1999; Cohen, Jones, and Tronto 1997; Naples 1998]. Whether acting to protect their communities from toxic waste dumping or fighting for better schools and education for their children, campaigning for better wages and working conditions or challenging authorities to provide improved services to the community, or resisting domestic abuse, many women challenge patriarchal and inequitable gender relations and institutions. In so doing, they draw attention to many aspects of what are conventionally seen as private matters, redefining them as politically relevant issues of public concern. They also redefine politics to include women’s grassroots organizing. Women’s actions also challenge the dominant liberal definition of democratic politics, a definition that limits democracy to individual rights and electoral politics related to the formation and regulation of government and state institutions. This narrow and formal definition of democratic politics maintains the invisibility of patriarchal structures in society, especially in community and domestic life, that are inherent in institutions, and that have a significant influence on the ability of humans to participate effectively in public life and exercise their rights. Historically, women and minority groups in particular have been limited in this respect. Feminist rethinking of politics and democracy
allows us to re-envision democracy as a broad participatory process in which citizens (and women) "take part directly in decisions affecting them, their community, their work, their interpersonal relationships, and, of course, their formal political institutions" (Sekhon 2001, 880–1).

However, many significant decisions are made within the context of formal institutional and political structures. A key objective for feminist politics and organizing, then, is to translate women's community activism into real power to make institutional changes that improve the quality of private and public life. This necessitates greater participation by women in formal political institutions at the local, state, and national levels. Given that much of women's political action is community-based, it is at the local level that women's participation in electoral politics can have a significant impact on challenging and changing patriarchal structures. Women's participation in electoral politics remains low worldwide, and India is no exception (Burn 2000, 187–91; United Nations 2000, 163–5). By the late 1990s, women accounted for 11 percent of seats in elected legislatures, an actual decline of 3 percent from the 1980s. While women's representation has increased in many parts of the world and is highest in the Scandinavian countries, the trend has been uneven at best. The lowest representation is in East Asia and North Africa, with declines in both Eastern Europe and East Asia. In India the percentage of women in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian Parliament, has ranged from 2.8 percent in 1952, to 3.5 percent in 1977, 8.10 percent in 1984, and in 1998 it was 7.9 percent (Santha 1999, 15). Though accurate statistics are not available, women's participation in state and local elected offices in India is also very low. The reservation of seats in electoral politics at the local village council level instituted through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in India, therefore, assumes significance in ensuring that female candidates are elected.

A formal right to stand for elections, however, is no guarantee that an individual, in this case a woman, can participate effectively. Not only do women need to be prepared for participation in formal electoral politics, they also need to be enabled to act independently and be confident in setting and implementing policies. This usually requires challenging traditional patriarchal institutions that limit political participation and activism. For example, Bystydzienski and Sekhon (1999), Dietz (1992), and Pateman (1989) note that the assumption of a separation between private and public spheres of life in the conventional approaches to democracy tends "to ignore the patriarchal structure of domestic life that translates into the unequal position of women and men in public life" (Sekhon 2001, 884).

In recent decades, numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including women's groups, have emerged as important players at local, national, and global levels (Civicus 1999; Fisher 1998; Carroll 1992).
Working at the intermediate level between the community and the state, NGOs derive, develop, and change their agendas through cooperation and interaction with people at the grassroots level. In India, which has had a formal, if imperfect democratic system of government since independence in 1947, NGOs have played a significant role in expanding spaces for public participation (Kothari 1993; Kothari 2002, 195–203). Activists, academics, and intellectuals associated with organizations, such as Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), the Indian Social Institute, Aalochana Centre for Documentation and Research on Women, Multiple Action Research Group (MARG), and Institute for Social Sciences, are engaged in participatory action research, training, and advocacy with and for women at the local level. Broadly, in participatory action research, knowledge is generated from people in the communities through an interactive research process. Action on the basis of this knowledge and analysis may be directed back to the residents through training programs, and used for networking with other groups, disseminating information, and advocating with government and NGO agencies for assistance and implementation of policies and programs (Participatory Research in Asia 2000).

Focusing on the work of the above organizations generates information about the experiences of people who live and work in villages, and creates a space where their voices are more likely to be heard. In the last decade or so, NGOs have been working to enable effective participation by women in local politics, especially in panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) or “rule of the panchayats” as the local council system is called. Their work provides a unique insight into the ways in which civil society organizations can work to improve the formal electoral process and enhance the potential for a more participatory representative democracy. I will illustrate my argument primarily through an exposition and analysis of the work of Aalochana, an organization that self-consciously engages in feminist politics to achieve more effective participation of women in panchayats. The work of Aalochana may be termed as what Naples describes as feminist activist research on behalf of progressive social change (1998). As scholar activists, the Aalochana team members have engaged in participatory research using dialogue and conversation, have developed a training program, and have created a network to “sustain and promote progressive analyses and alternative political strategies” (Naples 1998, 18). Before presenting my analysis, however, I will provide background information about panchayats in India and women’s political participation.
Panchayats in India

Panchayats have a long history in India, with the earliest evidence from the Rig-Veda texts dating to 1200 B.C. Over time, these self-governing sabhas, or councils, evolved into panchayats or councils of five people. These councils, usually controlled by upper-caste men, were responsible for governing village affairs and managing land and taxes. Caste panchayats also existed to monitor social conduct and ethics of caste members as well as their occupational affairs. During medieval times, and especially after the institution of Mughal rule in the 16th century, the self-governing powers of the village panchayats were eroded alongside greater administrative centralization. Initially the British, who consolidated their rule in India in the 18th century, did not pay much attention to the villages as long as the local elite collected and paid taxes, but after the revolts of 1857, the British initiated a series of measures to decentralize local government. However, the administrative structure remained very hierarchical with little effective control at the local level (Rai et al. 2001, 1–5).

The leaders of the Indian independence movement also debated the issue of village self-governance, but there was little action. Mohandas Gandhi was in favor of autonomy for villages, while B. R. Ambedkar, a leader of the lower-caste groups, argued that villages in India were oppressive for many groups, and believed that parliamentary politics would best meet the needs of people in rural India. Panchayats, therefore, were not afforded important status in India’s constitution. After independence in 1947, however, there were periodic calls for incorporating local participation in planning for community development projects. The government of India set up several commissions that recommended measures to facilitate local involvement through panchayats. The issue of women’s participation in panchayats was first proposed in 1959 when the Balwantrai Mehta Commission Report recommended that two women be appointed to panchayats. At this time, however, the women appointed were often from rural elite families. In 1974, the Report of the Commission on the Status of Women in India suggested the setting up of women’s panchayats, but this idea was implemented in only a few places—mainly in the states of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. The Ashok Mehta Commission Report in 1978 recommended a more radically decentralized structure of panchayats with strong decision-making powers, as well as the inclusion of women and other disadvantaged groups like the lower-status castes and tribes. The idea for the reservation of a percentage of seats in electoral office gained momentum during the 1980s, but several measures for a constitutional amendment did not pass in parliament. Finally, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed in 1992, effective April 24,
1993, as part of the effort to deal with poverty and other problems in rural India (Mohanty 1999; Rai et al. 2001, 5–11).

The Act provides for a three-tier structure of elected representation in panchayats, which includes the village level, the block (intermediate) level composed of a group of villages, and the district level. At each level, at least one-third of the total seats are reserved for women. In addition, there is reservation of seats for the “weaker castes and tribes” in proportion to their population in the area. These are groups that were formerly known as “untouchables,” as well as many indigenous tribes and other historically oppressed groups, most of whom are now referred to as Dalits.

The foundation of the Panchayati Raj System is the gram sabha or village assembly, composed of all adults in the village, that must meet at least three times a year. The Act outlines the responsibilities of the panchayats, as well as the mechanisms for planning and implementation of programs. As a result, every five years three million people are elected, about one million of them women, covering almost the entire rural population of India (Rai et al. 2001, 15–34).

Women and Political Participation in India

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has allowed a significant number of women to be involved in formal or electoral politics for the first time, a trend with enormous transformative potential. Though women’s participation in state and national legislative bodies has been limited, Indian women have actively participated in numerous social movements before and after independence, such as the independence movement, the lower-caste movement, communist movements, movements for land rights, tribal rights, environmental movements, and women's movements (Sen 1990; Gandhi and Shah 1991; Omvedt 1993; Kumar 1993; Ray and Basu 1999). The women’s movement in India has largely operated on the basis of groups and organizations autonomous from formal political parties. In fact, women’s groups have been somewhat skeptical of the utility of electoral politics in bringing about significant gains for women. However, there was a gradual rise in calls for reservation of elected seats for women to enhance political participation and women’s rights in general. Even before the constitutional amendment, several states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Kerala had enacted legislation reserving a certain number of seats for women in village councils, but in many cases women were appointed and not elected. Once the 73rd Amendment to the Indian constitution was passed, Indian women’s movement organizations could no longer ignore the issue of women’s participation in local electoral politics.
However, effective participation was limited by barriers rooted in patriarchal social structures and norms about a woman’s proper place and appropriate behavior in society. These barriers include the responsibility of housework and child rearing, lack of education and knowledge, economic constraints, fear of failure and ridicule, corruption, fear of character debasement and bringing shame to the family. Clear evidence of these limitations became available after the first round of local elections in the two years following the amendment. At the same time, however, early studies also show significant gains for numerous women as a result of their participation.

A review of several studies after the first round of elections (Mohanty 1999; Rai et al. 2001, 105–29) reveals that most states met the minimum percentage of women in local elected offices. Demographically, most of the women elected were from the dominant castes in their villages, and most were married, ranging in age from their 30s to 50s. This is not surprising as older women have somewhat lessened child-rearing and household responsibilities, and married women, as compared to single women, tend to have less to fear in regards to their reputation in the community. Elected women representatives (EWRs) also tended to have very little prior political experience compared to their male counterparts. Though the literacy rates varied from one part of the country to another, a majority of the elected women were illiterate. However, most of the women who became the sarpanch, or head of the village council, were literate. This is in keeping with the overall literacy rate for females in India of approximately 40 percent (Sekhon 2000, 81).

The above studies reveal that many of the women were elected as proxies for their husbands or other male relatives who usually attended the panchayat meetings and made decisions. Many elected women never attended meetings, lacked knowledge of the new law and its provisions, and were often ignored or mistreated. They met with resistance particularly from upper-caste males, and were often subjected to violence, threats, attempts at bribery, charges of incompetence, no-confidence motions, and false rumors about them. Traditional political parties also reflect the hierarchical social structure of the villages, and are reluctant to challenge it for fear of losing votes. Government officials and state agencies have also not been very responsive to effective electoral participation by women, as in many instances it is more expedient and advantageous to go along with the entrenched interests. These studies, therefore, reveal the limits of the liberal democratic focus on electoral politics and individual rights that also conceal barriers to electoral participation imposed by patriarchal norms and structures.

Several women have, however, emerged as assertive leaders and have become independent and effective as they have become better informed.
They were more likely to be responsive to issues of drinking water, health, education, income generation, and pensions for widows, and in some cases, they have also taken up the issue of alcohol abuse. Gradually, many women have challenged limiting norms and practices. As Mohanty notes, “once women become aware of the issues they try to execute programmes successfully and in the process their self-perceptions undergo change. This has a multiplier impact on the children, the family, the neighbourhood and the village” (1999, 31). Overall, individual characteristics, such as education, skill, determination to learn, initiative and drive, ability to mobilize the community and interact with the sociocultural environment, serve as enabling or inhibiting factors. Women were more likely to be effective in their work and in challenging traditional power structures when they had the support of their family, the community, other panchayat members, and government officials, and when there was presence and support of voluntary community groups and organizations.

These research findings have motivated several women’s and other non-government organizations to work as catalysts for enabling participatory politics at the local level. The work of Aalochana Centre for Documentation and Research on Women in Pune in the western Indian state of Maharashtra illustrates the challenges and possibilities of feminist politics in enhancing grassroots democracy. I have been familiar with Aalochana’s work since its founding in 1989 through regular communication with some of the founding members, reports and documentation produced by the organization, and visits in 1999 and 2003. In spring 2003, I had extended formal interviews with the two founding members of Aalochana who coordinate the work on panchayats. I also had informal discussions with other members of the Aalochana team, and attended meetings where Aalochana’s work on panchayats was discussed. During this time, a report on the networking project was being written, and the discussions on this topic afforded an opportunity to gain insight into the style and functioning of Aalochana as well as their work on women and panchayats. In what follows, I chose to focus on three main aspects of their work: the research of all-women panchayats commissioned by Aalochana, the preparation of a training program, and networking to enable community participation and implementation of training programs.

Aalochana

Aalochana, which means critical review, is “a nonprofit research and documentation centre on women . . . established in 1989 by five feminist activists” which aims “to systematically collect and provide information on issues related to the social, political, economic, legal and personal aspects of women’s lives,” and “to disseminate the results . . . through
pamphlets, booklets, slides, audio and video cassettes, films, lectures, seminars and posters” (Aalochana 2003). The five founding members have academic backgrounds and/or social movement experience, and all came together with a commitment to combine research and activism for emancipatory social change informed by feminism. Though the focus of their work is in Maharashtra, Aalochana team members also network with a variety of women's groups, NGOs, activists, and researchers at the local, regional, national, and international levels to develop their programs and to advocate for women. Over the years, the focus has shifted to women and politics, and since 1994 they have worked primarily on women and panchayati raj. As activist scholars, Aalochana’s members “have developed linkages with activists and policy arenas in such a way as to effectively bridge the so-called activist/scholar divide” [Naples 1998, 8].

“And Who Will Make the Chapatis?”

To learn about the experiences of women in panchayats until the mid-1990s, Aalochana collaborated with feminist journalists, Bishakha Datta and Sharmila Joshi, for a study of twelve all-women panchayats that existed in villages in Maharashtra before reservations were legislated nationally in 1992. Findings from this research, conducted in 1994 and 1995, are published in the book And Who Will Make the Chapatis? [Datta 1998]. A chapati is a wheat flatbread that is a staple of the Indian diet. The title of the publication comes from a quote by an elected woman whose husband asked, “And who will make the chapatis?” if she became involved in panchayat and community work. This is symbolic of the difficulties women face in challenging conventional structures. In this section of the paper, I report the findings from the research by Datta and Joshi presented in this book.

As an example of feminist politics and methodology, Datta and Joshi’s research provides an insight into the perspective and philosophy of Aalochana in action. The guiding research question was: “Have all-women panchayats carved out a political space that allows women to transform their lives?” [Datta 1998, xv]. Over a nine-month period, Datta and Joshi visited all the villages, spending at least two weeks in each, living with local families and attending numerous panchayat and gram sabha meetings. They conducted informal interviews “at the women’s convenience, over lunch, dinner, in the field, or while putting the baby to sleep. . . . They seem to have enjoyed the interviews—going by the number of repeat dinner invitations we received” [Datta 1998, xvii]. Often the husbands were present, and made their views known, but the researchers were always able to ask the men politely to leave so that they could talk alone with the women, and the men did not resist.

The varied processes through which the twelve panchayats were formed underscore the diversity of local circumstances and conditions that affect
women's political participation. The first all-women panchayat, formed in 1963, was initiated by Kamlabai, a woman from a wealthy and influential family in the village Nimbut in the sugar-growing area. Her independent spirit and wide-ranging responsibilities from taking care of a large extended family inspired her to become a member of the village panchayat. She noted, "If I can run the house, why not a panchayat?" [Datta 1998, 2]. Though supported by her family, Kamlabai felt that she would be more comfortable if other women were also on the panchayat. Therefore, her male relatives instructed others in the village to have their wives contest the elections, and all thirteen women were elected defeating the male contestants. This panchayat was, however, an exception, and it was another 21 years before the next all-women panchayat was formed in 1984 in Mauje Rui, at a time when there was a more active women's movement in India, and also more debate on women's political representation. Padmavati was influenced by the community work of her father, a village policeman, and the desire to serve her village in a time of severe drought and chronic water scarcity. She could not get any women from the dominant Maratha caste to participate. So she persuaded women from her own lower Dhangar (shepherd) caste to be on the panel of candidates. All were elected unopposed as the potential male candidates withdrew fearing embarrassed if defeated by female candidates.

Five all-women panchayats were formed in 1989 in villages that had been active in the peasant movement led by the organization Shetkari Sangathana, whose mostly male leadership had called for greater empowerment for women in the mid-1980s. Also in 1989, local women initiated the formation of panchayats in Nimbgaon Bhogi and Bitargaon, while in Ralegan Siddhi well-known social reformer Anna Hazare argued for the political participation of women as part of his movement for social transformation. In Bhende Khurd, a sugar baron orchestrated the formation of an all-women panchayat in 1992 in order to maintain control of village politics and undercut the power of a rival group, and the panchayat continues to be a "puppet" manipulated by this man's supporters. In Brahmandgarh, however, women have been active in village affairs largely due to the absence of men through migration to the cities for jobs. They formed an all-women panchayat in 1992 partly to limit infighting among the men. Women continue to actively manage village affairs. Therefore, a combination of the desire of women and support from men, within the context of local circumstances, resulted in the election of all-women panchayats, though not always for the sake of women's empowerment.

Social and cultural perceptions about women's roles and status in society also influenced the manner in which the women were elected. In eight of the twelve panchayats, women were elected unopposed mainly to avoid divisions among women, and a desire to stay away from formal political parties as that often involved allegations of violence and corruption.
Women also feared ridicule and slander, which in fact was the case in many instances where women contested the elections. It was easier to avoid contests in villages that were more homogeneous politically and socially. While all castes in a village were represented through an informal system of proportional representation, the sarpanch, or the head of the council, was often from the local political elite, thereby replicating the village caste and power structure. There was some preference given to literate women and women above 40 years old, though in Brahmagarh all the women in the panchayat were illiterate.

Once elected, the all-women panchayats studied by Datta and Joshi gave priority to issues that particularly affect women and their families, such as clean drinking water, water for agriculture, and building extra classrooms in schools. Though these issues are important all over rural India and are prioritized even in male-dominated and mixed panchayats, several males interviewed by Datta and Joshi also commented that the women's panchayats had been more effective in actually improving the water supply by installing taps and tube wells and constructing new wells and water tanks (Datta 1998, 117–22). Moreover, this and other studies show that women active in community-based politics do not always separate women's issues and community issues, and view their interests as closely linked to community and family interests (Naples 1998; Bystydzienski and Sekhon 1999). For instance, a clean and reliable water supply has a significant impact on the community but particularly on the lives of women as they use water for cooking, sanitation, and agriculture. Building extra classrooms, adding teachers, and higher grade levels to local schools has an important effect on the education of girls as rural parents are reluctant to send girls to neighboring villages and towns. In Vitner, the panchayat extended the local village school from fourth grade to seventh grade, enabling girls to go to school until at least seventh grade (Datta 1998, 95).

However, the all-women panchayats were not as successful in addressing issues such as alcoholism, dowry, and division of labor in the household that would challenge male authority and practices more directly. In Metikheda, for example, women were able to resolve the fodder crisis by releasing cows to graze in the forest, thereby challenging the government rules. But even though many women complained about the problem with men drinking and gambling, they did not speak up when the panchayat called a meeting with the men to discuss the issue. As Datta and Joshi note, “It is much easier to meet women’s practical needs than to address women’s strategic interests” usually because “fighting against rape, unequal wages, alcoholism, domestic violence usually confront male interests and are resisted” (Datta 1998, 89). Moreover, women in panchayats in this study were elected before the 73rd Amendment, and did not undergo any training connecting their political activism with feminism as, for example, Aalochna undertook later. In Bitargaon, however,
the women’s panchayat was successful in banning liquor sales. It should also be noted that the very act of being elected to the panchayat for many women is in itself a challenge to patriarchy.

Women used both formal and informal mechanisms to get programs implemented. If formal channels failed to get an official response, women often resorted to creative informal methods. For instance, once in Bitargaoan, the sarpanch told the local visiting state legislative assembly member that they would like to offer him tea, but that there was no water to make it, thereby underscoring the issue of water scarcity and the need to do something about it. In other instances, the women marched in protest, levied fines for nonparticipation, or released cattle to prevent encroachment on common land in order to carry forward their work.

Opinions varied among women as to the benefits of the work done by the all-women councils. Women from the lower castes in particular felt that their issues were often neglected, not because of overt discrimination, but because their interests differed from those of women of the middle and upper castes. In Brahmangarh, for example, the sarpanch, Pushpalata, who comes from a large landowning family, expresses a lot of satisfaction with the work of the panchayat. Alka, meanwhile, who is from a lower status caste, does not believe that her community has benefited as they still lack water connections and street lights in their part of the village, even though some of this is due to their inability to pay for the services (Datta 1998, 27–30). In most instances, the sarpanch and a few women seemed to shoulder most of the responsibility and workload. While some women complained about this, others were quite content to let a few women do the work.

At the personal level, however, many panchayat members stated in conversations and interviews with Datta and Joshi that they gained recognition and respect within the community, as well as increased mobility, awareness and knowledge, and greater confidence. Many women also reported enhanced status and influence within the family. They displayed greater consciousness of their roles as women, and wanted more education and opportunities for their daughters. Many expressed satisfaction at having more time and a space to discuss their affairs. However, women still do not publicly challenge many traditions that are indicative of their subordination to males. In Vitner, for example, by the mid-1990s women owned some land in about half the families due to land rights granted as a result of the influence of the peasant organization, Shetkari Sangathana. This, coupled with the all-women panchayat, gave many women a strong sense of autonomy and independence. But many women underplayed their influence and continued to show subservience to men in public by not wearing shoes in their presence, by not challenging them publicly, and by acquiescing to dowry payments at the marriage of daughters (Datta 1998, 107–9).
The research by Datta and Joshi reveals that though effective change takes place over a long period of time, many traditional political and cultural attitudes and practices had been challenged, and a process of change was underway in these villages (Datta 1998). At least some of the change was due to awareness related to all-women panchayats, even though cultural, economic, and political currents operating in the wider society also have an impact. Nirmala Sathe, a founding member of Aalochana, notes that many of the former and current members of the all-women panchayats also became more aware of the significance of their own historic role and felt very important as subjects of this research (Sathe 2003). This research also underscored for Aalochana the need to make concerted efforts with women and their communities in order to enable effective participatory change promised by the constitutional amendment.

**The Training Kit**

It was clear that with the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, more women would be elected to local bodies. What they lacked, says Nirmala Sathe, was "political education and experience to be effective in panchayats" (Sathe 2003). Aalochana team members, Medha, Vandana, as well as Nirmala, planned to develop a training program to help clarify the meaning of politics in connection with gender, caste, and class from an explicitly feminist standpoint and enable organization and collective action. A series of intensive meetings and discussions with women in three clusters of villages during 1996 and 1997 resulted in the production of three booklets, a slide show, and a set of posters, in the local language Marathi and in English, as the basis of a participatory and discussion-oriented training program. One booklet, titled *Politics, Panchayat Raj and Women*, focuses on developing a broad definition of politics in order to make it more participatory and inclusive of formal and informal dimensions of action. Taking a feminist stance, Nirmala Sathe and Lalita Joshi note that "the coming together of women, their mobilization, protests, militancy and strategies are all expressions of political participation or activism" (1999, 1). Information on the constitutional amendment and how the three levels of local self-governance operate are clarified. Strategies to include women’s issues as a central focus of the work of panchayats are discussed. Four case studies of women’s activism in people’s movements in other parts of the country are included in a second booklet, *Profiles in Courage* (Sathe and Kulkarni 1999). Stories from movements for land rights, the environment, indigenous group rights, and alcoholism illustrate women’s political activism and are designed to inspire the women being trained to also become part of political action for change. Lessons learned from *And Who Will Make the Chapatis!* are incorporated in a third booklet, *Forging Ahead in Politics* (Sathe, Kulkarni, and Kamble...
The cases of Metikheda, Vitner, Brahmanghar, and Bitargaon form the basis of questions and issues for discussion, many of which challenge oppressive traditions and patriarchal assumptions, and offer ideas for effective action. Focus is on ways to include diverse constituencies in the villages, such as men, lower castes, and tribal groups to improve the community as a whole.

A book of games and role playing to impart skills related to methods and strategies for consciousness raising and mobilizing women was also developed by Aalochana. A slide show depicts the story of Nani, an illiterate woman who became the sarpanch of the panchayat in Bitargaon. She relates the process of her personal and political growth and stories of how initially as a young widow she had to disguise herself as a man to sell produce from her land in order to support herself and her young son. Gradually, her perseverance and hard work won her tremendous respect and admiration in the village. Ten posters are used to assist in discussions and raise questions related to politics, caste, gender, and class. In addition, films from the Aalochana archives are used for training.

**Networking for Change**

Alongside using the training kit, Aalochana launched a three-year program in 2000 to develop a network of organizations to work on training and education for panchayats, focusing on the Pune district in Maharashtra. Purushothaman (1998) argues that networks among women's groups and NGOs allow for greater visibility that is necessary when working with state institutions and government officials. Twenty-five individuals, mostly women, from ten community-based organizations were recruited for training on issues affecting the community. As Medha Kotwal and Vandana Kulkarni note in the Aalochana publication, *Moving From Visibility to Effectivity*,

> Strengthening the civil society we think is crucial to ensuring the future of democracy, [and] if panchayat raj is to be made a success what is needed is the mobilization of people as a whole, for them to become active participants in the decision-making process of the village. The gram sabhas had to be rejuvenated . . . Thus, addressing the community as a whole, where both elected and non-elected, men as well as women, are involved in the process of learning, would ensure continuity. (Aalochana 2003, 13)

A participatory community, they theorized, will lead to strong and effective panchayats and prepare women to run for political office.

The community-based networking program is also indicative of the skepticism surrounding electoral politics in the Indian women's movement, and constitutes a feminist critique of conventional liberal democratic politics. As studies by Bystydzienski in Norway (1995), Yoon in
Sub-Saharan Africa (2004), and others in India reveal, the formal right to vote or reserving seats in elections, and even electing all-women panchayats are not enough to enable effective participation and empowerment for women and other marginalized groups. Observations among elected women representatives in India also show that they have been more effective in regions where the status of women is higher, where there have been more social movements, and where there are supportive community-based organizations (Santha 1999; Rai et al. 2001; Multiple Action Research Group 1997).

Through a participatory, interactive, and informal process, the networking project focused on developing a feminist perspective on how “caste, patriarchy and class operate to keep the interests of the upper-caste men and classes intact, how they manipulate the day to day functioning of the elected bodies using existing legal loopholes” (Aalochana 2003, 17). Aalochana activists organized a series of camps over a period of two years to develop an understanding of issues of gender equality, casteism, the reservation of seats in electoral politics for women and lower castes, religious fundamentalism, and related violence and oppression, and the structure and effective functioning of panchayats. Participants also developed a variety of skills, such as creating and using street plays, songs, stories, posters, and games for generating awareness and mobilization, conducting public meetings, documenting their work, and writing reports.

During this period, mainly 2001 and 2002, the training program itself was developed, modified, and implemented as deemed appropriate through a multi-level process of networking. Five meetings were held with the ten network partner organizations in order to generate feedback and ideas for improving the program. Every three months the trainees gathered for a three-day camp to provide personal space and “freedom to make friends, to share their experiences and learn from each other without the pressure or presence of their families or organizational heads” (Kotwal 2003). The trainees then went back to their organizations and communities to arrange follow-up meetings designed to mobilize people, assess how best to translate knowledge and skills into practice, and generate ideas for future training. This led to the realization of the need to network and dialogue consistently with the elected women representatives [EWRs] of the panchayats and other local women’s groups, resulting in several gatherings in the villages and in Pune for EWRs during 2002.

The participants also connected with groups in other parts of Maharashtra and the country to learn from their experiences working in other rural communities. A national workshop titled “Moving From Visibility to Effectivity” on panchayati raj was held in December 2002 with 70 participants, including representatives from organizations in seven Indian states. Some of the questions and issues raised were:
• the nature of the relationship between women's networks and the traditional political parties, and whether networks can emerge as alternatives to formal political parties;
• if decentralized planning itself can ensure democracy in terms of gender relations;
• to ensure that traditional groups like caste panchayats or newly created groups and co-operatives do not undermine the work of elected panchayats;
• how to ensure that the rights of all citizens, especially the poor and marginalized, to livelihood, education, health, and housing are protected;
• the relationship between participatory democracy and representative democracy;
• how to make women's issues also the issues of panchayats;
• how to tackle issues of urban governance, communal violence, and unrest;
• how to connect with the women's movement, and other social movements such as the Dalit (lower caste), indigenous, and environmental movements; and
• how to make gram sabhas, or village assemblies, stronger.

Immediate Effects: Networking on Attitudes and Actions

After the two-year process of networking and training, some changes at the individual, organizational, and community levels were evident to Vandana Kulkarni and other Aalochana team members, even though it was not possible to predict whether these would be lasting (Kulkarni 2003). Many women expressed more self-confidence in their lives and work in the communities, and in taking on difficult issues. Meenakshi, for instance, firmly argued in the gram sabha of her village for the right of a poor woman with an alcoholic husband to be allotted a house under a program for deserted women. And the three women from Sadhana village were almost illiterate, with only one having a limited ability to write. However, Putlabai would diligently take notes and share ideas with the others. And Leelabai was very adept at grasping complex issues and articulating them in a clear and simple way. Undaunted by the task and their limitations, they were on par with the others by the end of the training (Aalochana 2003, 107-10).

Many participants in the networking project also acknowledged changes in their own personal attitudes. Sugandha, for example, was active in her community but held very traditional views about a woman's role in the family. By the end of the program, she was of the opinion that she and other women should be able to marry someone of their own choosing rather than someone chosen by their families—a very radical step in rural India. The male participants were also able to openly reflect upon and rethink their own attitudes about women's work and status, express understanding of their workload, and show willingness to share household responsibilities. Though it is not possible to be certain that these attitudinal changes will translate into real changes in behavior, one male
participant, Dunda Supe, persuaded his wife to stand for elections to the panchayat in their village. He then took on household duties and cared for their child when his wife started participating in the training program (Aalochana 2003, 111–4).

Participation in the training network also had a significant impact on the work of the organizations the trainees belonged to. Many organizations launched fresh initiatives to educate the villagers on gender and caste issues, and work with the panchayat members on community issues using skills learned through the Aalochana network. Many women were also more confident in intervening in the affairs of their communities, and challenging the traditional power structures. One major obstacle to the effectiveness of the panchayats is a variety of other government agencies, as well as traditional village panchayats, such as the “gavki” in Maharashtra, controlled by upper-caste men. In the village of Verwe, for example, the gavki collected certain taxes at a lower rate from a local businessman, when in fact the elected panchayat has the legal authority to collect local taxes. Two women, Usha and Rekha, from a relatively new organization, the Samajik Kranti Sanstha, worked with the woman who headed the panchayat to challenge the gavki and stop the illegal flow of tax money (Aalochana 2003, 114–8).

Sitabai Gaekwad, an illiterate woman with significant family responsibilities, enthusiastically set about learning all she could from the training program. She shared her knowledge with women in her village and mobilized them to become active in the gram sabha and panchayat. Sitabai first got women to attend meetings under the guise of distributing sweets for children. This encouraged the women to attend more regularly and legitimized the use of public spaces by women. Sitabai notes, “I started coming for Aalochana’s training camps and I have never looked back. I have seen the world having stepped out of my home. I am no longer afraid to go anywhere. I feel energized and charged to do things and I want to do a lot for my village” (Aalochana 2003, 118–9).

Sunanda, meanwhile, brought women together in several savings groups as a means to generate discussion and awareness, and eventually, the women proposed a dialogue with elected women representatives to incorporate them into the training programs for panchayats. Sunanda herself was persuaded to stand for elections, and was elected with the support of her family and community. Sangeeta Shingare, the only elected woman representative in the networking program, believes she has become more effective and confident. She has mobilized a women’s group that meets before gram sabha and panchayat meetings to discuss gram sabha issues (Aalochana 2003, 120–4).

In spite of many successes, however, the process of learning and change through participation in the networking program has been uneven. Not all participants attended regularly, and some were limited by lack of formal
education and could not always grasp the issues at hand. Also, many of the skills taught in the training sessions, such as making posters, writing reports, and conducting surveys in the villages, were not used effectively or were not visible. The social context defined by patriarchy, caste, and class, however, remains the biggest obstacle to engendering democracy in the political process at the grassroots level. As Medha Kotwal states in the Aalochana publication *Moving From Visibility to Effectivity*, “The powerlessness of women in politics is related to their overall powerlessness” in society, and

every site of power that is located in the public spaces, institutions like banks, cooperative, market committees, education, religion, jati (caste) panchayats and so on will have to be penetrated. This is the only way women will be able to break the ‘public-private’ divide and the informal male networks of power that exist. . . . And that is a Herculean task. (Aalochana 2003, 127)

Another challenge is to make women’s issues, such as domestic violence, reproductive health, and proper toilets, the issues of the panchayats. The organization Sutra in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, for instance, has been successful in getting many local panchayats to take on these issues.

The three-year networking process, however, underscores the fact that strong community-based organizations, as well as networks among them, are necessary as alternative support structures to create an enabling environment for women and other disadvantaged groups. In spite of challenges, this Aalochana experiment also shows that a well-organized, flexible, and interactive feminist-inspired program can be an effective catalyst for political change at the grassroots level. Indeed, in recognition of Aalochana’s work on panchayati raj, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Maharashtra state government selected Aalochana to implement a three-year gender-training project with elected women, elected men, and government officials in another district of the state. The networking program of Aalochana also highlights the connection between representative democracy and participatory politics at the grassroots level. As such, it is an explicit reflection of the use of feminist methodology and feminist rethinking of the concept of liberal democracy and politics to make electoral institutions more responsive to, and representative of, women and other marginalized groups.

**Implications for Feminist Politics and Democracy**

By highlighting the contribution of the women’s movement and feminist politics to participatory democracy, this paper exposes the limitations of the conventional liberal democratic notion of politics and democracy.
While the right to vote is a significant individual right, feminists reveal the interconnectedness of private and public spheres of life and the ways in which patriarchal norms and conventions inhere in social, cultural, economic, and political institutions to limit women's participation in electoral politics. The government of India recognized, in principle, some of these limitations when it legislated the reservation of 33 percent of seats in panchayats for women. But both the government, and especially women's and other nongovernment organizations, realized that more research, training, networking, and advocacy were necessary at the local, state, national, and international levels to enable effective participation at the grassroots levels.

The work of Aalochana and my research highlight the challenges and possibilities for cultural change and women's empowerment, and add significantly to a comparative understanding of feminist theorizing on politics and democratization. Aalochana activists network with women and groups to create an environment for challenging patriarchal structures. This is significant as Yoon, who in her study of national legislatures in Sub-Saharan Africa, argues that both patriarchal culture and the presence or absence of quotas are significant variables affecting women's representation (2004). She notes that while quotas are effective in getting more women elected, an egalitarian culture is more effective in ensuring that women are not manipulated by limiting cultural conditions. And it is in this context that women's and other nongovernmental organizations emerge as catalysts to work with women and their communities. Bystydzienski also underscores this in her study of Norway, a country with a high level of women's participation in electoral politics (1995). While conducive historical and cultural factors and a flexible electoral system enabled an increase in women's political representation, an active women's movement and women's organizations were instrumental in working to get women elected in significant numbers. Women's movement organizations also were instrumental in ensuring that women were effective and independent once elected.

This article also illustrates the utility of the feminist definition of politics that includes formal and informal dimensions within a single framework. Conventional social science research on politics tends to focus on electoral politics while relegating the work of women's organizations and their community work within the confines of social movements research. My analysis reveals that effective women's participation in formal politics also involves working on what is deemed informal politics in which women's movement organizations and networks engage. Aalochana's work straddles the boundary between formal and informal politics. We see a research and documentation center for women networking with activists and communities, as well as state institutions at the local, state, and national levels to enable electoral participation. Knowledge gained from
these processes is an integral part of strategies developed for intervention. We learn, therefore, that effective networks are a key to participatory democracy, and we gain an insight into democracy as a process involving action and reflection at multiple levels in the private and public lives of people. Thus, this kind of feminist participatory politics has the potential to challenge entrenched traditional power structures and renegotiate power at institutional, collective, interpersonal, and personal levels. As such, this look at engendering grassroots democracy in India also has theoretical relevance for the analysis and understanding of political representation and participation of other marginalized social and cultural groups in India and elsewhere.

This study also highlights the complex and varied relationships between women’s organizations and the state as explained by Bystydzienski and Sekhon (1999). State institutions often reflect and reinforce patriarchy, but a liberal-democratic political system can also allow individual women and women’s organizations a space for autonomous action. These organizations can both challenge and work with the state. Aalochana, an autonomous feminist organization, works to enable a cultural and political environment conducive to women’s participation in local electoral politics. In so doing, it is working for effective implementation of state policy. But by using an explicitly feminist participatory political framework, activists associated with Aalochana also are engaged in the process of transformation of both the state and society. More research and analysis are necessary to identify the ways in which feminist organizations can both challenge the state and work with the state without being co-opted by it.

In some ways, though, democracy is an ongoing process that “can never be achieved in any final form—it has to be continually re-created and renegotiated” (Bystydzienski and Sekhon 1999, 9). The efforts of organizations such as Aalochana can only be effective if there is continuous connection with, and support from, other community-based organizations as well as women’s families. Change, however, is often piecemeal and uneven. As Aalochana’s experience shows, even when women become aware of the issues and act with confidence when participating in political activities and within women’s groups, they are often not able to practice their progressive and feminist views in personal life. However, public and political activities do give many women in rural India a space to express themselves. In a country where women continue to face various forms of oppression, efforts at enabling participatory democracy do hold out some hope. As noted by several people with whom I spoke, even if a small percentage of the women become aware and empowered, this has a significant effect on their families and communities. This is, then, one step in making inroads into challenging and dismantling deep-seated patriarchal structures, and engendering participatory democracy.
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