

The Elected Women Representatives of the Kerala Grama Panchayat Elections

Sabu P. Thomas S.J.¹

Abstract

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 was a landmark one in institutionalising the Panchayati Raj System in India, constitutionally creating a space for women to become active in the public domain. The present study looks at the Elected Women Representatives (EWR) of the 2010 Panchayat elections of Kerala wherein the reservations of seats and positions of women became 50 per cent. The paper examines the motivating factor of the EWRs to contest the election, the encouragement and discouragement they received, and their political and organisational exposure before becoming EWRs. It was found that the majority of the persons who became elected women representatives did so because of the provision they got due to the reservation of seats and they became so due to the encouragement and motivation of others, especially political activists. The support of their family members was a crucial factor for them to become EWRs. For the self-motivated ones, it was their desire to do something for others, especially for women, that was the motivating factor to contest in elections. The previous organisational involvement of the EWRs was a positive factor which helped them to perform better in their current responsibility as people's representatives.

Keywords

reservation, women, motivation, contest, encouragement, involvement

Introduction and Background of the Study

Panchayats are the best suited agencies of the State governments to carry out various developmental activities in the state. In 1957, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report, which evaluated the Community Development

¹ Loyola College of Social Sciences, Thiruvananthapuram - 695 017, Kerala, India.
Email: sabupala@yahoo.com

programme of 1952, emphasised the role of panchayats in transforming the country. The Committee recommended a three-tier Panchayati Raj System in India for people's participation in the developmental programmes. Although various attempts have been made by the Central as well as State governments to strengthen the Panchayati Raj Institutions during the last four decades (Singh, 1995), the 73rd Constitutional amendment of 1992 was prominent among them by which the Government of India regularised the functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) throughout the country. It was an official mandate to harmonise people's participation in the development undertakings with the administrative procedures.

Kerala was one among the first states which enacted the state legislation, The Kerala Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 in accordance with the Constitution (73rd amendment) Act, 1992. This act came into effect on the 23rd April 1994, which created a three-tier Panchayati Raj system with the Grama Panchayat at the village level, the Block Panchayat at the Block level and the Zilla Panchayat at the District level. As a result, a new institutional arrangement for the decentralisation of power to the grass roots level has been created in the state, replacing the Kerala Panchayats Act, 1960 and the Kerala District Administration (Amendment) Act, 1991 (Biju, 1997).

The Constitution (73rd amendment) Act, 1992 and the ensuing state level legislations created a new era in the history of Indian women. Although Indian women were fortunate enough to get their franchise immediately after independence, the power to vote seldom helped them to improve their status. The amendment gave them a chance to exercise greater power because the amendment that came into effect on the 4th April 1993 had a provision to allocate at least one-third of the seats in PRIs to women. It also states that among the chairpersons of PRIs, a minimum of one-third must be women. Consequently women, and especially rural women, got a chance to play leadership roles and to take part in the decision-making process which had so far remained unreachable for them. The first elections to the PRIs, as per the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act 1994, were held in 1995 with 33 per cent of seats reserved for women. The same reservations were there in the elections of 2000 and 2005. In 2010 it was increased to 50 per cent in the state. These reservations of seats for women enabled them to participate actively in the development activities of their locality. Suriakanthi (1997) observed that:

“The power envisaged in the Act has given them the constitutional rights to deliberate, debate and decide important policy matters which concern the people’s day-to-day life. They can stake their claim in the process of planning, policy formulation and execution of rural development programme and funds allotment. Also laws can be enacted, amended, programmes planned and executed. What is important is that all these can be done from a feminine perspective which is very much lacking now.”

The Panchayat administrative scenario had been a male dominated area until the passing of the 73rd Constitution (Amendment) Act 1992 and the subsequent enactment of the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act 1994. A number of women came into the Panchayat administrative scenario as result of those steps.

Methodology

The present paper looks at those women who were elected to Gram Panchayats in the 2010 elections when the reservation of seats for women were increased to 50 per cent. It examines the motivating factors of the EWRs to contest the election, the encouragement and discouragement they received, and their political and organisational exposure before becoming EWRs. The sample design of the study was stratified random sampling. One district each was selected randomly using the lottery method from the three regions of Kerala namely, north, central and south Kerala. The southern region consisted of the Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pathanamthitta, and Alappuzha districts. The central region included the Kottayam, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Idukki, and Palakkad districts. The northern region consisted of the Malappuram, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Kannur, and Kasaragod districts. The selected districts were Thiruvananthapuram from the southern region, Ernakulam from the central region, and Kozhikode from the northern region. From one district, three Gram Panchayats were selected from the three geographical areas—coastal, midland, and highland. The selection of Grama Panchayats from each area was done randomly using the lottery method. From the Thiruvananthapuram district, Kadinamkulam GP (Grama Panchayat) was selected from the coastal area, Vamanapuram GP was selected from the midland area, and Kallikkad GP was selected from the highland area. From the Ernakulam district, Kumbalangi GP was selected from the coastal area,

Kalady GP was selected from the midland area, and Keerampara GP was selected from the highland area. From the Kozhikode district, Kadalundi GP was selected from the coastal area, Kunnamangalam GP was selected from the midland area, and Kodenchary GP was selected from the highland area. Thus a total of nine Gram Panchayats had been selected for the present study. All the elected women representatives of the selected Gram Panchayats were studied. The tool used was a structured interview schedule. The study followed a mixed method by substantiating the quantitative data with qualitative data collected through focus group discussions. The total number of elected women representatives who were studied was 84.

Aspects Related to the Contest in the Panchayat Elections

Times Contested, Times Elected, Previous Position, Present Position, and Seat Contested among Region and Area

The majority in all the regions and areas had contested in panchayat elections only once. Thirty per cent of the respondents in the southern region, 22.7 per cent respondents in the central region, and 25.7 per cent respondents in the northern region had contested more than once. Area-wise, 21.2 per cent of the respondents in the coastal area, 30 per cent respondents in the midland area, and 27.3 per cent respondents in the highland area had contested more than once. It was also revealed that the majority got elected to the panchayat only once. Twenty-six per cent respondents in the southern region, 13.6 per cent respondents in the central region, and 20 per cent respondents in the northern region got elected to the Panchayat more than once. Looking area wise, it is seen that 18.2 per cent of the respondents in the coastal area, 24.1 per cent respondents in the midland area, and 18.2 per cent of the respondents in the highland area got elected more than once.

When we look at the previous position of the respondents who got elected more than once, it is seen that the majority in the southern region (85.7%) and northern region (71.4%) were only Panchayat members. Whereas in the central region, 33.3 per cent respondents each were members, standing committee chairpersons, and presidents of grama panchayats. When it is analysed area-wise, it is seen that the majority in the coastal area (83.3%) and midland area (85.7%) were members. But in the highland area half of those respondents who got elected more than once were presidents.

The present position of the majority of the respondents both region-wise and area-wise were panchayat members. Out of the total respondents, 16.7 per cent were standing committee chairpersons, 4.8 per cent were vice-presidents, and 6 per cent were presidents of grama panchayats.

The vast majority of the respondents in all the regions and areas contested reservation seats. Out of the total respondents, only 6 per cent contested general seats; the rest got elected either from the seats reserved for women or from the seats reserved for SCs. The association between these variables with region and area were tested using the Chi-square test and it was found that there was no association at all.

It is evident from the above figures that women got space to act in the public domain due to reservation. If there were not reservation of seats for women, this number of women would not have been there as EWRs. Few women who were elected more than once. Because of the rotation of the reserved seats, the possibility of being elected from the same constituency is absent as far as an EWR who performed well is concerned.

Table 1. Reason for contesting among region and area

Reason for Contesting	Region				Area			
	South	Central	North	Total	Coastal	Mid Land	High Land	Total
Personal interest	4 14.8%	1 4.5%	2 5.7%	7 8.3%	3 9.1%	1 3.4%	3 13.6%	7 8.3%
Motivation and encouragement of others	21 77.8%	14 63.6%	27 77.1%	62 73.8%	23 69.7%	22 75.9%	17 77.3%	62 73.8%
Both	2 7.4%	7 31.8%	6 17.1%	15 17.9%	7 21.2%	6 20.7%	2 9.1%	15 17.9%
Total	27 100%	22 100%	35 100%	84 100%	33 100%	29 100%	22 100%	84 100%

Reason for Contesting and Region: Chi-square =6.509, df=4, Sig=.164.

Reason for Contesting Area: Chi-Square =3.009, df = 4, Sig=.556.

Reason for Contesting among Region and Area.

It is seen that the majority of the respondents who contested the panchayat election did so because of the motivation and encouragement of others. Whether it is in the region or area, the same is the case. Thus, it is clear that when an opportunity is provided for women with the

reservation of seats, women came forward to be active in public life. This is not out of their own personal interest; but with the support and encouragement of others. The Chi-square test reveals that there is no association between the reason for contesting and the region or area.

Motivation behind the Personal Interest to Contest in the Election

Out of the total respondents, 22 persons (26.2%) contested the election because of their personal interest. One person may have contested because of more than one factor. Therefore, the distribution of the motivation behind the personal interest to contest the election by respondents is prepared as a multiple response frequency table. There are a total of 30 motivations behind the personal interest to contest the election. All the respondents who contested the election because of their personal interest did so to serve people. Thirteen per cent of the respondents each did so either to do something for women or to enter into politics. Therefore, the motivation to serve the people or to do something for women are the major factors that encouraged the persons who contested out of their personal interest. These people are the really motivated ones.

Table 2. Person who encouraged to contest the election

	<i>Responses</i>		<i>Per cent of cases (Out of 84)</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>Per cent (Out of 228)</i>	
Self	1	0.4%	1.2%
Husband	45	19.7%	53.6%
Children	18	7.9%	21.4%
Other family members	29	12.7%	34.5%
Relatives	10	4.4%	11.9%
Neighbours	16	7.0%	19.0%
Friends	12	5.3%	14.3%
Women's organisations	16	7.0%	19.0%
Political activists	74	32.5%	88.1%
Religious leaders	6	2.6%	7.1%
NGOs	1	0.4%	1.2%
Total	228	100.0%	271.4%

Persons who Encouraged respondents to Contest the Election

All the respondents were encouraged to contest either by themselves or by others. One person may be encouraged by more than one person. Therefore, the distribution of persons who encouraged the respondents to contest in the elections is prepared as a multiple response frequency table. Table 2 shows that there was a total of 228 persons who encouraged them. In the majority of the respondents' cases (88.1%) it is political activists who encouraged them to contest the election. Fifty-four per cent of respondents received encouragement from their husbands. Thirty-five per cent of respondents received encouragement from their family members. The strong support the EWRs received to contest the elections was from political activists. What was understood from the personal interview and focus group discussions was that women were not very keen on contesting the elections. But the political activists motivated them, encouraged them, and campaigned for them. In many of the cases, women contested because of their encouragement. Political parties were keen to select those women who had some possibility of winning and thereby they wanted to increase the seats for their party. In that process many women received strong support from political activists. Another strong support was from the family members of EWRs, especially their husbands. Those husbands who were active in politics or who were the well-wishers of a particular political party encouraged their wives to contest the elections. They were ready to manage in the absence of their wives from their involvement in household activities due to the involvement of their wives in the public space.

Discouragement to Contest in the Election

Out of the total respondents, 60.7 per cent were not discouraged by anybody to contest the election whereas 39.3 per cent were discouraged from contesting the election. When we analyse this in the area or region-wise, it is seen that majority were not discouraged. The Chi-square test reveals that there is no statistically significant association between the discouragement in election and region or area.

Persons who were Discouraged from Contesting the Election

Out of the total respondents, 33 persons (39.3%) were discouraged by one person or the other. One respondent may be discouraged by more than one person. Therefore, the distribution of persons who discouraged the

respondents from contesting the election is prepared as a multiple response frequency table. Table 2 shows that there was a total of 40 persons who discouraged the respondents from contesting the election. Out of the 39.3 per cent of the respondents who were discouraged, 33.3 per cent were discouraged by political activists. Twenty-seven per cent of the respondents received discouragement from family members and 18.2 per cent of the respondents received discouragement from their children. It is important to note that the majority of the respondents were encouraged by the political activists to contest in the election. Those political activists were their own party members while the political activists who discouraged the EWRs from contesting were members of the opposite party. The family members and children who discouraged the EWRs from contesting did so because they did not want to suffer from the absence of the EWRs from their homes. But their discouragement became insignificant because of the motivation of the EWRs and because of the encouragement of political activists and friends.

Political and Organisational Involvement of EWRs, Husbands and Parents

Political Affiliation of the Respondent and the Age of Starting Political Activity among Region and Area

The political affiliation of the majority of the respondents in all the regions and areas belonged to the United Democratic Front (UDF). Twenty-six per cent of the respondents began their political activity in the south when 10–20 years, 31–40 years, and 41–50 years. Twenty-seven per cent of the respondents in the central region began their political activity while they were between 31–40 years, 31.4 per cent of respondents in the north began their political activity while they were between 21–30 years and 31–40 years. In the southern region political activity began at a younger age because they started their political activity when they were students. Once their study period was over they discontinued their political involvement and started again at the time of panchayat elections. The area-wise picture shows that 30.3 per cent of respondents in the coastal area began their political activity while they were in the age group 10–20 years and 31–40 years. In the midland 37.9 per cent of the respondents began their political activity while they were in the age group 21–30 years. Thirty-six per cent of the

respondents in the highland began their political activity while they were in the age group 31-40 years. As far as the respondents were concerned, involvement in student politics was seen more in the coastal area compared to the other areas. The Chi-square test revealed that there is no statistically significant relationship between the political affiliation of the respondent and the age of starting political activity with region or area.

Duration of Membership as EWR

The average duration of membership as an EWR in the south is 4.8 years, in the central region it is 4.41 years, and 4.3 years in the northern region. Area-wise the average duration of membership as an EWR in the coastal area was 4.65 years, 4.53 years in the midland and 4.18 years for the highland. Elections to the panchayats were held in May 2010 and so, ideally speaking, there should not be any difference in the duration of membership of EWRs. But the data was collected over nine months from January 2014 onwards and so there will be differences in the duration of membership depending on when the personal interview of EWRs took place. In addition, in the constituencies where by-elections were held, the duration of membership of the sitting EWRs will be shorter. These are the reasons for the difference in the duration of membership of the respondents. A one-way Anova test was conducted to find out whether there was any difference in the averages (mean values). The p values were >.05 which means there was no statistically significant difference among the mean values.

Table 3. Previous political involvement of the respondent

	<i>Responses</i>		<i>Per cent of Cases (Out of 84)</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>Per cent (Out of 157)</i>	
Only voting	41	26.1%	48.8%
Involvement in student politics	9	5.7%	10.7%
Well-wisher of the party	12	7.6%	14.3%
Participating in political party meetings	40	25.5%	47.6%
Organising political party meetings	17	10.8%	20.2%
Election campaign	30	19.1%	35.7%
Polling agent	6	3.8%	7.1%
Counting agent	2	1.3%	2.4%
Total	157	100.0%	186.9%

Previous Political Involvement of the Respondent

All the respondents had one or other previous political involvement. One respondent may have more than one previous political involvement. Therefore, the distribution of previous political involvement of the respondents is prepared as multiple response frequency table. Table 3 shows that there were a total of 157 previous political involvements of the respondents. Forty-nine per cent of the respondents' previous political involvement was only voting; followed by participating in political party meetings (47.6% of respondents) and going for the election campaign of the party (35.7% of respondents). The responses show that many of the respondents had some form of political involvement. It was those persons who had some political involvement who were given seats.

Affiliation of the Respondent with the Political Party while Contesting among Region and Area

It shows that in the southern region all respondents contested as political party candidates. In the central region, 90.9 per cent of the respondents contested as political party candidates and the rest contested as independent candidates with political support. In the northern region, 94.3 per cent of the respondents contested as political party candidates and the rest contested as independent candidates without political support. While looking at the areas, all the respondents in the coastal area contested as political party candidates. Ninety-seven per cent of the candidates in the midland contested as political party candidates and the rest as independent candidates with political support. In the highland, 86.4 per cent of the respondents contested as political party candidates, 4.5 per cent contested as independent candidates with political support and 9.1 per cent contested as independent candidates without political support. While testing Chi-square, it was found out that there was no association between the political affiliation of the respondent with region or area. In general, the candidates contested with political support. Those who contested without political support were from the highland area of the northern region and all of them were contesting for the first time. That means those people were not the ones who were not given seats by the political party to contest a second or third time.

Table 4. Involvement of EWRs in organisations

	Membership			Type of Involvement			Years		
	Yes	No	Total	Ordinary	Office Bearer	Total	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Political party	72 85.7%	12 14.3%	84 100.0%	56 77.8%	16 22.2%	72 100.0%	10.44	2.00	46.00
SHGs	15 17.9%	69 82.1%	84 100.0%	3 20.0%	12 80.0%	15 100.0%	9.13	2.00	18.00
Kudumbashree	74 88.1%	10 11.9%	84 100.0%	30 40.5%	44 59.5%	74 100.0%	9.32	1.00	20.00
Janashree	14 16.7%	70 83.3%	84 100.0%	9 64.3%	5 35.7%	14 100.0%	4.29	1.00	8.00
Religious/Pious organisations	36 42.9%	48 57.1%	84 100.0%	18 50.0%	18 50.0%	36 100.0%	10.89	1.00	40.00
Social organisations	19 22.6%	65 77.4%	84 100.0%	13 68.4%	6 31.6%	19 100.0%	16.11	2.00	50.00
Student organisations	8 9.5%	76 90.5%	84 100.0%	7 87.5%	1 12.5%	8 100.0%	16.75	4.00	30.00
Other movements	19 22.6%	65 77.4%	84 100.0%	11 57.9%	8 42.1%	19 100.0%	10.53	3.00	30.00

Involvement of EWRs in Organisations

The social outlook and involvement with people are important characteristics as far as people's representatives are concerned. Those people who had some organisational exposure before becoming EWRs will definitely have an advantage over others. It was important to note that all the respondents had one or other previous organisational involvement. It is seen that 88.1 per cent of the respondents were members of Kudumbashree and among them 59.5 per cent worked as office bearers of a Kudumbashree unit. The average year of involvement in Kudumbashree is 9.32 years. Eighty-six per cent of the respondents were members of political parties with an average of 10.44 years of involvement. Forty-three per cent of the respondents were involved in religious/pious organisations with an average of 10.89 years of involvement. Among them 50 per cent of the respondents were involved as office bearers of religious/pious organisations.

It is evident from the above-mentioned figures that the respondents had good organisational exposure/involvement in public life before becoming people's representatives.

Involvement of the Husbands of EWRs in Organisations

The majority of the husbands are not members of a political party, Kudumbashree, religious/pious organisations or any such social or student organisations. The biggest group (46.4 per cent of the respondents' husbands) are members of political parties followed by members of social organisations like arts and sports clubs (11.9% of the respondents' husbands).

Political or organisational experience of the family members, especially that of the partners of EWRs, can help the EWRs to broaden their social outlook. But the data reveals that the organisational exposure of the husbands of EWRs was not a big factor influencing the socio-political outlook of the respondents.

Involvement of the Parents of EWRs in Organisations

The majority of the parents are not members of a political party, Kudumbashree, religious/pious organisations or any such social or student organisations. The biggest group (29.8% of the respondents' parents) are members of a political party followed by members of social organisations like arts and sports clubs (8.3% of the respondents' parents). The organisational exposure of the parents of EWRs was not a big factor influencing the socio-political outlook of the respondents.

Influence of Previous Involvement of Respondents/Husbands/Parents

The majority of the respondents said that their previous political and organisational involvements were definitely helpful for them to function as EWRs ('Definitely Yes'). For the majority of the respondents, the political experience of their husbands was also definitely helpful to function as an EWR ('Definitely Yes'). The biggest group of respondents (44.7%) also found the same in the case of organisational experience of their husbands. Half of the respondents said that the political and organisational experience of their parents helped them to function as EWRs ('Yes').

It is striking to note that even though the number of husbands/parents having political/organisational experience is not large, the respondents were very positive with regard to the usefulness of those experiences of the husbands/parents who had it.

Conclusion

It was the 73rd constitutional amendment that gave a political space for women to be active in the public domain. Among the large number of women who became people's representative because of this affirmative action, the encouragement of political activists and support from their own family members were very crucial. The vast majority of the respondents in all the regions and areas contested in reservation seats. Out of the total respondents, only six per cent contested general seats. So it is evident that women got space to act in the public domain due to reservation. If there were no reservation of seats for women, these many women would not have been there as EWRs. Women who were elected more than once were a minimum. Because of the rotation of the reserved seats, the possibility of being elected from the same constituency is absent as far as an EWR who performed well is concerned.

The majority of the respondents contested in the panchayat election did so because of the motivation and encouragement of others. Thus it is clear that when an opportunity is provided for women with the reservation of seats, women came forward to be active in public life. This also is not out of their own personal interest; but with the support and encouragement of others. Out of the total respondents, 22 persons (26.2%) contested in the election because of their personal interest. The motivation to serve the people or to do something for women were the major factors that encouraged the persons who contested out of their personal interest. These people are the really motivated ones.

All the respondents were encouraged to contest either by themselves or by others. The strong support the EWRs received to contest the elections was from the political activists. What was understood from the personal interviews and focus group discussions was that women were not very keen in contesting the elections. But the political activists motivated them, encouraged them, and campaigned for them. In many of the cases, women contested because of their encouragement. Political parties were keen to select those women who had some possibility of winning and there by they wanted to increase the seats for their party. In this way many women received strong support from the political activists. Another strong support was from the family members of EWRs, especially their husbands. Those husbands who were active in politics or who were the well-wishers of a particular political party encouraged their wives to contest the elections.

They were ready to manage the absence of their wives from their involvement in household activities due to the involvement of their wives in the public space.

All the respondents had one or other previous political involvement. It was those persons who had some political involvement who were given seats. In general, the candidates contested with political support. Those who contested without political support were from the highland area of the northern region and all of them were contesting for the first time. That means those people were not the ones who were not given seats by the political party to contest for a second or third time.

It was important to note that all the respondents had one or other previous organisational involvement. So it is evident that the respondents had good organisational exposure/involvement in public life before becoming people's representatives. The majority of the respondents said that their previous political and organisational involvements were definitely helpful for them to function as EWRs. For the majority of the respondents, the political experience of their husbands was also definitely helpful to function as EWRs. Half of the respondents said that the political and organisational experience of their parents helped them to function as EWRs. So the political will to give space for women to be active in the public domain was utilised by those women who had some previous organisational exposure with the support of political activists and family members.

References

- Biju, M.R. (1997). *Politics of Democracy and Decentralisation in India*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Singh, H. (1995). *Administration of Rural Development in India*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited.
- Suriakanthi, A. (1997). 'Panchayati Raj: Redefinition of Women's Power,' in Palanithurai, G, B.R. Dwaraki, and Narayanaswamy, S. (Eds.). *Major Issues in New Panchayati Raj System*. (pp. 55-60). New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers.