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Deliberative Democracy and the Politics of Redistribution: The Case of the Indian *Panchayats*

Shirin M. Rai

By examining evidence from India, where quotas for women in local government were introduced in 1993, this article argues that institutional reform can disturb hegemonic discourses sufficiently to open a window of opportunity where deliberative democratic norms take root and where, in addition to the politics of recognition, the politics of redistribution also operates.

Feminists have long struggled with issues that arise out of participation in institutional politics. On the one hand, not participating in institutional politics raises the fear of marginalization. On the other hand, while there is the allure of influence there is also the fear of co-option (Watson, 1989; Rai and Lievesley 1996; Randall and Waylen 1998). In general, the 1990s saw the resolution of this dilemma in most country contexts in favor of feminist participation in institutional politics. This did not mean that the issues of co-option and marginalization disappeared. However, the focus shifted to assessing and reviewing the terms of participation in and the outcomes of such involvement in institutional politics. Also at this time, liberal democratic theory began to grapple with issues that arose from group rather than individual claims to rights and citizenship (Kymlicka 1995; Young 1995; Phillips 1995). Because of these shifts, parliaments, local governments, and bureaucracies renewed their focus on increasing the rates and levels of women's participation (Goetz 1997; Karam 1998; Rai 2000), and used quotas as one of several strategies to do so (Dahlerup 2006). However, Nancy Fraser has argued that quotas reflect a "politics of recognition." Fraser suggests that identity politics allows for

recognition of inequalities within society but that we also need to ask whether such recognition leads to the “politics of redistribution” (Fraser, 1995).

In this article, I build on these discussions, to examine the *process* of participation by assessing whether deliberative politics, together with enhanced levels of women’s presence, can help transform institutions in order to bring about efficient, less corrupt, and more gender-sensitive outcomes. The starting point of the deliberative democratic framework seems to be that “democracy revolves around the transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences” (Elster 1997, 1). I recognize that institutional processes themselves are embedded in structures of social power, which limit the effectiveness of the outcomes of deliberation. The voices of the marginalized and the deprived continue to be ignored within the context of economic and social inequalities. However, if we are not to write off institutional politics entirely, then we must force political institutions to work in a more open and deliberative way to deliver a gender-sensitive political equality agenda. At the same time, if we are to sustain the long-term legitimacy of institutional politics, then we must look also to a “politics of redistribution” that enhances the quality of deliberation.

I make my case by examining the quota system introduced in India in 1993, which ensured that women constituted 33 percent of the membership and leadership of village councils (*panchayats*) and urban local bodies. I suggest that a focus on deliberative democracy allows us to do several things. First, we can make judgments about the processes in which women are being asked to participate, which is important to sustaining women’s participation in the face of a lack recognition of their efforts or as a result of an experience of the political process as threatening to their security or well being. Second, it raises questions about the appropriateness of the current parameters of the political party system within which the *panchayats* function.

Third, a focus on deliberative democracy allows us to examine whether the “politics of presence” or recognition rather than of outcome or redistribution should therefore be the limit of our expectations. Finally, it allows us to reflect upon the ever-present political problem of structure and agency—how deliberation can take place among political actors within boundaries of socioeconomic structures that are reflective of fundamental, and some would argue, increasing social inequality between men and women.

State institutions are gendered spaces that also reflect the socioeconomic inequalities of class and caste.<1> Within these socially embedded institutions the politics of presence and the politics of ideas do not always coincide leading to the undermining of deliberative processes. However, secondary and primary empirical data leads me to argue that there is value in strengthening deliberative processes in the *panchayats*. This is because women *panchas* show, within the constraints mentioned above, a growing self-confidence through participation in local politics that paying attention the processes of deliberation within local government institutions could further enhance. A strengthened deliberative process might then produce improved outcomes for village development. This study demonstrates that institutional reform *can* disturb hegemonic discourses and the politics of presence sufficiently to prepare the soil in which deliberative democratic norms might be able to take root. The deliberative model gives us a framework for holding these bodies more accountable and ensuring that participants in its processes can do so with confidence, thus perhaps disturbing some identity-based power relations as well as delivering outcomes that enhance the welfare of marginalized communities.

The Panchayati Raj System

Historically, *panchayats* (village councils) in India were local, deliberative bodies. An ideal *panchayat* reflected the presence of “difference” within its boundaries, marking different religions, castes, and classes and insisting upon a working process by which difficult issues were deliberated and decisions arrived at that transcended the particular interests of the *panchas* (*panchayat* members). Munshi Prem Chand’s short story “Panch Parmeshwar” movingly and memorably illustrates how a person is transformed by being elected to serve on the *panchayat* and how the responsibility that comes with being a *panch* (councilor) works its magic to overcome prejudice and conflict in favor of justice (1996, 85-95). The title of the story is deeply evocative of respect that traditionally accrued to the village *panch*: *parmeshwar* is a synonym for “god.” Deliberative theorists would love this story—it speaks directly to the transformation of interests as an outcome of deliberation within political institutions.

At the time of India’s independence, Gandhi insisted that the concept of village self-sufficiency (*gram swaraj*) be translated into village self-governance (*panchayati raj*). The promise of decentralized state authority legitimized the new democratic state while at the same time keeping village institutions within the state framework. As a result, Article 40(C) of the Indian constitution provided that “the state should take steps to organise village *Panchayats* and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government” (Kaushik 1993, 20). The process of opening, providing resources for, and democratizing these bodies has continued ever since. The *Community Development and Panchayati Raj* system was established in 1959, taking into account the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report of 1957. By 1962, the *Panchayati Raj* system became nationally visible (Kaushik, 1993). While in the states some experiments with quotas had already

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started as early as the 1980s in 1993, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution addressed the questions of strengthening the role of the *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) nationwide. The 73rd amendment introduced direct election to and five-year terms for all seats of the *panchayats* at all three levels. The elections of the chairpersons of Block Samiti and *Zila Parishads* were to be indirect, with the mode of election at the village *panchayat* level left to the states to decide. The amendments also introduced one of the most far-reaching measures for local democracy—a quota of 33 percent for women, which would induct over 79,500 women into politics. Quotas can be seen as part of the deliberative democracy framework by recognizing that equality of opportunity and access to resources requires at times that individuals and groups be treated *unequally* where they are disadvantaged due to circumstances beyond their control (Roemer 1993, 1995). This acceptance of inequality to rectify historical exclusions, however, is not reflected in two areas critical to the functioning of the *panchayats*. First, the political party system in India, which is deeply entrenched and increasingly reflective of identity politics, and second, class inequities reflected in land ownership and labor relations that undermine the political equality that is the basis of Indian quota legislation.

Next, I will consider the merits of the deliberative democracy framework in order to assess whether this framework is suited to local governance in light of the experience of the *panchayati raj* system in India. I will do this by considering arguments for quotas for women in Indian local government and the social and political challenges faced by women who have entered PRI politics in the delivery of effective governance.

Deliberative Democracy Framework: Process, Outcome, and Context

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Deliberation has been an important part of democratic or consultative decision making in various contexts and locations over time. In the Indian context, *panchayats* deliberated in order to come to consensual decisions. Deliberative democratic theory focuses on three elements: process, outcome, and context. As a *process*, deliberation includes a number of actions: (1) collective decision making with participation by all who will be affected by the decision or their representatives; (2) decision making by means of arguments offered *by* and *to* participants who are committed to the values of “rationality and impartiality” such that they are able to argue in terms of public rather than simply particular interests; (3) conversing so that individuals speak and listen sequentially before making collective decisions; (4) ensuring that the interests of certain participants are not privileged over those of others and that no individual or group can dictate the outcome of others’ actions, which means that outcomes are not known before deliberations are conducted and completed (Elster 1998; Knight and Johnson 1997, 279-319). Feminists have argued that situated deliberation leading to democratic outcomes is particularly suited to the way women do (or are predisposed to do) politics, when they have spoken of ‘transversal politics’ (see Yuval-Davis 1997; Cockburn 1999). As this study shows, the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender tend to undermine the values of rationality and impartiality in the *panchayats*.

As *outcome* deliberative democracy focuses on the educative power of the process of deliberation; the community-generating power of the process of public deliberation; the fairness of the procedure in such a model; the epistemic or knowledge-building outcome of deliberation and the “congruence of the ideal of politics articulated by deliberative democracy with ‘who we are’” (Cooke 2002, 53-87; Elster 1998). However, some scholars argue that the deliberative model is rather vulnerable as a framework for reaching particular (better) outcomes. For

example, Squires suggests that the deliberative framework endorses a “bifurcated model of democracy” that separates participation from decision making, “locating deliberation within an informal public sphere and decision making in the formal public sphere” (2002, 134). Despite some cross-party discussions and support among female members of *panchayats*, the evidence of better policy and project outcomes remains patchy with social hierarchies and party lines containing such work.

Deliberation can only take place in a context that is conducive to open debate, which often undermines social hierarchies and poses challenges for both the process of decision making and its outcomes. Deliberative democracy advocates have focused on *political* equality. This has provoked considerable skepticism. Susan Stokes names the “pathologies of deliberation” that arise as a result: deliberation can produce outcomes that are perverse from the perspective of democratic theory, where hegemonic beliefs and information about how a society can and should organize themselves make the representatives’ views subject to manipulation. The quality of the information representatives need and receive is suspect in the age of monopolistic mass media. Moreover, the quality of information varies depending upon the levels of literacy and formal and civic education available to the representatives (Stokes 1998, 123-39). Thus deliberative politics can provide legitimacy to preferences that are arrived at by a flawed process. This has political consequences. Finally, deliberative processes could, because of their legitimizing nature and the public nature of the deliberative process, produce political identities that are debilitating for those who hold them—shifting of positions over time thus becomes less rather than more possible.

Skepticism toward deliberative politics focuses our attention upon how and what we need to challenge and reform in order to translate political equality into a more socially embedded egalitarian politics. Do we need to take into account the force of the *dalit* (low caste) movement

for equality when assessing the processes of deliberations that women engage in the *panchayats*? Do we need to consider whether, given the force of gendered hierarchies in rural areas, the local space of the *panchayat* is the most appropriate space for deliberation, or does deliberation occur better at a national level in parliament, where resources are greater, the pressures of particular interests not so visibly dominant, and the consequences of one's political position not so immediate (Rai 2000)? Given the role of political parties as aggregators of interests, would deliberation thrive better in a nonparty context without which the possibilities of a deliberative process shifting agendas are fairly limited, even though political parties do provide support and resources (monetary and informational) to its members that would be invaluable in equalizing the resources that potential candidates bring to *panchayat* elections?

Here, arguments of justice are juxtaposed with those of general interests or the common good (Cohen 1989) and we need to consider the "importance of inequalities of power, which generate conflicting interests as well imbalances in capacities to participate in a politics based on reasoning" (Picciotto 2001). The justice impulse leads us to include marginalized groups in deliberation-based decision-making processes and to focus on strategies of capacity enhancement of those involved. As *context* it is argued that the deliberative setting promotes rationality and impartiality, and considers the question, who deliberates?

Focusing on the context of deliberation would also raise the issue of guaranteeing religious, moral, and expressive liberties, both for individuals and groups of citizens' associating on the basis of identity-based differences. These fundamental human rights are routinely undermined through structures of exclusion, toleration of violence against minorities and the marginalized, and in the name of imagined national and cultural characteristics. Finally, it would examine issues of capacity enhancement of civic associations that can challenge well-resourced

interest lobbyists, as well as the regulation and challenging of information distribution through media. This could include, for example, lobbying for less monopolistic media ownership, on the one hand, and the tightening of rules for “declaring particular interests” of representatives, on the other.

There is also the issue of *political* resources—equality and capacity or capability (Knight and Johnson 1997, 279-319). As theorists proposing the deliberative framework acknowledge, “A commitment to political equality involves potential trade-offs with other societal goals.” They concede that “some redistribution of power and relevant material resources as well as an acceptance of inequalities in the treatment of citizens by the state” will have to become acceptable (310). How does deliberation fare under such conditions of relative or absolute inequality? Does the discourse of capacity or capability mediate between political and socioeconomic inequality? The issue then is how we ensure conditions of deliberative democracy by ensuring the condition of “substantive equality in resources” (Phillips 1995, 154) that will build the capacity of representatives to participate, deliberate, and influence the outcome of deliberation.

Political equality of resources would mean procedural (access) and substantive (influence) resources at both the agenda-setting and decision-making stages (Dworkin 1987; Knight and Johnson 1997). Equality of resources also, therefore, means that individual assent to arguments resulting in outcome is uncoerced, and that the capacity to advance persuasive claims is supported equally. That all claims are subject to critical scrutiny, and that all participants should be able to challenge and defend the positions of themselves and others, and that asymmetries of socioeconomic resources should not impede this process. While authority

relations, of necessity, cannot be precluded, they are also subject to challenge, and the response to this challenge must rely on argument and uncoerced persuasion.

Regard to political equality of opportunity and resources can require policies that treat individuals unequally—setting quotas for example, based on caste, race, ethnicity, and gender. This would recognize that particular interests should not be excluded from the deliberative process. The politics of presence can be part of the process of deliberation about why certain interests have been excluded from being represented and how they might be included. This would allow the question of resources to be addressed not through the individual but through recognizing the social situatedness of the individual—through “group differentiated citizenship” (Kymlicka 1995; Young 1995). Here, difference is seen not as a burden of identity but as a resource for “democratic communication among and across various groups, the outcome of which is the more comprehensive and effective form of social knowledge” (Bohman and Rehg 1997, xxv). On this reading of political equality, reasonableness has to be a central norm built into deliberative procedures. Interests, however, bind reasonableness. Can bounded reasonableness translate into deliberation leading to shifts in policy (outcomes)?

Those who answer this question in the negative point first to the structures of power surrounding the processes of deliberation, which destabilize and even block communication and therefore deliberation, and consequently make shifts of political positions either impossible, or perfunctory. In the context of the Indian caste system, for example, the route that has led to greater influence is caste-based identity politics filtered through a formalized party system—hardly a deliberative context. Second, critics would point to the risks of public deliberation that are differentially experienced by those engaged upon it, leading either to a less-than-honest deliberative process or to the playing out of unacceptable risk in the lives of some and not others,

rendering political equality impossible. For women joining the *panchayats* under the quota system, the opportunity for leveling off gender inequalities comes at a risk not experienced by men of the dominant castes. Their merit and their commitment to their families is questioned; they are regarded as pawns in the hands of male relatives and, at the same time, are said to be undermining the family by working in such a male-dominated political arena.

Those who answer the above question in the affirmative argue that entering the political process through an “unrestricted domain” would lead to an understanding of others’ positions, and possible trust in the process itself; reasonableness thus becomes part of the outcome. Deliberative processes need to be grounded in substantive equality that will ensure “that each individual citizens will have the personal resources to participate effectively in that process”—procedurally through ensuring the minimizing of both “promises” (individual and collective bribes) and threats, and substantively through ensuring the enhancement of capacities of the representatives (Knight and Johnson 1997, 293).

Sen has distinguished between the “means of freedom” and the “extent of freedom” both of which affect the ways individuals engage in the deliberative process and even use the political goods available to them most effectively and in their interest (1992, 8). Focusing on capacities highlights the fundamental importance of effective freedom, which is “the capacity to live as one would choose; it is the capacity for social agency [and the] effective use of public freedoms” (Bohman 1996a, 130). Within Sen’s framework, the major politically relevant capacities are (1) the capacity to formulate authentic preferences, where authenticity denotes the interpretative freedom of representatives; (2) effective use of cultural resources, the capacity to be able to use hegemonic political language and concepts creatively, critically and subversively; and (3) cognitive capacities that require acquiring the information necessary to diminish uncertainty (Sen

1992, 148-49). I argue below that the quota based participation of women in *panchayats*, while not reflecting all these indicators of effective freedom, do show a shift in social hierarchies and the power relations underpinning them.

Challenges of Participatory Politics

After passage of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, high expectations were attached to the *panchayats* as spaces of local decision making. According to a *pancha* from the southern state of Andhra Pradesh,

There are so many unrealistic expectations generated by the propaganda in the media without *panchayats* having enough resources. . . . They have made the *panchayat* disabled. Agendas are set not by us but by central or provincial government. We don't have resources, only MLAs (Members of [Provincial] Legislative Assemblies) do. We can only propose [schemes]. We have a lot of schemes but don't set the priorities. Block level governments do that. We only have to implement their projects. (Interview, April 25, 2003)

The question we could ask here is whether this sense of powerlessness in setting agendas can influence deliberative processes, or whether any decision-making process is open to deliberative politics? Do unrealistic expectations set up the *panchayats* to fail and does this undermine the processes through which decisions are arrived?<4>

Similar extraordinarily high expectations of good governance delivery have been placed on women as compared to male politicians. As a *sarpanch* from Uttaranchal commented, "Women have more capacity for work than men. They are conscious of what others will say. We have to take these things into account when we work" (Interview, April 25, 2002). These

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Comment [HLM13]: I'm a bit confused by the fact that these interview dates are all in April on the same date but different years. Can you explain?

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expectations often become a burden on women as they struggle to cope with a host of political and social agendas with minimal resources, training, or support of governmental agencies, a complex and multilateral network of privilege and exclusion and with varying familial backing. Speaking of her first day as a *panch*, one woman said, “I was so worried. This was the first time I had worked outside the home. I didn’t want to be a *panchayat* member, but my husband insisted” (Interview, April 25, 2002). However, the *sarpanch* was more confident: “I had no trouble to work as *sarpanch*. My purpose in becoming a *sarpanch* is not to earn money or influence but to do service. You will always face opposition if you work honestly—as a woman but also as a *sarpanch* because they can’t buy me. Women in the *panchayat* have always supported me, but some men cannot accept me as a *sarpanch*” (Interview, April 25, 2002).

A particular complaint about the membership of *panchayats* was that of remuneration for time and work. Several women pointed out that without a salary the *panchayat* is more open to corrupt practices and to being dominated by upper-class individuals who can afford not to be paid : “We should at least be paid expenses,” one said. The issue of payment is a particular one for women. Being paid is important also because it gives *maan* within the family” (Interview, April 25, 2002). In terms of process, then, the induction of women into politics requires attention to expectations of members, their training as well as remuneration issues. One could argue that such attention leads to improved outcomes in decision making as women are better supported both within and outside the family and that adequate resourcing of their participation allows them to insist upon honest, noncorrupt decisions. However, the gendered contexts both within and outside the home make these issues contentious and complex.

Women’s representation privileges their particular gender identity. Whatever their caste or class, women are expected to be more compliant. A woman *sarpanch* from Uttaranchal

suggested that *panchayat* members found her confidence difficult to deal with and one of the more influential male members refused to attend meetings of the *panchayats* in protest against what was termed her intractable style of functioning (Interview, April 25, 2002). Gendered assumptions about women's lack of education and learning are abused by government functionaries who refuse to give them access to records or even willfully misdirect them about conduct of meetings (Mayaram and Pal 1996, 18).

At the same time, however, women from lower castes are often treated with contempt by upper-caste *panchayat* members (as are men, but there the gender inequality does not add to the exclusion) (Sharma 2000, 7). Nirmala Buch's study shows that "14% of the women representatives came from landless families, 19.5% from families with marginal holdings and 20.6% from families with small holdings . . . [O]ver all, 32% used hired labour and 22% worked as hired labour" (2000, 15). While there is a considerable presence of poor farmers and agricultural laborers, Buch also points out that the *sarpanch* of *panchayats* are of higher-class position as indicated by the fact that while "families of 14.8% representative have [scooters and motorcycles] among chairpersons their percentage is 35%" (Buch 2000). That the women involved in *panchayat* politics are aware of the privilege of class was evident in my interview with a *sarpanch*: "Poor women cannot participate in politics," she said. "It is just not practical. We are not paid for our work. Also a capable *pradhan* (*sarpanch*) needs to travel. A poor woman, if she is honest, cannot even travel. The *panchayat* members and the *pradhan* should be paid if they are not to become corrupt. How can a poor person support herself without being paid? Corruption undermines the work of a *panchayat*. My husband has supported this expenditure [on traveling around the village on a scooter] because ours is a religious and social

service family, but there are limits” (April 24, 2004). Caste lines, however, strongly offset class privilege.

Though one-third of all women elected on quotas are from the lower castes, it is impossible to draw a straightforward correlation between their (low) caste position and the support they get from their families. Interviews with *panchayat* members suggested that lower-caste women tend to get strong support from their husbands, brothers, and fathers. Their presence in *panchayats* is a political resource for the family. The experience of women representatives in *panchayats* shows that the educative and community-building power of the processes of deliberation occurs in some cases at an individual level and in others at a collective level, depending on the length of support that representatives receive from their families and other agencies such as NGOs (see Rai 2002). The existing levels of economic standing and education are also not necessarily reflected in the way women representatives are able to participate in *panchayat* work: “While a woman *panchayat* member from an upper caste background resigned herself to her husband’s diktat in *panchayat* matters, another illiterate women from backward caste performed remarkably well” (Buch 2000, 13; see also Rai et al. 2006). This evidence seems to support Cooke’s analysis that the educative elements, while in some context important side effects of public deliberation, do not themselves provide a justification for deliberation (2002).

In her study of women’s presence in *panchayats*, Buch found that “in the case of women informal source of information like family members and neighbours were prominent as the source of information. In the case of male members, *panchayat* office bearers, government officials and media figured relatively more prominently” (2000, 16). This was confirmed by *panchayat* women members I interviewed who suggested that training programs fall short of the

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challenges they face in the field, that sessions are organized without consulting women on their needs, and that trainers often deliver information in a manner that is rather alienating. Indeed, they have found the annual meeting of women *panchayat* members and leaders that are held over four days in Delhi much more useful and supportive. Others confirmed that they “train” through the support of the *sarpanch* and the more experienced women *panchas* in their *panchayats*: “I have had no formal training. Our *pradhanji* (*sarpanch*) is wonderful; she is so supportive. The previous *pradhan*, who was also a woman, was not so communicative. This one explains everything to us and is transparent is what she does” (Interview, April 25, 2004).

While participation through conversing and listening and through persuasion is at the heart of the deliberative process, it does not mean, of course, that the other major democratic processes of voting and bargaining do not occur in a deliberative situation. However, the focus remains firmly on arriving at a decision that emerges from discussion, argument, and conversation. Women representatives in *panchayats* have used various strategies for carrying their views in the meetings. The first has been to address the issues of proxy male membership of *panchayats*. Living in contexts where women’s participation in public service is tolerated but not encouraged, women have had to insist upon attending *panchayat* meetings and speaking in their own voice. This has not been easy. While a *sarpanch* for Andhra Pradesh proudly declared, “We have ensured that men cannot work for women; we have stopped men from attending *panchayat* meetings for their wives,” another *panch* suggested that male *panchas* cannot easily accept women as colleagues and find it even more difficult to work under women *sarpanchas*: “When it is a strong woman *sarpanch* men don’t like it and always cast aspersions on her reputation” (Interviews, April 25, 2002). Women generally need the support of the men in their lives if their participation in politics is to be sustainable.

Evidence of male support of women’s participation in *panchayat* politics is mixed. For example, there are some shifts in the way housework is being divided to accommodate new demands on the woman’s time; however, women often experience an increased workload. “I get up at 4 a.m., cook the two meals, get the children ready for school, and pack lunch for my husband. After he goes, I clean the house so that he doesn’t come back to an untidy home. Only then do I start my *panchayat* work. A woman, whatever she does, is really the one who has to look after the home,” said a woman *panch* from Uttranchal (Interview, April 24, 2004).

Women *panchas* strategize for political space by taking other women members into confidence, through informal discussions, and accepting the help of their families and husbands. Some have found that formalities of political power help give them the status that is important for acceptance as a public servant. As a *panchayat* member said to me, “I prefer the meetings to take place in the *panchayat ghar* (house) rather than the *sarpancha*’s home; it gives you more freedom to say what you want; you don’t have to feel obliged” (April 25, 2004). Of course, those best able to cope with and even thrive in the political context of local government are those who were politically active before joining the *panchayat*. As the *sarpanch* recounted: “My family was a social-service family. My family always supported me. Together with my father, I participated in the *andolan* (movement) for the creation of Uttarkhand and now I belong to the Uttarkhand Kranti Dal party. We suffered such *atyachar* (oppression) on the 30 September 1994—so many men were beaten badly and women were raped. I was determined to be part of the new state and do service for our people” (April 25, 2004).

In 2000, I interviewed a woman *sarpanch* from a lower-caste/class background who said that she wished the women *panchas* could take their children to the meetings with them. I assumed that this was a complaint about the lack of child care available in her absence. “Oh no,”

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she said, “my mother-in-law is happy to look after the children. No, the men behave very differently toward us when children are present. They want to set a good example to the children. They don’t shout us down or speak rudely when children are present.” Reflecting on the transcript of that interview, I learned that civility is an important part of deliberation and that the participation of different actors does affect the nature of participation within institutions. In the context of the PRIs, participation influences attitudes both of and toward women. Buch’s study showed that “48% . . . have reported change in their attitudes—the highest among ST [Scheduled Tribes] and SC [Scheduled Caste] women” (2000, 22). Women members of the *panchayats* have also reported “new recognition and respect from their families and communities. . . . It is a matter of pride for *dalit* (low caste) women when upper caste men come to her with requests” (Sharma 2000, 13). Buch reports that more than “70% see the change in their status in the family, among neighbours, and among own caste persons, and more than 60% see it in govt. offices and other caste persons” (2000, 24).

The PRI system is a political party system. As such, we need to consider how far participation can be deliberative in the sense of “shifting” political party positions in the face of persuasive argument. Within liberal political theory, political parties are aggregative bodies that represent the interests of their members as well as attempt to secure these through gaining political recognition in government. However, for women, political parties have posed problems of autonomy versus integration, marginalization versus cooptation, and, fundamentally, of cooperation versus competition. Political parties have historically been gendered institutions where women have found only insecure and marginal hold. While imposing party discipline, even institutionally weak political parties have often denied women an autonomous space to work toward feminist goals or to develop strategies for addressing gendered social inequalities.

Comment [HLM19]: Hyphen missing in original? Dalit upper or lowercase usually? You capitalize above, but Sharma does not? Hypatia typically prefers down style—OK to change to *dalit* above?

Comment [ARR20]: Yes, thanks.

Comment [HLM21]: Is the % symbol used in original articles? Govt. abbreviated in original?

Comment [ARR22]: As in the original.

In terms of PRIs, we find that the politics of presence has preceded the “politics of ideas”—political parties are nominating women to *panchayat* elections, but they do not necessarily reflect the ideas of gender equality within the organizations themselves. As a *panchayat pradhan* (or *sarpanch*, that is, chairperson) from Andhra Pradesh in southern India commented: “The local leadership of the party began to interfere with my functions and insisted that I should accommodate their interests, even if it comes to violation of rules. . . . [They] held local party meetings without my knowledge and shared the funds coming from different sources among themselves” (Manikyamba 2000, 4).

Some evidence exists of cross-party work among women in the *panchayats* on specific issues. One *pancha* said, “*Panchayat* members don’t think of themselves as party members” (April 25, 2004). However, competition between parties tended to disrupt this cooperation. As, a *sarpanch* explained, “MLAs [Members of Legislative Assemblies] favor their own parties. . . . Once we [the *panchayats*] have the money [for particular projects] party divisions don’t operate, but to get money from state governments is dependent upon party politics” (April 25, 2004). More research is needed on the role of political parties and how women’s membership of these institutions might affect their work within the *panchayats*. Such research might also shed further light on the relationship between the politics of ideas and politics of presence that Phillips has explored.

Deliberation as Process and Outcome

The *panchayat* quota strategy was adopted as a means to compensate women for their historically and culturally bounded exclusion from public political life. Others, following Fraser, argued that redistribution of resources, which underpin exclusion of presence and voice, couldn’t

be addressed simply through increasing women's presence in politics. However, Young has argued that in the very process of arguing for the recognition of hitherto excluded or marginalized groups, there is redistribution of discursive power taking place (1997). The politics of recognition and redistribution therefore unfolds simultaneously. Attempting to bring these two views together Phillips has argued that it is "in the relationship between ideas and presence that we can best hope to find a fairer system of representation, not in a false opposition between one or the other" (1995, 25). In this context of the disjuncture between the politics of presence and the politics of ideas, deliberative politics becomes an attractive framework within which to analyze political spaces and resources available to women within PRIs, and to assess whether such a framework would enhance these. It is, of course, easy to be skeptical of the functioning of *panchayats*. Social and gendered inequalities persist to undermine the quality of its deliberations and the outcome of its decisions. Quotas for women have not led to changes in women's status within the home, and neither have political parties or governments increased the seats for women to a parity level. One could even argue that women are now carrying a triple burden—working within the home, as farmers and laborers in many cases, and then as *panchas*. Skepticism of deliberative processes is also common. Alternatively, the levels of self-confidence and aspirations expressed by women who have been participating in PRI politics are on the increase (Buch 2000). This increase is in the context of a patriarchal society where quotas were initially seen as undermining the merit-based representation within institutions. While the context of poverty means that poor women and men do not often feel able to hold the office of the *sarpanch*, their participation as members of the *panchayats* increases the confidence that is needed to raise issues of such constraints to participation.

Comment [HLM23]: What's the third burden? Womanhood?

Comment [ARR24]: As it says below – working in the home, outside the home and in panchayat politics.

Despite all its problems, if deliberative communication is a viable future means of enhancing participatory politics and shifting policy as outcome through a process where different procedural mechanisms ensure the presence of groups hitherto excluded, then we can also begin to assess how the inclusion of women (as individuals and as part of a group) in PRIs could influence other levels of politics. Would, as is beginning to happen, women in rural India insist upon the redistribution of land, reviving questions of mobilization for better working conditions and access to social and financial resources (Karat 2005)? This could require a focus on an “empowered citizenry” within strengthened institutional frameworks for which procedural measures, such as the power of veto, “threshold representation,” and “weighted control over agenda-setting,” might be considered. What deliberative processes based on political redistribution of resources should allow for is a combination of recognition (of difference through quotas) as well as redistribution (through enhancing capabilities as part of the equation of deliberation, procedural mechanisms, and information exchange) to empower representatives to influence policy outcomes as well as change the nature of the debates themselves (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 3). Finally, would deliberative politics allow representatives to go beyond the group identities with which they started—especially in the context of quotas based on recognition of historical exclusions of groups—to become “empowered citizens” through the process of deliberation, through “rooting” as well as “shifting” their “original positions”?

Phillips reminds us of the 1970s debates that distinguished between inequality based on the terms of distribution and inequality based on the terms of production, “The former dealing in quantifiable levels of income and wealth, the latter in the power relations that expose workers to the commands of employers, subject them to exploitation, and alienate them from the very labour that could be giving meaning to their lives” (1999, 16). She argues that today few would expect

to eliminate (as opposed to ameliorate) structural inequalities embedded in production regimes of capitalism, and she suggests that the focus of debate be on inequality of distribution (17). Only in this context, can the issue of capacity enhancement be linked directly to that of redistribution of resources. This might lead to tradeoffs with other societal goals, which would entail redistribution of power and material resources as well as acceptance of inequality in treatment of groups and individual by the state (Knight and Johnson 1997, 310). Negotiations with and challenges to the state then become an important part of the deliberative strategy if democratic politics is to thrive and political actors are to exercise agency. David Marquand, for example, has argued that only an empowered and active citizenry can progress toward social equality (in Phillips 1999, 15). The two aspects need to be held together, sometimes in tension, to understand the nature of change through institutional politics. Despite the slow process of change at local levels of governance in India, women's increased participation in *panchayats* is an important part of creating an active citizenry that includes both men and women and challenges the dominant relations of social power.

Notes

I am grateful to Pratiksha Baxi, Upendra Baxi, Catherine Hoskyns, Jeremy Roche, Fabienne Peter, Georgina Waylen, and the editors of this issue and reviewers of the article for incisive comments on this essay. The shortcomings are, of course, all mine.

1. While this essay focuses on the state-based *panchayats*, also of importance are caste *panchayats*, which are not state authorized and which regulate social relations within the village and can act as “instruments of terror” (Karat 2004) in regulating sexualities. See also Baxi, Rai and Ali 2003.

2. The administrative structure of the *Panchayati Raj* system encompasses village or gram *panchayats* covering 56,500 villages (93 percent of the total), block *samitis* (councils) with 53.3 village *panchayats* per *samiti*, *zila parishad* with 13.4 *samitis* per *zila parishad*. There are some variations in this structure in different parts of the country (Kaushik 1993, 20-21).

3. In 2000, there were 532 district *panchayats*, 5,912 block or *tauluk panchayats* and 231,630 village or gram *panchayats* and there are more than three million elected *panchayati raj* representatives of whom women constitute a third (Ford Foundation 2002, 14-15)

4. Buch has identified four such myths (2000, 11): (1) women's passivity and lack of interest in political institutions; (2) only the well-to-do women of the upper strata will come through reservation; (3) their political connectivity—only privileged kinswomen of powerful politicians will enter these institutions to keep the seats for them; and (4) women who have entered the *panchayats* are only proxy and namesake members. They do not participate in *panchayats*.

5. *Maan* denotes respect, though this might be underpinned by pride. A woman's status might be enhanced if she has an income, where the job can be characterized as "public service." This also supports Amartya Sen's contention that paid work outside the home is a prerequisite for women's improved status within the family.

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Comment [IS25]: Don't know what to do about this. You could delete it? I have tried to get reference but have failed.

Comment [HLM26]: This link is no longer valid. Do you have any further information? Title of piece? Date? Etc. Does Karat have a first or last name?

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Comment [IS27]: I have checked the document; this is how it is! Often South Indians don't write out their full names as these are rather long.

Comment [HLM28]: First name?

- , F. Bari, N. Mahtab and B. Mohanty. South Asia: Gender quotas and the politics of empowerment—a comparative study. In *Women, quotas, and politics*, ed. D. Dahlerup. London: Routledge.
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