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AUTHORITY, POWERLESSNESS AND DEPENDENCE: WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Authority, Powerlessness and Dependence: Women and Political Participation^a

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Abstract

Affirmative action has enabled the representation of women in panchayats and enhanced their political status in local government. While they now possess authority through being incumbents of elective positions, this has not been translated into power (i.e. the ability to actually effect outcomes). Gender and other social differences hinder the exercise of power by women representatives, and have reduced their effectiveness as political representatives. Thus, what is required is an alternative conception of power which is centred not on the position but on the individual.

Power is an important feature of political interactions; it is both an object of practice as well as a condition. In local governance, these interactions give an impression of a simple, orderly structure of power relations. The undercurrents, however, represent multiple dimensions that are in specific ways contextual and produce their own limits. The perceptions of power tend to change, as a dialectical exchange between representatives or as conforming interactions. There are certain inherent contradictions in the power relations in local governance. If authority and power¹ are considered identical, there would not be asymmetrical power relations in local governance. Although authority is inherent in the position of the representatives, asymmetric power relations are typical in local governance and politics. If gender defines the exercise of power, the underlying assumption is that political authority has masculinist connotations, and women have less power. This, however, implies that all men in institutions of local governance have equal power, which is not true. The asymmetrical power among men would then mean that gender is not always central to power relations. From the perspective of gender and power, hierarchical gender relations have led to the construction of a power structure where

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men have more political power than women, but in specific ways also places certain limits to this power. The limits in the case of men are rooted in their access to various bases of power. There is a 'core' in the power structure of gender, with more diffuse patterns of power at the periphery [Connell, 1987]. In the present context, the core is the political and public space, which is considered an elite domain.

The increase in the proportion of women in grassroots politics is a significant indicator of change in the political environment. However, the system of representation that gives women *authority* through holding an elective post was not transformed into *power*. The marginalisation of women in the political process of local governance indicates that mere 'representation' should not be construed as 'equal sharing of power'. This is also true of men who are unable to gain access to resources of power. Gender and other social differences in exercising authority (although theoretically authority is not gender specific) raise questions that would require an alternative conception of power where it is centred not in the position but in the individual. The weak nature of power in the case of women in local governance draws our attention to the various features of power in the political process. To what extent are gender and power related in governance? Why is the power of women diffuse and what factors contribute to the powerlessness of women? Why are there no women among the elite? How is the link between masculinity, authority, and politics constructed? These issues will be examined here.

Authority, Power, and Gender

Power as a commodity or as an embedded attribute was central to most theories of power. Marxist and Liberal political theories conceptualised power as something that individuals or groups possess or do not possess.² Political power is related closely to 'authority' in liberal political conceptualisation and to the domination of the ruling class in Marxist theory.³ In both the traditions, power is defined as the ability of individuals to influence the course of decisions and outcomes. Liberal theorists conceptualised it as legitimate action and Marxists as domination.⁴ Various definitions have been made which distinguish between power, authority, and influence.⁵ Weber made a distinction between power and resistance, the conjunction leading to conflict.⁶ Giddens extended Weber's formulation by shifting the focus from control to praxis. Power, according to Giddens, lies in 'transformative capacity', i.e., a 'necessary implication of the logical connection between human action and transformative capacity'.⁷

From the perspective of feminist theory, gender relations have always been considered asymmetrical relations of power. Power is explained as subordination of women and domination of men [Giddens, 1979, 1981:28]. There is considerable discussion on how relations of power came to be constructed and maintained, and how women's power

is undermined in social interactions. Unequal political status is seen as related to women's confinement to the private sphere, and patriarchy. The expressions of power—the ideological hegemony and decision-making control — were looked at in uni-dimensional ways as the power of men and powerlessness of women [Stacey and Price, 1981]. The perception of women as weak, and the construction of women's power as 'naturally deficient in a specifically political capacity'⁸ undermined the political potential of women.

The fundamental premises of the liberal philosophy are to provide equal access to power for women which means that they should occupy positions of authority in the political sphere, similar to men. Authority is articulated as gender neutral and the emphasis is on the position one occupies and the power inherent in it. This implies that irrespective of who occupies the elective post and no matter what people might think about the person, the power involved in the position is the same. In practice, however, authority in itself might not result in equal power. Authority for women in electoral politics, which is predominantly a male sphere, would give them greater access to power if there were corresponding changes in the structural inequalities. Authority in this sense is a *transitive* relation of power and has the expectation that the commands are executed [Goehler,2000].

In the case of the elected representatives in panchayats, it is not a simple and straightforward case of power being constituted in the position. The question is not the 'belief in legitimacy' [Parson,1978:213] alone, but the competing structures of authority and the resources an individual occupying elective positions brings into the political interactions. The parallel structures of authority are the ones that are developed over a period where dominant power relations [of the elites] are legitimised and accepted. And this is rooted in and reproduced in the social [including gender] relations. Even when authority is given to the elected representatives who are not always a part of the competing authority structure, the access to different bases of power determines the exercise of power. This is intransitive power, where exercising of power by the elected representatives is related not only to the elective position but also to the capabilities and resources of individuals. Authority inherent in the position or post does not automatically ensure compliance of the incumbent's views, except in situations where the position (president's post for example) also has an executive component, which has to be accepted (signing of cheques for instance) regardless of the person's abilities.⁹

Power in local governance involves several interrelated determinants such as elites, patrons (often the same persons are both), position of the representatives in the social structure, gender values and norms and symbolic interpretation of individual action. Certain

contradictions arise in explaining the distribution of power in local governance. First, authority and power cannot be viewed in isolation from gender and other social structures, that determine the extent to which power can be exercised by the representatives. In the context of women in local government, authority involves opportunity for greater gender equality in politics. Women may achieve equality provided they can balance the asymmetrical position in other spaces of social interaction and their new position of authority. Second, if gender is central to power differences, it does not explain the power differences among men and the domination over others by a few men of the elite. It also does not explain differences in the power among women.

To resolve these contradictions the conceptualisation of power should take into account various determinants such as the structured relations (involving domination and subordination [elite domination], gender, caste, class inequalities), which produce norms and value systems. Power in panchayats is located in various sites — in patron-client relations, the election process, decision-making, potential to prevent certain issues from being taken up, and mobilisation of political support. Examining power as embedded in the larger social structures and processes takes into consideration the changes in the social (and political) situation, which have a direct bearing on power.¹⁰ To analyse the structured relations in exercising power, Giddens' framework is used. Giddens' theory of structuration emphasises the units of the social order, which are systematically produced and reproduced. The knowledge of these structures defines the nature of interactions, and the actors have a tacit understanding of the distribution of power. The interactions and perceptions of the constraints and opportunities that one faces take place within this knowledge. Structured power relations conceptualise power in terms of access to and control over resources, which allows for explaining multiple and contrasting variations in power as an agency. In the 'duality of structures,' agents and structures are not independent phenomena, but are interconnected [Giddens, 1984:25].

Four dimensions of Giddens' conceptualisation of power are particularly relevant in the context of power relations in local governance. First, power is a process, i.e., power cannot be viewed in isolation but is a part of the structured relations and practices resulting in the reproduction of domination and subordination. The capacity to effect outcomes is dependent on the relations of autonomy and dependency among the various actors. Second, power involves the resources individuals bring in to influence or direct interactions. The skewed division of resources and the hierarchical social structure, defines the autonomy and dependency of the actors involved in power relationships. Third, power is intrinsic to human agency, which implies that power is an agency through which a desired outcome is realised, but involves certain limitations. Regardless of the extent of power that the influential individuals possess, there may

be situations where the persons who are in most contexts powerless can counter the domination of these individuals. An outcome, however, is not an indication that it cannot be done otherwise.¹¹ Compliance in a political interaction does not always entail coercion and/or agreement. It can result from a rational assessment of the situation, and/o lack of alternatives [Giddens, 1976;1984]. Fourth, power is relational, comprising dependency and autonomy.

The analysis of power was based on the narration of the representatives and politically active individuals in local politics (which also includes elites). We observed meetings and asked the representatives to give an account of deliberations in meetings where crucial decisions were taken and where conflicts of a political nature were resolved. Assertiveness, control, persuasiveness, and self-confidence were some of the parameters used to assess the power of individuals in the decision-making process. The perception of respondents about powerful individuals in the panchayats and local politics was used to analyse positions of power. The factors that influenced the use of power in panchayats were the personal benefits that representatives expected (in terms of rent seeking), consolidation of their political base, and the bargaining power it gave them in other political interactions.

Although gender was not the only factor in differential power sharing, there were significant variations in the exercise of power between men and women. Women representatives were poorer exercisers of power despite occupying positions of authority, and this was because of weak structural bases of power, norms and values reproduced by the gender systems in the political space, their positions in the social structure, and individual characteristics.

The analysis indicated that at least four determinants of power have a bearing on the extent to which men and women exercised power. They were, first, *positional power*, which includes official positions such as heads of committees, office bearers in civil society associations contributing to greater presence in the political sphere. Second, *social power*, which is derived from their position in the gender structure, caste structure, and exclusion or inclusion from resources that enhance power. *Discursive power* refers to the reproduction of power relations in the political sphere that is defined by the prevailing gender values and norms. Finally, *human capital*, which includes individual attributes that are useful in exercising power, such as expertise. These determinants of power are examined here.

Boundaries of Authority

The dichotomy between authority and power was evident in panchayat politics. The decision-making score, and the power score in the political

interactions shows that there are not only gender differences but other factors too that determined the exercise of power. Asymmetrical power relations that characterised political interactions were not specific to women alone, but also applied to most men. The linear regression analysis of power score shows that several variables influenced power score in politics [see Table 1]. Power score was a sum of the responses to a set of questions on the representatives' self-assessment of their power in panchayats and other areas of political space and decision-making in panchayat.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Power

	Un-standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B		
(Constant)	-0.172	-0.072	0.943
Elite Status	0.828	10.045	.000
Public relations	-5.52E-02	-1.062	0.289
Participation in Political Party	-4.731E-02	-2.005	0.046
Participation in panchayats	6.58E-02	1.386	0.167
Participation in grama sabhas	0.133	1.723	0.087
Gender Perception Score	0.191	1.684	0.094
Civil society participation Score	0.752	11.191	.000
Constraints in political participation	0.161	1.432	0.154
Awareness level	-4.773E-02	-1.405	.162
Attitude towards women's inclusion	-2.054E-02	-1.434	.153
Gender			
Men	1.756	2.010	.046
Income level			
50000 and Below	-1.926	3.138	0.002
50001-125000	-0.227	-0.71	0.478
Above 200000	0.607	4.191	.000
Education			
Illiterate	-0.509	-3.560	.000
Above school	-8.64E-03	-0.293	0.77
Dependent Variable power			
R ²	0.873		

The analysis in Table 1 shows certain significant relations. Illiteracy and low awareness of the functions of the panchayat had a negative relation with the power score. Higher levels of public relations [contacts with party functionaries, officials, patrons] contributed to the power of the representatives. Similarly, participation in civil society [caste associations, interest groups, cooperative society] and party activity enhanced power. While belonging to the locally dominant caste contributed to the power, there was a significant association between higher economic status of the representatives and exercising of power.

The reasons for not being able to exercise power varied. Political power was concentrated in a few men, of the elite, who were either panchayat representatives, or not elected representatives but were active in local politics. The 'structured asymmetries of resources' [Giddens, 1981:50] between representatives [both women and men] had a bearing on the sharing of power (see Table 2). The possession of education, political skills, and contacts, which affected participation and the sharing of power were related to the access to economic and social bases of power. Differential power in panchayats was related to the various bases of power-social, economic, information and political contacts. The t-test shows a significant relationship between the social position of the representatives, i.e., caste, class and gender, and the exercising of power (see Table 2).

Table 2: Power Score, Gender, Caste Category and Elite Domination

	N	Mean	t-value
Gender			
Men	123	16.1382	9.998*
Women	86	12.5930	
Caste categories			
Scheduled Castes	46	11.8913	-6.180*
OBC	119	15.1261	
Among men			
Income			
50001-125000	16	14.5625	-7.004*
200000 and above	29	19.1724	
Elite domination			
High	55	15.3273	-3.223*
Low	28	17.7500	

* Significant at 1 per cent

When the seats were reserved for women there was an expectation that women's election to panchayat positions would enhance their political role and power. An overwhelming majority of women (97 per cent) agreed that they would not have been in politics if it had not been for the reservation of seats for women. But to what extent was this status of women in politics indicative of their power in political interactions? The power scores of women correlated at 0.772 with the perception of authority in panchayats. Women's position as representatives did not eliminate gender-discriminatory practices and asymmetry in the power structure. Equality in political practice was only symbolic. Women representatives were aware of their *de facto* status, and across the different tiers 90 per cent stated that they did not perceive their position in panchayats as giving them power. Power in this context is not *given* but is capacity and 'concerns the resources that underpin this capacity' [Held, 1995:170]. Since the resources that men and women bring into political interactions were not the same, the capacity to effect outcomes or even to counter the reproduction of asymmetrical [social and gender] power relations is limited [see Table 3].

The differential power of representatives was related to their position and involvement in the activities of the political party and in civil society associations. Low participation in political party and civil society was one of the factors in the differential power position of the representatives. The t-tests show that there is a significant relation between participation in political party and civil society and exercising of power in panchayats (see Table 3). Women's participation in the activities related to political parties and civil society was negligible. Women were asked to respond to a set of questions on the level of participation in the activities of the political party. On a three-point scale their responses were on participation in party rallies, party meetings, public protests and demonstrations, canvassing, informal party get-together, voting, public functions, party networks, regular interaction with important party functionaries, and whether they held any official position in the party. Except for voting during elections, a majority of women were not involved in any of the other political activities. Similarly, women's participation was low in associations that had a longer presence and had lobbying power (such as interest groups, cooperatives, and caste associations). Participation in political activity other than the elections is crucial for women's access to political resources of power. The mean score of participation in political parties between men and women was 21.1008 and 12.4419 respectively, and for civil society participation it was 18.2602 and 9.3256 respectively. Among women who had stated that they participated in civil society associations, a majority were members of *mahila mandals* (women's groups) and micro-credit groups that were now defunct.

Table3: Exercising Power, Participation in Party and Civil Society Activities

<i>Participation in party (Men and women)</i>	N	Mean	t-value
Low	28	16.0714	-4.137*
High	70	22.1714	
<i>Civil society participation</i>			
Minimal participation (Below 12)	75	11.2267	-8.753*
Medium participation (12-22)	78	15.5256	
Minimal participation (Below 12)	75	11.2800	-15.529*
High participation (23-33)	36	18.6389	

* Significant at 1 per cent

Being elected members did not bring about attitudinal changes in men to the extent that they accepted an equal political role for women. The t-tests show rigidity in the political attitude to women's inclusion and their equal participation in the activities of the panchayats (see Table 4). The representatives responded to statements on inclusion in electoral politics on a three-point scale, of lesser agreement to high agreement. Men had a more rigid political attitude on inclusion and participation of women in electoral politics. The constraining factor for women was the rigid gender [and also social] norms of participation in public activity which is constantly reproduced in social interactions. Similarly, representatives with higher income levels, and belonging to locally dominant castes had a more rigid attitude on the inclusion of disadvantaged groups and related policies (see Table 4). The question here is not only of women's empowerment through participation in elective positions, but how to conceptualise this with the meanings constituted in the larger social system.

Table 4: Political Attitude Score, Gender, Income and Caste

	N	Mean	t-value
<i>Gender</i>			
Men	123	13.8537	-18.406*
Women	86	25.0116	
<i>Income</i>			
50001-125000	16	15.1250	3.635*
200000 and above	29	11.8621	
<i>Caste groups</i>			
Scheduled Castes	21	17.4167	7.268*
Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Bunts, Mughaveeras	74	12.4930	

* Significant at 1 per cent

There was a difference in the perception of power in the three tiers of panchayats. In grama panchayats, power was seen as centred in a few men who were of the elites [which includes prominent community leaders]. Since the representatives were in proximity to the local leaders, these leaders were able to influence the functioning of the panchayats to a greater extent. Women representatives had no significant role in the functioning of panchayats. Further, even the executive position of president did not necessarily confer power on the incumbent. Power was related to the person who occupied the post of president, rather than the post itself. In three grama panchayats that we studied, the president's post was reserved for women in the categories of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and a BCM (B). The vice-presidents and/or officials influenced or controlled the functioning of the panchayats. This was not something peculiar to grama panchayats.

When there was a weak president the officials' intervention was not confined to their specified roles but extended to decision-making areas of panchayats. If the president was inexperienced, officials dominated in the administration of the panchayats. The scores of representatives on panchayat participation correlated at $-.880$ with the nature of official involvement in the activities of the panchayats. The lower the participation score in panchayats, the greater was the role of the officials. In zilla panchayat meetings we observed that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) conducted the meetings and the president, who is the head of the zilla panchayat, was marginalized. The official's position in the meetings was more assertive and he had a greater influence on the proceedings. The representatives should have been playing the decision-making role and the officials the implementation of the decisions. In the meetings and from listening to the representatives, it becomes clear that rather than playing a facilitating role in decision-making, the officials often took decisions related to panchayats (which otherwise may be considered as the representatives' function). Thus, in panchayats the activities related to an elective position were carried out, whether or not the representatives themselves were involved in these functions.

The exercise of power or the limited influence that women had in the functioning of the panchayats was not a matter of concern for most of them. Most representatives only wanted to get the maximum benefit for themselves out of their position irrespective of their level of involvement. In taluk and zilla panchayats, since the proportion of funds was relatively large, the representatives were more interested in getting percentages and commissions from panchayat works. Who ultimately influenced the decision was less significant for a large section of the representatives if they got a share of the bribes and commissions. Even representatives with a weak base of power showed resistance when they did not get a share in the commissions. They justified the taking of bribes as a means of recovering money that they spent during the elections, and this was

not seen as misusing their elective position. MLAs, MPs and patrons were more concerned that their supporters or their constituency people got the benefits of the programmes. There was reciprocity in the sharing of benefits on either side. While this was one of the ways by which patrons and elites widened their support base, the representatives also expected the MPs to give them funds for development work from the MPs development fund, or the patrons who had contacts with the MPs got them these funds.

In principle, authority is inherent in the elective position regardless of what people believe is the potential of the individual representative. The representatives, however, stated that there were several constraints to their exercising power. In the case of women representatives, the resistance to exercising power was both from outside and within the family. This is the intransitive aspect of power where meanings associated with social hierarchies are hurdles in the exercising of power by the representatives. Outside the family, the resistance to the exercise of power was primarily from individuals who wielded considerable economic power, were of high social status, and were prominent in local politics. Within the family the male members who were politically active played a role in matters related to panchayats, which did not give much scope for women to function on their own. The male family members and the patrons functioned as *de facto* members. The gender hierarchy in political institutions and private space lead to women accepting a subordinate position in politics. The hierarchical gender relations, which are institutionalised, are one of the constraints to accepting the exercise of power by women in elective positions.

Political elites, whether within the panchayats or outside them, influenced the exercise of power by men and women in panchayats. Some of the elites did not contest elections for two reasons. First, they may not have been eligible to contest because the seats were reserved for certain groups. Second, they were political brokers and held power as mediators. One of the means used to control the functioning of panchayats or their resources was to sponsor candidates during elections and ensure their election to panchayats. At the local level they played a vital role in the selection of the candidates for panchayat positions and were instrumental in these candidates winning the elections. Since the representatives were elected through their support, the local elite did not usually allow the elected members to exercise power according to their own discretion. To ensure compliance, the elites often chose weak candidates who depended on them.

Active participation by a few women in the panchayats was for the most part not tolerated. Three politically active women representatives faced backlash from men and no-confidence motions were moved against them. In one of the grama panchayats that we studied, no-confidence motions were moved on three occasions against the same woman

president. Although it was not an easy task, on all the three occasions she managed to get the required number of votes to defeat the no-confidence motions. In another instance, a no confidence motion was moved against the Mandya zilla panchayat vice president and she was removed. Party functionaries claimed that she was removed because of corrupt practices. It was, however, unusual for any party to openly state that their own party candidate was corrupt.¹² But she stated that the no-confidence motion was moved against her as she did not obey the party line as put across by a few party functionaries. How frequently women exercised power seems less relevant when they had to face considerable resistance, and they had to go against the prevailing power structures in politics to even carry out their role in the panchayats.

The examination of power in local governance raises an important question. If women were not exercising power, does it imply that their authority as representatives remained unutilised. Since authority is not transferable, women cannot claim that they were actually functioning as representatives. On the other hand, it is also true that the functions of the panchayats were being carried out by others. This brings us to the vital question of factors that contribute to having authority but not being able to exercise power; and other actors in local governance who subvert the authority of elected representatives. The question to be discussed is how elites and patrons subvert power in panchayats, and why women accept powerlessness.

Elites, Patronage and Power

The power structure is elite centred in panchayats. The political network showed a central core of elites perceived as influential in the political and local community affairs. There were distinct segments of power with members of elites (which includes members and non-members) at the centre, followed immediately by the bureaucracy, and at the periphery there were representatives other than those in the inner circle. The reputational method was used to identify those whom the representatives considered powerful in the panchayats and local politics, and their perception of why they considered them so. The local elites were individuals who had access to and control over various structural resources, economic, social and organisational (see Table 5). The elites were propertied and belonged to the land-owning class with high levels of income often from multiple sources. They were from locally dominant caste groups placed high in the social hierarchy who predominantly occupied leadership roles (such as community elders) and belonged to locally prominent political families. They had a political base and occupied important party positions, were members of civil society associations, and had contacts with prominent politicians, MLAs and MPs. By virtue of their social, economic, and political positions, these individuals wielded considerable power. The

elites at each level of panchayats had one or more of these characteristics. Multiple bases of power were evident in a single individual, making it difficult to classify them under one group or the other. The distribution of power involves, as Giddens puts it, resources that individuals bring in, and this also applies to political relations where authority is also involved. The power derived from the resources that elites possess were used by them as a means to initiate or influence the outcomes of their choice.

Table 5: Bases of Power as Perceived by the Respondents

	Representatives (%)	
	Women	Men
Economic	52	67
Political contacts	41	75
Membership in associations	65	59
Authority	32	41
Party positions	54	69
Elite family status	42	56
Traditional leadership	31	23

Note: Multiple responses were given by the representatives

There was a difference in the perception of who among the elites influenced the functioning of the panchayats at different levels. At the grama panchayats, the elites were community elders from the land-owning group. They were also party functionaries. At the taluk and zilla panchayats these attributes were not sufficient to make an impact on the political process at the higher levels. They were still a part of the rural elite but did not influence taluk and zilla panchayats unless they had wider political links. The elites were not only in a good economic position (they were often affluent), but were usually politically well connected, had a large political base and occupied important positions in the political parties at district or state level. These individuals also included MLAs and MPs. The social, economic and organisational power enabled the elites to influence the functioning of panchayats whether or not they were representatives. They played a significant role in the selection of candidates, mobilising support for them during elections and in keeping the election competition under their control.¹³

The elites were always men. Considering women representatives of panchayats as elites is problematic. To be a member of the elite, women should have their own political bases, high and influential standing in public life, and be in a position to influence the political process at the local level. We did not come across any woman who fulfilled these criteria.

At the grama panchayats the elite were often elected members. In some cases when they were not eligible to contest because of the reservations of seats, they ensured that their supporters or women from their own families were elected. The dominant presence of the elites was evident at every stage. During the elections to grama panchayats (conducted in February 2000) the election contest among 39 per cent of candidates was perceived as being between the elites. The mandate was for one of the elites who could swing the votes in favour of their candidate. The elites supported several candidates in the grama panchayats, as their political reputation in local politics depended on the number of representatives who were elected because of their support. In grama panchayats where the representatives were elected unopposed, the local elites played a prominent role in choosing the representatives. The consensus arrived at was between the local elites, who selected the candidates, and was not the popular choice of the local people. Although, in principle, people had the right to contest or oppose a candidate the right to equal opportunity was not enough to oppose the powerful elites. In taluk and zilla panchayats, women's selection as candidates was related to who their patrons were and the political and economic standing of their families. Power was therefore dispersed and related to elites and not automatically to the elective position.

There is a close link between elites and the patronage system. The patronage relations in panchayats not only point at the power centres but also the direction of the relations. Mentoring, where the association was over a period, was not common among women. There were only four cases where women representatives stated that their patrons helped them not only in their political advancement but also from time to time in developing political skills.¹⁴ Despite the reservation of seats for various sections of the population, control over panchayats and local politics by the elites continued and the patronage system has taken new forms. The elites who were in politics influenced the panchayats through the members they were instrumental in getting elected. These representatives were convinced that their chances of winning the elections on their own were remote, and they were compelled to identify with one elite faction or the other.

There were two types of patronage in the panchayats— the 'patron-client relationship' and 'neo-clientelism'. (see Inbanathan 2001, 2000) The power equations were different in both these systems of patronage relations. The patron-client relationship is a hierarchical, inegalitarian relationship. The status difference [political and social] between the patron and the client was wide in this type of patronage. The patrons were the elites [local landlords, party functionaries, and members of the panchayats] and the clients were the representatives who did not have resources to influence the decisions in the panchayats. The patron-client relationships involved a high degree of dependence on the part of the client. The

political resources enabled the patrons [elites] to influence outcomes in the panchayats. There was, however, a gender difference in the client's relationship with the patron. Unlike in the case of men, among women clients there was no regular interaction with the patrons. While there was no significant difference in the power of men and women clients in terms of political resources they brought into the relationship, men were preferred for two reasons. Men did not have problems of mobility and they were also interested in continuing in politics after their tenure in the panchayats. Most often, the husbands of the women representatives acted as clients to the patrons.

The patron-client relations exhibited not only different degrees of dependence of the clients, but also were contextual. The patron-client relations between the elite and a grama panchayat representative without any power base, and between a locally prominent individual and an MLA/MP were qualitatively different. The level of dependence and the potential to influence panchayats varied in both these cases. While the patrons were interested in retaining their political base and popular support, the clients used this base to enter elective positions and develop political contacts. The patrons who had access to more resources supported the representatives during elections and in turn expected the benefits from panchayat programmes to reach their supporters. For patrons it was also building a political base through the activities of the panchayats. The client was dependent on the patron to get into the elective position, fully aware that the favours received had to be reciprocated.

The representatives who were elected with the support of the elites had no choice but to comply with their demands. The negative consequences of opposing the elites were multiple. First, in the villages, it was difficult to challenge powerful individuals who had access to political, economic and institutional resources. Second, elites used coercive measures to keep the supporters and elected representatives under their control by threatening to withdraw benefits. The benefits that the representatives expected were: loans for themselves, getting funds for development work, and getting elected to executive positions in the panchayats. There were instances where the elites got the president removed through a no-confidence motion because he/she refused to carry out their instructions in the functioning of the panchayats. This was more common in grama panchayats than the other panchayats. The respondents were asked specifically about the women representatives who had better access to resources, and which enabled them to exercise power. The common perception was that these women did not wield power, but their husbands were considered powerful individuals.

Neo-clientelism was a relatively more egalitarian relationship. It was less skewed because both the actors had political resources; and the relationship lasted as long as both the parties involved benefited from

such an interaction. It was present in all three tiers but was manifested to a greater extent in the zilla panchayats. In neo-clientelism the interests were highly specific involving contracts, material, political or other forms of exchange, monetary contribution to political activities such as elections and/or for personal gains. The neo-clientelism was between representatives in the same tier, and between MLAs/MPs and the representatives who had political and economic resources. While the politicians in the state and higher level politics needed the mobilisation support of the locally prominent individuals who are panchayat representatives, the latter expected monetary or other political payoffs. In the case of women, neo-clientelism had a third dimension and the patronage relationship was with the male family member.

During our interviews with women representatives one of the things everyone liked to talk about was about their patron, although in a majority of cases they had only an indirect relation with them. While women did not hesitate to attribute their political position and role to patrons and family, men were reluctant to give credit to the patrons, although in both the cases patrons had an important role.

In panchayats at all levels there were patrons/elites who were also elected to panchayats, and others who were outside the panchayat structure. Since political parties played an important role in taluk and zilla panchayats the control of rural elites over the panchayats was through party mechanisms. For example, at the grama panchayat a no-confidence motion against the president was not seen as a party affair as the personal identity and elite status were more prominent than the party identity. At the taluk and zilla panchayats the image of the party was seen as more important. The elites, for example, used the party whip to remove the president. Instead of bringing in a no-confidence motion, which would affect the party image, the president was coerced into resigning, as happened with a Mandya zilla panchayat president. Similar manoeuvring was resorted to by the elites to prevent representatives from contesting for the president/vice president's post. When there were factions within the same party the representatives aligned with one faction or the other, depending on their patron, and how beneficial the alliance was for them.

During the elections to the taluk and zilla panchayats, senior party functionaries, MLAs and MPs played a major role in ticket distribution, ensuring that their supporters got tickets. In both the districts there were instances of direct and indirect intervention by the MLAs and MPs to secure tickets for their supporters. There were certain similarities and differences in the power equation at the three tiers. In the grama panchayat the predominant pattern of power relations was patron-client relationship between elites /patrons and the representatives who did not have access to resources. In taluk and zilla panchayats there was a multiplicity of power relations in operation. There were patron-client

relations, where the power relation was asymmetrical, between the elites and representatives who were lower in economic and social status, and had limited access to political resources. The other form was neo-clientelism, where the status difference between individuals was much less than in the case of patron-client relations. These relations operated simultaneously between different individuals, and often the same individual was involved in both types of patronage relations.

The interaction between equals in local politics entailed greater reciprocity, where both benefited, or the favour received was reciprocated later. Reciprocal relations, for example, included sharing of commissions, selecting supporters as beneficiaries, and sharing the support of their respective political base during elections. Elections to the posts of the president and vice president in taluk and zilla panchayats were good examples of the involvement of patrons of different levels, who brought different resources of power to influence outcomes. The candidates who were seeking the president's post had to consider several aspects. To win the elections they had to keep their supporters content and also gather additional support. This was achieved using several methods. The party whip was used as a deterrent so that the representatives did not switch loyalties to the candidate of another party. They had to use their political contacts or seek the help of the patron to ensure that the representatives did not cross vote or abstain from voting. It was also common to pay money to important individuals in the panchayats to mobilise their supporters to vote in favour of a particular candidate. A combination of these factors was needed to win the elections to the post of president and vice president. Elections to the post of a zilla panchayat president in Mandya district had two powerful candidates belonging to the same party. Party members and supporters found it difficult to back one of them. The candidates used their power to negotiate and arrive at an outcome that was mutually beneficial to both the individuals. It was decided that they would share the 20 months tenure between them, i.e., ten months each. In the election of women to the executive positions the party played an important role, apart from the money paid by their family to key individuals to ensure that representatives who were their supporters voted in their favour.

There was also deviation from the general pattern of elite domination. During the elections to executive positions, or when important issues were voted upon, the exercise of power assumed various forms. It was on such occasions that representatives who did not have access to any bases of power other than their panchayat membership made maximum use of the situation. There was an instance when a single vote changed the outcome in favour of a particular candidate when the contest was evenly poised. The election to the post of president to the Udupi taluk panchayat would illuminate the dynamics of power in panchayats. The Congress party and the Janata Dal (Secular and United) and BJP

alliance had almost equal support in terms of numbers. On the day of elections, every vote was crucial for both the groups. One of the Congress representatives abstained from voting, and the candidate of the Janata Dals and BJP combine was elected as president. Although the Congress was the single largest party in the taluk panchayat, the Congress candidate could not get elected. In close contests the value of one vote goes up considerably since it can affect the outcome. The resources of one individual, which under other circumstances would not have had much relevance, becomes a critical resource. The Congress representative abstained because she was not chosen as the party candidate for the post of president, and her father who was a contractor was not given any of the panchayat projects. There were other instances where the presence and support of individual representatives became critical for a desired outcome. The common method used by the elites and powerful individuals was coercion or keeping representatives isolated from others until the election date.

Gendered Power

Women's powerlessness in local politics cannot be seen in isolation from other related intersections of power at various levels. Occupying decision-making positions in elective and informal political institutions and organisations forms one of the sub-systems of power, and their position in gender and other social power relations was the other sub-system. Women were represented in panchayats but their exclusion from positions of power (i.e., decision-making positions) in parties, civil society associations such as cooperatives and pressure groups indicates the gender hierarchy in local politics. The increase in the proportion of women in local governance did not enhance their power in the political process. Change in the gender composition in local governance, made possible through externally infused measures, cannot by itself indicate women's status in elective politics. Elite status or occupying positions of decision-making in public life, and women contesting in open seats and winning them should be the parameters of women's political status in public affairs. The findings point out that women's absence among the political elites cannot be construed as a lack of leadership potential among women. Absence of women among the elites was rather a conjunction of gender and cultural precepts, *de facto* politics, and male-dominated patron-client system.

The exclusion of women from decision-making positions and constraints on women evolving into political agents was a consequence of several interrelated factors. First, women's position in the patronage system was one of an indirect nature. Second, exclusion from interactions in the political space reduced the presence of women in informal politics. Third, there was a lack of seriousness attached to their political role and

women's tokenism in participation. Fourth, women's identification with the private sphere centred priorities, and a glorification of 'feminine culture' excluded women from different spaces in the political sphere. Finally, women had limited access to and control over resources (economic, political and institutional), that retained gender inequalities.

One of the reasons for a short-term patron-client relationship was the reservation system, which in practice reduced the possibility of the continuity of the representatives in electoral politics. The dependency relationship between the representatives and their patrons, from the stage of the selection as candidates, and winning elections reinforced the elite-centred nature in democratic institutions of governance. The situation was no different in the case of women where male family members often functioned in the same manner as patrons. In both instances, the dependence was also greater as they were compelled to take the advice and support of the patrons in the functioning of the panchayats. There were both men and women who remarked that having a powerful patron sometimes proved to be of doubtful value, since the patrons continued to function as the *de facto* representatives even when the representatives wanted some independence to carry out their responsibilities.

The patron-client relation, which is a dyadic relation, had a third dimension in the case of women. Women did not directly interact with the patrons. Interaction was always through the male family member. With the involvement of the male family member in the patron-client relation, women were reduced to being nominal members of the patron-client relationship. The patron-client relationship of this nature has weakened the political development of women, denying access to political contacts. Since women did not directly interact with the patrons they were not introduced to the informal networks of power. The development of political skills was also stunted when there were others acting on their behalf.

We spoke to a few patrons on why they did not support women in pursuit of a political career. These patrons did not think that women would continue in politics for long because of family constraints. In a few cases women were encouraged and supported since they remained dependent on the patrons. When the women representatives tried to be independent and assertive there was a backlash, with patrons trying to create obstacles. Patrons restrained women from pursuing an independent line also by pressurising their families. Direct and open confrontation between the women and the patrons was avoided as the men from their families interacted with the patrons.

The relationship with the patrons while essential on one hand, also became constraining when the representatives did not have any

other resources to influence outcomes. While women realised the importance of contacts with propinent party functionaries in their political development they did not want to interact with them directly. Since the patron-client relation entailed interaction with men, it also gave some scope for gossip that would affect their personal life and the honour of the family. This was one of the reasons why women preferred the indirect mode of interaction through their male family members. One of the hidden barriers to women's progress in politics, besides backlash through institutional methods (no-confidence motion, etc.) was the threat of being talked about, or a slander campaign. All the women we interviewed were conscious of how their behaviour was perceived by others. The association of the political advancement of women with possible impropriety through relationships with male patrons was a factor discouraging to most women. There were instances (four cases) where women who were politically ambitious and active in politics were not judged positively. Their political advancement was attributed to their proximity to male patrons. In the case of men such a proximity was a positive factor and often crucial for political advancement. Although women too needed the help of patrons for political development it was socially censured as inappropriate. Most women withdrew from politics and from active participation in local governance to avoid being in an embarrassing situation where political development was believed to have been due to personal relations with male patrons.

When the patrons were family members the situation was no better as women did not have the opportunity of social interaction that would help them in enhancing their political role. An important problem from the point of view of the quality of governance was the lack of accountability when women were nominal members and the patrons and male family members acted on their behalf. There were several instances where women did not know what was being done in the panchayats 'on their behalf'. Dependence and powerlessness of women in local governance as a subverting mechanism has the capacity to become a reverse discourse.

Participation of women in informal networks and associations was not acceptable to the local people, and also the representatives families. A majority (79 per cent of women representatives) stated that their 'being in' panchayats was acceptable to their families and other people but any role in informal political networks was not encouraged or tolerated. 'Politics' in the local sense was not only associated with men but it was also referred to as 'dirty' and not 'women's space'. Only 13 per cent stated that women should be in politics and create a space for themselves. The perception of 39 per cent of women was that politics 'is not all right' for women; 27 per cent were of the opinion that women were not good at political manoeuvring, which was seen as a necessary trait of a successful politician; and 21 per cent stated that it was difficult to compete with men. Women representatives explained the problems associated with

being a part of the informal political cliques, and party meetings. The informal political activities, for example, took place in street corner meetings, or in crowded restaurants where a woman's presence was considered 'inappropriate'. It was not easy for women to get into political circles mainly because of the gender constraints, and the lack of respect attached to women who may attend such gatherings. As one of the women representatives stated, 'the informal meetings do not take place in temples, they take place in restaurants where liquor is served'. The avenues available to women to reach positions of political elites were not suitable since they were male avenues and did not suit the value system related to women. Besides, there were no alternative structures that provided any avenue to reach such political space.

Tokenism of women and the *de facto* politics in panchayats were outcomes of two related factors. One was their acceptance of the role of patrons and male family members in the panchayats (on their behalf), and the second was their loss of power through not using the power, and hence someone else did so. Both these factors contributed to the powerlessness of women in the panchayats. The perception of the men and women in panchayats indicated that *de facto* politics had wide acceptance. Endorsement and acceptance of the *de facto* representation by the constituents, other representatives, and officials led to the dependence of women on family members or patrons. It also reduced the possibility of acquiring political skills. Thirty-four per cent of the women stated that their husbands managed the panchayats better than they would have themselves done. No matter what the people thought about the role of proxies in the functioning of panchayats it had a negative effect on the participation of women and their ability to exercise power.

There were significant differences between the expectations of men and women, and their attitudes regarding their political roles. These distinctions were evident in the perception of their role in panchayats. Among men, 89 per cent were elected to panchayats for the first time, and all of them wanted to pursue a political career. They viewed their election to the panchayats as the first step in politics. On the contrary, 59 per cent of the women did not aspire for any political career and did not think their political role (as representatives) would be repeated; 27 per cent were willing to remain in politics if there was support from the political party and family; and only 14 per cent were really interested in politics. For the majority of women, who were not politically inclined, the construction of political power in terms of self and other was less distinct.

Being an elite was related to the access to and control over various resources, and women representatives had limited access to these and particularly economic resources. Among 17 per cent who were in an economically good position, women did not have control over the family's assets and finances although they stated that they were involved in family

decision-making. In taluk and zilla panchayats where the decisions pertaining to election expenses were those of the husband, women had a limited say in the matter. This in a way contributed to the *de facto* politics in panchayats where the husband functioned as the actual representative and in a sense was also conferred with power. There was a marked difference between women's claim that they wanted to be successful, and their actually making an effort to be effective. Fifty-four per cent of the women representatives wanted to be successful panchayat members while the remaining 46 per cent played down the importance of being successful. Although they valued their position in the panchayats they did not relate it to exercising power. The various statements women made on their role in panchayats indicated that panchayat activity was jointly carried out either with male family members or patrons, minimising their own contributions.

The social roles that women performed in non-political areas (private sphere) promoted a value system that did not facilitate their political role. Women members found it difficult to comprehend factional politics and the intricacies of power brokerage.

Powerlessness and Dependence

The idea of the liberal feminist philosophy that power is embedded in authority and women who occupy positions of authority would automatically have power has certain limitations. Women in local politics are not entities whose authority in panchayats would immediately transform their social conditions and the cultural attributes that are part of their 'self'. Although women have equal authority by virtue of their election to the panchayats, it did not enable them to overcome the social and political constraints in exercising power. The weak orientation of women to their responsibilities and functions as representatives, and greater willingness to compromise in their style of functioning did not help them to effectively participate in panchayat matters. Women considered their presence in politics as a short-term one, and did not see the necessity to develop administrative and political skills. This is in conformity with the gender order that considered the nominal representation of women as acceptable, but not their total participation in politics. Compliance of women with the dominating forces was a conscious decision, a result of the lack of alternatives available to them. Women were not driven 'uncomprehendingly by mechanical pressures,' as Giddens puts it, rather the compliance was a rational assessment of the situation, where power was not independent of their position in social structure and the political calculations.

An important dimension in the exercise of power was women's experiences and identity formation in the larger social context that defined their perception of power. In a Foucaultian sense women did not perceive

their position as representatives as a personal achievement, it was rather seen as involving their husbands, patrons and other prominent individuals (men). The construction of power involved various factors in women's experience related to prevalent gender values, their position in the private sphere, and already existing public role of women. Women representatives played down their political position in panchayats and manifested a dependent role. Women's low perception of their authority was evident from what they considered an important factor in getting elected (other than the reservation of seats). They attributed their election to others, and that undermined their power. The political contacts and economic position of the male family members facilitated the election of women representatives. There was a difference in the perception of men and women on how they interpreted their resources. While men related their position in the panchayats to their own bases of power, women considered themselves less influential and not in direct control of the resources of power. What was important for them was the persons whose views counted when decisions were taken. And these views were clearly perceived as those of *a few powerful men*.

The subjective experiences of women and men who entered panchayat politics varied. The women representatives' understanding of their power, how far they can succeed in politics and the constraints they would face circumscribed their political claims, ambitions, behaviour, and strategies in getting into the functioning of panchayats. They were also aware that their control over the resources that were important to transform their position of authority in local institutions to actual power was limited. It was not worthwhile in their calculation to take an independent position in politics and hope that others would support them spontaneously. The subjectivity was often tied to their identity as women or belonging to particular social groups such as caste or class.

Power was in reciprocal relation to women's gender identity that was socially constituted in behaviours and practices that were considered acceptable in their political role. Male-defined exclusionary behaviour that were barriers to being involved in politics was considered a norm. There was a double-standard in the identification of identity traits that were important for an effective political role. Traits such as exhibiting superior judgement in the functioning of the panchayats, knowledge and political skills, decisiveness, assertiveness, ability to communicate (speaking in meetings) and interpersonal relations were attributed to a few male representatives. Women representatives were seen less favourably in terms of knowledge, political skills, ability to learn and in their orientation to activities of the public sphere. A leadership role in public life gets legitimacy through acquiring political knowledge and skills. Ironically, the same traits that were commended when they were displayed by men were not seen in a similar light when women had them. Assertiveness and persuasiveness, attributes associated with male representatives, were

also indicated as signs of being powerful and influential. The hesitancy of women to imbibe authoritative language¹⁵ has led to the feminisation of their political role. Authoritative voices in panchayats were the voices of men of the elite. Women's perception of power was not directed at the outcome or who gained in the process, but was seen in relation to the larger social process as a reflection of their relations in other interactions.

The explanation women gave for looking at things the way they did points to issues that were not only related to individual factors in the non-exercise of power but also to societal and cultural factors. There was a perceptible gender difference in the boundary differentiation between the 'I' and the 'we.' Male representatives, even while reporting on their election to panchayats or their participation, emphasised the self (for, example, 'I had the support of the people because of my past work', 'I did this for my constituency', 'I know the MP'). Women who were in a similar situation attributed their being in panchayats to various individuals such as their husband and patron, where the sense of 'self' got diluted. The emphasis on 'we' contributed to the powerlessness among women.¹⁶

Signs of dependence and submissiveness that women displayed were to avoid being accused of subverting the authority of the husband in the private realm and neglecting the family. Women did not want to risk doing anything that would adversely affect their family life. The entire process of undermining their political role became a negative spiral with women avoiding power and undervaluing their potential. This also inhibited further effort to learn and play an active role in governance. The prevailing gender order accepted the duality of authority and power, where women had the authority but men exercised power. Women did not make an effort to transcend the gender norms to maximise their power.

Authority for women was not an isolated phenomenon, but included their family relationships, position in the social hierarchy, the dominant gender order, and the ethos of 'women's honour' and 'femininity.' Authority, as women see it, is what Pitkin calls 'being like you, not acting like you.'¹⁷ Their elective position is tied to their other social relationships and women representatives do not see it as a tool to exercise power. Engendering authority is not rewriting the basic precepts of what authority should entail. There is a need to understand that the woman and her social position are interrelated and affects her political authority. Women's view of life regarding gender and other social identities are also important in understanding their political position and authority.

Notes

- 1 For example, in the Parsonian framework power is defined in terms of 'authority', and legitimacy is brought into this definition. Thus, authority/power is also legitimate because it is acceptable to people.
- 2 See Gatens (1992) for a discussion on this.
- 3 Marxist feminism found it difficult to explain gender and power relations because women do not constitute a class, although Marxists would claim that power can be exercised through ideological means.
- 4 A radical Marxist view of power, presented by Lukes (1974) draws a contrast between three perceptions of power. Lukes refers to these as one-dimensional, two-dimensional and three-dimensional views of power. The first dimension of power involves examining issues over which there is an 'observable conflict of interests'. In some instances power is dispersed preventing decisions from being taken on issues, which is the two-dimensional view of power. The third dimension of power, which is Lukes' frame work of power, involves the ways in which potential issues are kept out of politics, the potential or 'the latent conflict, which consists in the contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the real interests of those excluded' (1972:24-25).
- 5 For example see Parsons, 1953,1954 and Barnard, 1964. Influence is seen as the ability to affect the power of others through charisma or moral authority (Bourque and Warren 1981).
- 6 There is considerable debate on whether power should presuppose conflict, since power is exercised to overcome resistance, see Weber (1978) and Parsons (1969).
- 7 Giddens, 1979 and 1981:28.
- 8 See Pateman (1989:96) for a critique of the feminist conceptualisation of socio-political theories.
- 9 Jones goes further and points out that authority is not located in the office alone, [1993:110].
- 10 If there is a transformation in the social context in which power negotiations are embedded, the value of resources that define power will change. The critical resources that earlier influenced the process of negotiations might lose their validity or gain even greater significance. See Lipman-Blumen (1994).
- 11 The potential to do something also implies that it 'could have been done otherwise' Giddens, 1976:11.
- 12 The representative admitted that she accepted commissions. However, we feel that this was not the only reason [or whether it was a reason at all] for removing her, as by all accounts most representatives accepted commissions.

- 13 Elites also played a significant role in ensuring that not too many candidates entered the electoral competition. They often paid money to some candidates to make them withdraw their candidature.
- 14 A zilla panchayat representative in Udupi district attributed her career advancement in politics to her patron, an MLA and former chief minister of the state who was instrumental in getting her a party ticket to contest the panchayat elections on two occasions. The patron also ensured that she had an active role in the party. Over a period of 14 years in public life (she was also a social worker, working for the welfare of destitutes, and an active member of Church associations) she was able to develop a political base for herself.
- 15 Jones (1993) makes this observation in her discussion on compassionate authority.
- 16 We discussed the 'we' and 'I' distinction in an earlier paper, see Vijayalakshmi & B.K. Chandrashekar, 2000.
- 17 See Pitkin (1967:89).

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