

Elusive empowerment: characteristics of indirectly elected women chairpersons of district councils in Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India was introduced with a stated legislative intent of reserving not less than a third of seats for women in institutions of local self-government, the three-tier panchayati raj institutions. That amendment is considered a milestone in India's project of empowerment of women. This paper evaluates the power and prestige of the post of an adhyaksha (chairperson) of a zila (district) panchayat (council) in general, and in particular the status of women elected to the post during 2016 in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Analysing the candidature, electoral success, electoral practices and subsequent functioning of zila panchayat adhyakshas (ZPAs), the authors argue that despite seats being reserved for women, no meaningful political empowerment of women has occurred in UP. The paper questions the efficacy of the indirect mode of election of ZPAs in bringing about empowerment of women, arguing that indirect elections enable powerful ruling elites to use women as proxies, subverting the legislative intent of the 73rd Amendment. The paper therefore proposes electoral reforms.

Introduction

The Indian Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act 1992 that came into force in 1993 states “reservation of not less than one-third of the seats for women” as one of its “objects and reasons”. This is in line with the objectives of ‘expanding’ democracy and making it more ‘inclusive’ (Jayal 2006). The objectives of the policy and our analysis of its working on the ground situates this paper in the debate on women’s empowerment, especially as contextualised by Batliwala (1994) or Kabeer (1994) and in subsequent works, with special reference to South Asia.

The role of quotas for genders in enhancing political empowerment has been studied extensively (Dahlerup 2006; Eckert et al. 2017; Dahlerup et al. 2020). A bird’s-eye view of the situation in South Asia seems to suggest a consensus that some degree of empowerment does result from women participating more in legislative bodies (Rai 2009). On closer inspection, however, regional and temporal variations in outcomes at the level of institutions of local self-government appear to be quite large in India. For instance Patnaik (2014), reporting on a study of eight relatively impoverished villages in the state of Odisha, concluded that empowerment did indeed increase after quotas for women in local bodies were introduced. Earlier, by contrast, in the more prosperous state of Karnataka (the first place in India where quotas for women in village-level institutions for self-government were introduced), it was observed that the “*primordial institutions of caste and patriarchy*” remained entrenched and in opposition to the “*emergence and performance*” of women leaders (Sutar 2007). Some ten years later, Mishra (2018, p. 558) observed that “*the mere representation of women in decentralised governance is not enough to bring [about] any qualitative change in local politics*” in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, whose social structure largely comprises tribal communities. Yet in an urban slum in the state of Kerala, which has been “*internationally celebrated as a leader in participatory governance since the ... 1990s*” Williams et al. (2015, p. 1,116) observed that a women-only self-help group was able to acquire and exercise power in relation to crucial developmental decisions. However, the researchers acknowledged that the women they studied were associated with a cadre-based communist party and had privileged exposure to methods of political mobilisation and negotiation: “[*The self-help group*]

therefore provides women in slums with institutional pathways to power... but utilising these requires knowledge and strategic negotiation of an institutional and political environment that is far more complex than that facing their rural council ... counterparts...” Williams et al. (2015, p. 1,119).

Many studies on the functioning of democracy in India (Kohli 2001; Vaugier-Chatterjee et al. 2009; Kaviraj 2010; Vanaik 2013; Jeffrey et al. 2014) have been informed by meta-narratives of the state at the national or state level. However, the authors of the present study note that although the success (or otherwise) of inclusion and empowerment of women elected by means of quotas has been extensively researched at the ‘micro-’ and ‘macro-’ levels, there is a paucity of literature on India’s ‘meso-’ or district-level institutions of self-government. Such institutions are potentially a valuable source of information about concordance or conflict between policy and practice. They are small enough to enable detailed critical examination, yet large enough to permit generalisation based on widespread socio-political realities.

A number of states of the Indian Union have enacted laws to regulate elections to *panchayati raj* (local self-government) institutions (PRIs). There are three ‘tiers’ of PRIs. The lowest is the *gram panchayat* at the village level (literally, ‘a council of five’, although in practice the number is often much larger). The next is the *khshetra panchayat* (literally, ‘area council’ or ‘development block’ council). The ‘highest’ tier is the *zila panchayat* (ZP, district council), chaired by a *zila panchayat adhyaksha* (ZPA). State election commissions (SECs) are responsible for conducting elections to these bodies. Some states, including Uttar Pradesh (UP), conduct direct elections for both members and chairpersons of the bodies at the first two tiers, with universal adult franchise. However, the district-level ZP that is the subject of discussion here comprises directly elected members, who then *indirectly* elect the chairperson. Interestingly, in UP, distinct sets of legislation enable and govern elections for rural and urban local bodies, and to the other two tiers.¹ Sivanna et al. (2017, p. 255) compared “*resource mobilisation, efficiency in delivery of services and utilisation of funds*” (but not women’s empowerment) according to whether rural local bodies had their chairperson elected directly or indirectly. They observed that local bodies chaired by directly elected chairpersons performed better, and the levels of ‘satisfaction’ of electors as well as those of ‘other stakeholders’ were significantly higher. Direct election of chairpersons was also perceived as more efficacious in restricting capture of power by local elites. Sivanna et al. (2017) also found that the exercise of the right to recall (via a no-confidence motion, or NCM) was significantly more frequent in respect of indirectly elected chairpersons. This paper will later explore the incidence of NCMs in UP in some detail.

At the time of writing, the term of the ZPAs elected in 2016 has ended and fresh elections for PRIs have been notified in UP. A typical ZP ward constituency in UP comprises approximately 10,000 to 15,000 voters, and the size of the ZP membership varies from 15 to as many as 70. A roster system of quotas

¹ For details, please see: <http://sec.up.nic.in/site/introduction.aspx>

operates to designate both wards and individual ZPA posts as ‘reserved’ for members of identified disadvantaged groups (the so-called ‘Scheduled’ castes and tribes, ‘other backward castes’) and women. This roster is supposed to follow a formula based on the population of the ward, the number of voters belonging to the ‘Scheduled’ castes or tribes and previous reservation history. Thus, the local SEC may reserve the post of a ZPA for, say, a representative belonging to one of the Scheduled tribes. All other tribes, castes and communities are then rendered ineligible for candidature in this round of elections. This same post of ZPA may further be reserved for women, so no men can be nominated as candidates. Five years later, in the next round of elections, the reservation status of the post may be changed to ‘unreserved’. This does not bar the previous incumbent from standing for re-election, but this time around, she would have to compete against rival candidates of other communities, castes and genders. Under this system, the number of women elected as ZPAs in UP can never be less than 25 out of 74, but the women themselves are more likely to be a new set of persons, different from previous incumbents.

The organisational structure of India’s political parties has yet to acknowledge the importance of effective women’s representation: as this paper will show, the evidence suggests that the nomination of a woman as a candidate to contest the post of ZPA is not based on her political strength or empowerment but rather to maintain the influence of a local political leader. A study by Chandra (2016) highlights that weak party organisations and the minimal role of women in party-political activities has enabled dynasty politics in India to assume a decisive role from grassroots to apex. Basu (2016) has argued that increasing violence and criminalisation of politics, bias in party organisations and the absence of affirmative action in state and national legislatures have impeded women’s representation. This theme is explored later under the heading ‘the district as a political arena’, mainly to contrast state and national legislatures with institutions of local self-government in UP.

Elections to the post of ZPA in UP during 2016 witnessed women candidates winning in 44 out of the 74 ZPs. Such a large proportion (59.5%) of women in positions of power in local self-government institutions contrasts with the 10–14% level of representation of women in state assemblies and the union parliament.² It is also significantly higher than the one-third (33%) mandatory quota for women in the three-tier PRI structure. This high figure led many to believe that there had been ‘winds of change’, and ‘a silent revolution’ (Mishra 2016) in achieving women’s empowerment. The State Election Commissioner at the time is reported to have said: “*The results are proof of women’s empowerment in the state and women leaders are sure to play a major role in the future*” (Mishra 2016).

² The current Lower House of the Indian parliament (*lok sabha*) has the highest percentage of women (14%) in the history of the republic. In the previous House, the proportion of women was 11.3%. In state assemblies it is less than 10%. See <https://prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/vital-stats/profile-of-the-newly-elected-17th-lok-sabha>

This paper questions whether a quantitative increase in the representation of women as ZPAs may be reasonably interpreted as real political empowerment of women; and whether their public presence is merely illusory, while true empowerment remains elusive. The authors demonstrate how the local elite at the district level continues to use its patronage and dominance in the power structure to get its favoured candidate elected as ZPA. They argue that to infer the empowerment of women on the basis of their election as ZPAs is misleading. Instead, the paper finds that the rising number of women ZPAs is not associated with any decrease in the illegitimate use of money, intimidation, or patriarchal patronage to perpetuate dominance by the local elite and its capture of district-level democratic institutions.

The paper begins by discussing the limitations of existing literature on the subject of ZPs and the role of women representatives. Next, it briefly surveys the functions and powers of a ZPA to highlight what makes this a coveted role. Finally, it describes the mode of election of ZPAs and analyses the background of the elected women ZPAs in UP in the 2016 elections.

In addition to cited academic literature, the bulk of the information used for analysis was collected through internet searches. Web pages cited as footnotes were accessed between 8 June 2020 and 5 April 2021. If the first source of the information was a newspaper article, it was cross-checked with at least one additional newspaper report. While the authors are aware that journalists reporting for the vernacular press in the local area where a ZPA is elected or functions may not be possessed of high levels of gender sensitivity, the reports used were considered to provide balanced accounts and not to devalue women. Additionally, the dedicated website <https://www.myneta.info/> maintained by the Association for Democratic Reforms was used for much of the information presented here and is gratefully acknowledged. Information available from the websites of the UP State Election Commission, Finance Commission, and the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India has also been used as available.

The district as a political arena

PRIs in UP are, the authors believe, particularly well-suited for the purpose of studying outcomes of policy when its practice is beset with challenges from anti-democratic and patriarchal forces. Studies relating to women representatives in PRIs have been few and most have been outcome/performance-based surveys of the lowest tier (*gram panchayats*). These studies have found a positive impact of reserved places for women on women's empowerment. Most (Buch 2000; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Hust 2004; Jayal 2006; Ban and Rao 2008) have essentially argued from the premise that women acquire more experience via the reserved places system and assume that as the system continues to mature, women will become more effective leaders. It is true that there have been counter-arguments (Pai 2001; Dutta 2012) that the women elected have largely been mere proxies for their male relatives or patrons. These studies, however, focused only on *gram panchayats* and did not address the two higher

tiers (development-block- and district-level PRIs) in sufficient detail. Analysis of these levels is important for the purpose of understanding political power and patronage, which are important levers influencing indirect election to the position of ZPA. Indirect elections are easier for a dominant elite to ‘manage’.

Power and prestige of the ZPA

Constitutional obligations mandate state governments to transfer various areas of administrative work and functions related to delivery of basic amenities and public services to the jurisdiction of PRIs. Article 243G of the Indian Constitution enjoins state governments to endow *panchayats* with the powers and authority necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and to plan and implement programmes for economic development and social justice, including those in relation to matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule. UP has devolved a larger number of functions (land development and land reforms, social forestry, rural housing, drinking water, rural roads, minor irrigation, street light in rural areas, etc.) listed in the Eleventh Schedule to PRIs than some other states – for example, Tamil Nadu and Delhi (Jha and Pal 2004).

PRIs in UP are empowered to generate revenue by several means. They may auction ZP property, and collect taxes, levies, tolls and fees on various activities like local fairs and marketplaces, ferrying, leather work, mining, etc. They receive funds directly from the national government under an allocation formula developed by the Union Finance Commission. The state government has also constituted five State Finance Commissions (SFCs) since the inception of this mechanism for direct devolution of state funds to PRIs. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG 2011) reported that during the five-year period of 2006–07 to 2010–11, PRIs in UP received about INR 480 billion (approximately USD 6.4 billion).³ In the year of this paper’s interest (2015–16), the UP SFC recommended a per capita devolution of circa INR 450 to PRIs (Gupta and Chakraborty 2019). This information is sufficient to estimate that in 2016 a ZPA in UP had control over very considerable sums of money, making it a coveted post.

Weaknesses in institutional delivery structure and implementation (Pritchett 2009) leave a lot of scope for financial corruption and misuse. Apart from the scope for monetary gain through exercise of powers to approve utilisation of funds, the ZPA can bestow patronage based on the non-financial powers associated with the post. Most development schemes, and particularly federally sponsored programmes, are implemented according to a district development plan that is approved by the district planning committee. The ZPA has a lot of say in decisions regarding the inclusion or exclusion of projects in the development plan. The choice of beneficiary social groups, constituencies and areas is thus within the

³ The figure is from Report No. 2 of 2011 – *Performance Audit on Civil of Government of Uttar Pradesh* prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. INR were converted to USD using the average of historical exchange rates between 2006 and 2011 and rounded to the nearest dollar.

ZPA's domain. Additionally, the trappings of office – for example prestige as the 'first among equals' among the elected representatives of the district, a red beacon on the official car, and security cover from a gunner – again make the ZPA a coveted post at risk of being captured.

Indirect election of the ZPA

As noted earlier, in the ZPA elections held in 2015–16 in UP, 44 women were elected to the posts of ZPA in 74 ZPs. Twenty-three (52.2%) of these were elected unopposed. The number of men who were elected unopposed in the remaining 30 ZPs was 15 (50.0%). One possible inference from this observation is that women representatives are as widely acceptable as ZPAs as men. However, it is important to examine the circumstances under which such a large number of women were elected unopposed, and who these women are.

Before analysing the profile and patronage relationships of the women who were elected ZPAs, it is pertinent to note that the process of indirect election of ZPAs can be susceptible to manipulation. ZPAs are indirectly elected by members of the ZP by simple majority of the quorum present and voting, and by open (not secret) ballot. The well-known phenomenon of local political elites 'championing' candidates – women or men – for posts that they themselves are not eligible to contest is in full play here.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which 'championed' women exercise real choice in agreeing to file their candidacy for these posts. The pressure on the woman is usually high and may become implacable and merciless. Consider the case of the Jalaun ZPA. She was under treatment for cancer but was discharged from hospital and travelled 1,200 km to campaign for ZP elections. She later died within days of being sworn in as ZPA.⁴ It is difficult to make out whether she was so motivated as to neglect her own health care for the opportunity of participating in elections, or whether she was not sufficiently empowered to resist demands placed on her to contest. That said, it is also true that some women ZPAs have been known to be extremely enthusiastic about fighting elections. In the ZP elections recently conducted during April 2021, one of the candidates for Baksha ward in Jaunpur ZP was a woman born in Jaunpur itself, but pursuing a successful career in the glamour industry in metropolitan Mumbai. She denied reports that she was contesting because her father, a successful businessman based in the state of Goa, 1,800 km away, was ineligible to do so on account of reservation of the seat for women (Sharda 2021; *Business Standard* 2021).

The legislation governing election of ZPAs apparently did not foresee how indirect election could be manipulated by influential district politicians in concert with the ruling political party in the state. During ZPA elections in 2014 the Samajvadi Party was the ruling party in the state government and it claimed to have won almost 60 seats out of 74 elected ZPAs. However, in the April 2021 elections

⁴ <https://www.amarujala.com/uttar-pradesh/jalaun/district-panchayat-president-farah-naz-was-not-hindi-news>

when Bharitya Janta Party (BJP) had become the ruling party, it claimed to have won 67 ZPA positions out of a total 75 (Srivastava 2021).

Given that a ZP in UP normally has 15–70 members,⁵ ZPA elections may be swung on the basis of only 8–36 votes. Apart from genuinely persuasive arguments, there are two main ways to secure the small number of votes required to elect a ZPA: bribery and intimidation. Newspapers reports have alleged that a surprisingly large sum of money, in the range of INR 2.5–30 million, was paid out for one vote in 2016.⁶ Even in direct elections, lack of oversight and action by the authorities resulted in candidates for ZP membership spending INR 0.5–25 million on their campaigns despite strict caps on electoral expenses (Anuja 2016). If true, such allegations of ‘purchased’ votes distort the aphorism ‘democracy, by the people’ ... to ‘buy’ the people.

The role of state politics

There are several ways for a political party in power in the state legislature to influence ZPA elections. The first is by pressuring officials in charge of conducting elections. Although ZP elections are supervised by the State Election Commission (SEC), the history of appointments to that post indicates that the ruling party may put a favoured official in charge. For example, in UP the State Election Commissioner during the ZP elections in 2016 had previously been removed from the post of Principal Secretary (Home) by the Election Commission of India during the 2007 state assembly elections on account of allegations about his relationship with the ruling party (*The Economic Times* 2007). But when the same political party returned to power in 2012, he was appointed Commissioner (*The Times of India* 2012).

Compared to the Election Commission of India, the SEC of UP is a much weaker institution. The Act governing the UP SEC provides for district authority figures like the senior superintendent of police (SSP) and the district magistrate (DM), and not employees of the SEC itself, to oversee the PRI elections. These officers may not make sufficient effort to prevent the use of bribery and intimidation during PRI elections, especially if the offenders are associated with the political party in power in the state legislature.

In 2016, it was reported that the district administration and the police played a questionable role in indirect elections to the post of ZPA in districts such as Ambedkarnagar, Bijnore, Sitapur and Gorakhpur.⁷ Alleged activities included: selectively registering criminal cases in police stations as first information reports (FIRs) against ZP members;⁸ issuing opportunistically-timed search warrants, arrest

⁵ Only seven out of 75 districts had 70+ members, with Allahabad having the most with 97 ZP members.

⁶ <https://www.amarujala.com/lucknow/money-game-in-district-panchayat-president-election-hindi-news>

⁷ <https://www.amarujala.com/uttar-pradesh/gorakhpur/sp-s-geetanjali-yadav-elected-zila-panchayat-adhyaksh-hindi-news>

⁸ https://epaper.amarujala.com/bijnor/20160101/06.html?format=img&ed_code=bijnor

warrants and demolition notices; cancelling licences to run businesses such as cooking gas distribution agencies or cold storage warehouses;⁹ and either conducting all-out raids on residential or business premises of ZP members, or simply “shadowing” them.¹⁰

ZP members often appear unable to muster the courage and resources to counter such tactics and pressures, especially if there is an offer of a lot of money as an alternative. As more and more ZP members are won over to the camp of the ruling party, the opposition finds it easier to give up rather than waste its money in trying to exceed the offers that ZP members have accepted in exchange for their votes. This may explain why many candidates are elected unopposed (see Table 1).

Further evidence of the important role in ZPA elections of the state ruling party emerges from an examination of what happens when there is a change of state government. Despite the UP state ruling party’s massive win in the 2016 ZPA elections (60 out of 74 ZPA posts), the same party was routed in the elections to the state legislature held just a few months later. This suggests that electoral success in ZPA indirect elections is not reflective of the people’s choice or preference for a candidate or party. Second, the elected ZPAs are by and large dependent upon the support of the state government to achieve results. If the party in government changes, the sitting ZPA is left with one of two options: either shift loyalties to the new dispensation, or face recall through a no-confidence motion (NCM). By law, the right to recall may be exercised if more than half the members of the ZP moves a NCM, and it is passed by simple majority. A re-election is then conducted to fill the casual vacancy.

It is no surprise that during the preceding tenure of the ZPs in UP (2010–15), hardly any ZPAs resigned or faced an NCM between 2010 to 2012. Within one year of the change in the state government in 2012, however, 27 ZPAs either faced a NCM (23) or had to resign without a floor test of the confidence of the house (4). Similarly, with the change in the party of government in 2017, NCMs were tabled in more than ten ZPs within three months of the state assembly election results. During the remaining years of the outgoing regime in UP, NCMs have been tabled in 15 ZPs, and nine ZPAs have resigned – leading to by-elections in 24 out of 74 districts. Furthermore, in the districts of Varanasi, Chandauli and Mahoba, the sitting ZPAs changed their political party affiliations.

From the perspective of 2021 now that the term of the ZPs elected in 2016 is over, it is instructive to see the impact of the change of ruling party in the state during March 2017, and how many women ZPAs completed their full term of office. The following table summarises the outcome.

⁹ https://epaper.amarujala.com/sitapur/my-city/20160106/01.html?format=img&ed_code=sitapur

¹⁰ https://epaper.amarujala.com/ambekar-nagar/my-city/20160104/01.html?format=img&ed_code=ambekar-nagar.

Table 1: Effect of change of ruling party on women ZPAs' term of office and affiliation

i.	Women ZPAs elected in 2016	44
ii.	Women ZPAs elected unopposed	22
iii.	Women ZPAs who could not complete their term as they were removed (due to either a no-confidence motion, resignation, or having their power seized after the change of state government in March 2017)	14
iv.	Women ZPAs who changed their political loyalties and joined the new state ruling party after March 2017 (from Samajvadi Party to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP))	12
v.	Women ZPAs who were already affiliated to BJP when elected in 2016	04
vi.	Women ZPAs belonging to the BJP by the time their term (2016–21) was over	30

When the elections for ZPAs were held in the state during January 2016, the Samajvadi Party ruled UP. However, following the March 2017 state elections the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) became the ruling party. The subsequent number of NCMs and the high rate of recall of ZPAs affiliated to the Samajvadi party strongly suggest to the authors that indirect elections of ZPAs (whether women or men), in UP at least, can be 'managed' by the state government. Also, the significant number of ZPAs who shifted their political loyalties reflects the influence of the state government, as does the fact that all the new ZPAs elected in by-elections during the period 2017–21 (triggered primarily by NCMs) were loyal to the BJP.

Characteristics of female ZPAs

While the election of a woman may be no more or less questionable than that of a man, it is important to understand whether candidates elected to a position of authority have the capacity to exercise the power conferred on them.

According to the National Family Health Survey of 2015–16 in UP state, only 32% of women are 'allowed' to go to a market, a health facility or any place outside the village or community unaccompanied. More than half (52%) are anaemic as compared to 24% of men. More than half of UP's women (51%) also believe that it is acceptable for men to beat their wives 'under some circumstances'; and 33% of women aged 15–49 have been subjected to physical violence, but only 4% of the abused women have sought help from the police (IIPS and ICF 2017).¹¹ These statistics suggest that at least half the female electorate in UP is not empowered in any meaningful sense. Women candidates for ZP membership or ZPA are therefore likely to emerge from the more empowered remainder.

This study profiled 44 women ZPAs declared elected by the SEC in 2016 (Table 1). Their median age at the time of election was 35 years (range: 23–57) and on average they had completed 11.5 (range: 0–20) years of education. Using established quantitative indicators of women's empowerment (Nayak and

¹¹ See also an open access, interactive web resource for Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) accessible at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/interactives/women-empowerment-index/>

Mahanta 2009; Chung et al. 2013), the median age and average number of years of education recorded suggest that the ZPAs are too young to be considered empowered, but are fairly well educated – especially in comparison to women voters in PRI elections.

For comparison with another, putatively politically empowered, group of women, the authors chose a randomly selected group of 44 women members of parliament (MPs) elected to the lower house of the national parliament in 2019.¹² These women were significantly older than the group of ZPAs at the time of election (median age: 50; range: 26–74) and significantly better educated (mean years of education: 15.2, range: 5–22 years). This finding again suggests that due to the indirect method of election of ZPAs, patronage is a more significant factor in their election than in general elections for MPs, and that as a result their skills may be less than needed.

Who are the champions of female ZPAs?

Another significant feature of the ZPA elections is the number of women elected unopposed. In contrast to the women MPs, who all faced opposition, as many as half the women ZPAs were elected unopposed. This appears to be linked to the role played by male champions of women candidates, who supported their election first to the ZP itself, and then to the post of ZPA.

The vernacular print and electronic media use two terms to describe the kind of men who may be championing women ZP candidates and ZPAs. The first is *bahubali*¹³ (literally, ‘strong-armed’) and the second is *pradhan-pati* (the ‘council president’s husband’) (Sinha 2015). It is noteworthy that in UP’s neighbouring state, the High Court of Punjab and Haryana passed an order on 31 March 2021 directing the Deputy Commissioners in the state of Haryana to keep a check that “*de jure election of the lady sarpanch [council president] was not taken over de facto by male members of her family*” (Malik 2021).

A *bahubali* (‘strongman’) is a person who, though not necessarily convicted of violent crime, possesses the ability to intimidate members of the general public, the press and media, well-off businessmen and farmers, and even state government officials. *Bahubalis* cut their teeth by exercising their strength in activities related to recovery of loans in the informal financial sector, property disputes, out-of-court ‘arbitration’ of civil suits, etc. Some eventually take up political activity full-time and rise in their party organisations, but their allegiance to individual parties tends to be somewhat fickle and they tend to migrate across a wide ideological spectrum. An illustrative example is the husband of the ZPA from Unnao. The Unnao ZPA herself was elected unopposed, when her husband was still a sitting member of the UP Legislative Assembly (MLA) and a member of good standing in the party then in power. A

¹² The authors used MSEXCEL® to prepare a non-duplicate list of 44 randomly chosen women from the list of 78 women members of Parliament elected to the Lok Sabha in 2019, using the RANDBETWEEN, RANK and COUNTIF functions.

¹³ <https://hindi.oneindia.com/news/uttar-pradesh/bahubali-mla-vijay-mishra-aide-win-bhadohi-jila-panchayat-election-413724.html>; <https://www.gaonconnection.com/desh/who-are-these-pradhan-husband-pradhan-son-and-pradhan-in-laws-47074>

year later, when the state government changed, he switched to the party that had wrested power, proceeded to get re-elected as MLA, and the ZPA completed her full term without having to face any NCM or seizure of her powers.

The importance of ZPAs connections to national or state politicians and former ZPAs is also worth noting. In the list of 44 female ZPAs at the time of writing, the authors found women championed by men who are ministers (8), MLAs (10) and former ZPAs (7). These champions included husbands (9), fathers (5), fathers-in-law (3) and one each of brother, brother-in-law, and mother.

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that in UP the women ZPAs elected in 2016 were mostly passive proxies, championed by rich and powerful male elites. Their election was made possible by the system of indirect elections. Thus, having a quota for women in PRI institutions, especially for the post of ZPA, did not achieve women's empowerment as envisaged in the Indian constitution's reservation quota policy.

To this extent, the present findings differ from those of several studies on the role of quotas in achieving women's empowerment (Patnaik 2014; Williams et al. 2015). The authors conclude that the other side in this debate (eg Kishor and Gupta 2004) has a better grasp of the situation on the ground at the ZPA level. This paper posits that this difference arises largely on account of the institutions under study. The intermediate and highest levels of the three-tier system of local self-government have not been examined in sufficient detail. Studies have focused either at the grassroots of democracy, namely village councils and urban local bodies, or on state or national legislatures. The authors note that elections to these are based on direct election by universal adult franchise, secret ballot and the 'first-past-the-post' system. Greater attention by political theorists to electoral politics at district-level PRIs is warranted.

ZPAs in UP are indirectly elected through an electoral process where the outcome is potentially influenced by the power and influence of the state ruling party, which may misuse official machinery to favour those who are in a position to 'capture the power' of the ZPA role. Moreover, officials are typically wary of incurring the displeasure of politicians in the ruling party and may yield to the pressure of power politics.

The outcomes of the July 2021 PRI elections in UP largely confirm the findings of this paper (which was drafted beforehand). First, the overwhelming majority of elected ZPAs (67) were associated with the state ruling party (BJP). Second, as predicted in an earlier draft of this paper, none of the former female ZPAs elected under the quota system were re-elected unless their constituency was reserved for women this time around as well. Most did not even contest. Out of 44 female ZPAs only one was re-elected, and her constituency (Sulatnpur) had again been reserved for women. The authors confidently predict that, depending on the outcome of elections to the state legislature due in 2022, many more incumbent ZPAs, both men and women, will only serve their full term if the party currently in power is

re-elected. In short, the apparent empowerment of women ZPAs in particular, and women ZP members in general, is likely to remain illusory or elusive.

The authors therefore urge that the legislative intent of the enabling Act for women's quotas in PRIs should be more diligently put into practice. This paper has already noted that direct elections to the post of ZPAs in other states of India lead to higher satisfaction among the people with the functioning of the ZP when compared to indirect election (Sivanna et al. 2017). The logistics of conducting direct elections for ZPAs in UP are not too onerous, as evidenced by current practice in the two lower levels of PRIs, which already fill the positions of both ZP members and ZPAs by direct election. A change to direct elections to the post of ZPA should now be given a chance, at least on an experimental basis.

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