

The Business Line 23.09.2009

Empowering women

The recent move to set apart 50 per cent of elected seats in panchayats and all other local bodies for women could spell a new and more active role for women in Kerala's sociopolitical sphere.

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For long, especially in the 20th century, women in Kerala have been accorded the status of a key pivot in the State's social and cultural development. Their elevated status was reflected on superior social indicators such as a favourable sex ratio, high female literacy rates, late marriage, low fertility rates, high life expectancy and low infant mortality rates, to name some of the indices commonly bandied around by social scientists.

Thus, writing in The New York Review of Books more than a decade ago, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen pointed to the fact that Kerala "does not have a deficit of women—its ratio of women to men of more than 1.03 is closer to that of Europe (1.05) than those of China, West Asia, and India as a whole (0.94).

The life expectancy of women at birth in Kerala, which had already reached 68 years by the time of the last census in 1981 (and is estimated to be 72 years now), is considerably higher than men's 64 years at that time (and 77 now). While women are generally able to find 'gainful employment' in Kerala — certainly much more so than in Punjab — the State is not exceptional in this regard. What is exceptional is Kerala's remarkably high literacy rate; not only is it much higher than elsewhere in India, it is also substantially higher than in China, especially for

women.”

Lack of political space

Yet, in terms of sociopolitical empowerment, women in Kerala remain hemmed in by patriarchy and male domination, and they find that avenues into the political arena remain blocked to them despite the State boasting 1,058 women per 1,000 men.

Thus it was a momentous move that the Kerala State Legislature made last fortnight when it decided to set apart 50 per cent of elected seats in panchayats and all other local bodies for women. The proposal is to amend Article 243d of the Constitution of India, which currently provides for one-third reservation to women in panchayats.

The one-third reservation for women in panchayats came through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. States can amend their local State laws to increase women's representation up to 50 per cent. Four States – Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh – have already done it, and another – Rajasthan – has announced that 50 per cent of seats will be reserved for women in the next panchayat election in early 2010. For its part, Kerala, which has 999 village panchayats, 152 block panchayats, 14 district panchayats, 53 municipalities and five corporations, will amend the provisions of the Kerala Panchayati Raj (second amendment) Bill 2009 and the Kerala Municipality (amendment) Bill 2009 in time for the next panchayat and civic polls in the State in 2010.

Role of education

But whether these legislative moves in themselves will pave the way for a resurgence of women power is a rather moot point. The historical roots of the relative superiority of Kerala's women, as Amartya Sen points out, can be traced to State-funded expansion of basic education, which began nearly two centuries ago, led by the rulers of the kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin.

“It is perhaps of symbolic importance that the first public pronouncement of the need for widespread elementary education in any part of India was made in 1817 by Rani Gouri Parvathi

Bai, the young queen of the princely state of Travancore, which makes up a substantial part of modern Kerala,” notes Sen.

Kerala is not quite unique in this respect, Sen points out. “Other societies, such as those of Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Thailand, which have relied on expanding education and reducing mortality rates—instead of on coercion—have also achieved sharp declines in fertility and birth rates.”

Nonetheless, recent efforts to accommodate mainstream gender concerns in local government in Kerala have been stymied by patriarchal interests in the State’s ruling classes. As a result, women as a group have remained less politically empowered in Kerala, despite their symbolic participation in political processes and rallies. With wizened old patriarchs still ruling the roost in Kerala’s political field, women have yet to make a huge mark in the State’s larger political leadership and even in local governance structures, though some experiments like the women’s self-help groups and some panchayat-based initiatives show great potential.

With patriarchy in its modern avatars serving to enforce female subjectivity, the “female agency” of Kerala’s women remains confined to domestic spaces. Where new socioeconomic spaces have been sought for women in Kerala’s public sphere and labour force – as in the traditional industries of coir, cashew and fish processing – these have hinged on women’s supposedly natural endowments such as dexterity with their hands, forbearance and lack of aggression. They have not been spawned by concerns of gender equality.

The new move to reserve half the seats in panchayats and local bodies for women could well change this situation, and lead to greater participation of women in employment and in political action. Next year’s panchayat elections could raise the role of Kerala’s women in collaborative public action and increase their presence in the public sphere.