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April 27, 2010

Women Spreading Political Wings With Help of India's Quota System

By MIAN RIDGE

TENT, INDIA — As sarpanch, or chief, of this northern Indian village, Maya Yadav has fought hard for local women over the past five years. She has encouraged more parents to send their daughters to school and fewer to shell out fat dowries when their girls marry. But her proudest moment came when she negotiated a discount on a bulk purchase of latrines.

Today, Tent, in Haryana State, is one of the few villages in India to boast an indoor toilet in every house.

“Before this, pregnant women had to walk into the fields,” Ms. Yadav, 50, said as she sat in her living room — and office — dressed in a scarlet sari. “No man would have thought of this.”

Despite her self-confident manner, Ms. Yadav concedes that she is unlikely to have come to power had the Constitution not been amended in 1993 to reserve at least one-third of the seats for women in India's 265,000 village governing bodies. More than a million women across India have since been elected into the reserved positions in these panchayats, which administer public services and resolve disputes on matters ranging from marriage to property.

Their experience holds lessons for the central government's current effort to extend quotas for women to the national level. The Women's Reservation Bill, which was passed by the upper house of Parliament last month, would set aside one-third of the elected seats in the national, state and local governments for women. If it becomes law, it will usher in one of the most significant social and political changes in India since independence in 1947.

First, however, the bill must be approved by the lower house of Parliament and by the legislatures in at least 15 of India's 28 states and union territories. So far, its journey has been a rough one. First introduced 14 years ago, the bill has been repeatedly knocked down. It won passage in the upper house on March 10 after two days of furious debate and the defection of two parties from the governing coalition.

The bill was opposed by small regional parties that argued that it would benefit upper-caste women at the expense of lower castes, who already have reserved seats in Parliament, and the Muslim minority, which does not. Critics also fear that the law would allow men to put forward

pliable female relatives as their political proxies.

Its proponents — foremost among them Sonia Gandhi, president of the party that leads the coalition government, Congress — counter that increased political representation is vital for India's women to overcome discrimination and inequality.

Supporting their argument that this is sorely needed is the recent World Economic Forum report on global sex disparities, which ranks India 114th out of 134 countries. Indian women, on average, earn less than one-third of men's wages. Only 54 percent are literate, compared with 75 percent of men.

A deeply ingrained cultural preference for sons, reflected in abortions of female fetuses, has resulted in a ratio of 933 adult women per 1,000 men for India as a whole, according to the last census, in 2001. Haryana, where Ms. Yadav lives, has the most skewed ratio of any state in the country, with 861 women to 1,000 men.

Inequality is especially marked in political life. Despite the high profile of a few female leaders — including Ms. Gandhi and the president of India, Pratibha Patil — fewer than 11 percent of members of Parliament are women.

By contrast, the panchayats stand as bastions of female representation. Academic studies suggest that the quotas have not benefited upper castes at the expense of more impoverished groups. Women are as likely as men to come from lower castes to serve on the panchayats.

And the quota seems to be benefiting both sexes in more tangible ways. One study, by Esther Duflo, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, found that panchayats led by women provided more public services, from wells to roads, over all.

There is also evidence that women were more likely than men to invest public money in services valued by women, like better access to safe drinking water. A study of 161 villages in West Bengal State found that more women (31 percent) than men (17 percent) raised the issue of drinking water in panchayat meetings. And villages with a woman as sarpanch constructed or repaired a total of 24 drinking water facilities, while villages with a man in charge constructed or repaired 15.

Men were more likely to discuss and invest in irrigation and vocational training programs, like upgrading the skills of farmers.

The same research found that women were slightly less susceptible to corruption: on average, villagers were 1.6 percentage points less likely to pay a bribe to the police or officials when the sarpanch was a woman.

Not all the women who lead panchayats display such virtues, however. A recent study of 42 panchayats in 12 states by B.S. Baviskar, a senior fellow of the Institute of Social Sciences in Delhi,

found that the quota had produced both women who were outstanding public servants and those who served primarily as fronts for their husbands or sons.

That is evident in the communities around Tent. A few minutes from Ms. Yadav's village, in the dusty hamlet of Thothwal, residents said that the woman who was elected their sarpanch was rarely on the job and deferred to her husband in all matters. Down the road in the tiny village of Punsika, Virinder Singh, another woman who was elected sarpanch, gave a convincing account of her achievements but then appealed to her adult son to answer any questions involving money.

But in the majority of cases, Mr. Baviskar said, women in reserved seats appeared to be exercising real power.

"In between there were a greater number that were mixtures of the two extremes, but in which women could certainly be said to be on the road to empowerment," he said in an interview.

"Women who would rarely have left home are now going out to meetings, sitting in offices with men. It's a big difference."

Comparisons can go only so far between Parliament and the panchayats, which primarily put policies into effect that have been enacted by the central and state governments. But the experience so far does offer evidence that the practice of preserving seats for women is changing the way they are perceived, by themselves and others.

In West Bengal villages that have a woman as sarpanch, the percentage of women participating in panchayat meetings increased to 10 percent from 7 percent in two years. Women in those villages were twice as likely to have petitioned their chiefs about access to safe drinking water in the previous six months.

The success of the quotas in increasing women's involvement in local government has led five states to pass state-level laws raising their panchayat quota for women to 50 percent. The central government has said it will amend the Constitution to extend this nationwide.

"Nothing in the world is perfect," Mr. Baviskar said, "but 60 years after independence, fewer than 11 percent" of Parliament members are women.

"Without reservations, achieving a proper balance of power won't take decades," he said. "It will take centuries."

