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THE “SARPANCH PATI” PHENOMENON AND THE LIMITS OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT IN THE PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

A Study of Proxy Representation, Patriarchal Resistance, and Grassroots Democracy in India

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INTRODUCTION

When the Indian Parliament passed the Constitution (Seventy Third Amendment) Act in 1992, it did something that very few legal reforms anywhere in the world had attempted before. It reserved, by law, a fixed share of elected offices in local government for women, and required that at least one third of the chairperson positions in village councils go to women as well¹. Nearly three decades on, that promise looks very different depending on where you stand. On paper, more than 1.3 million women now hold elected office in India's Panchayati Raj Institutions, making it one of the largest cohorts of female political representatives anywhere on earth². In practice, in large stretches of rural India, a woman may hold the seal of office while her husband, father in law, or brother signs the papers, attends the meetings, negotiates the contracts, and takes the credit. This informal but widespread arrangement has come to be known, half mockingly and half seriously, as the “Sarpanch Pati” phenomenon, using the Hindi word for husband to describe a man who governs through his wife's title.

¹INDIA CONST. pt. IX, art. 243D(3).

²George Mathew, The silent revolution, 2004, India Together, <https://indiatogether.org/articles/panchayat-women/print>

This paper examines that phenomenon closely. It traces the constitutional architecture that created reserved seats for women in panchayats, explains how and why proxy governance has taken root despite that architecture, and looks at what courts, legislatures, and civil society have tried to do about it. It also engages with a more uncomfortable question that recent scholarship has raised: whether blaming husbands alone lets everyone else, from patriarchal kinship networks to indifferent bureaucracies to political parties that recruit women only as placeholders, off the hook too easily. The argument developed here is that the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon is real and damaging, but it is best understood not as an aberration from an otherwise successful policy, rather as a symptom of how deeply gender hierarchy is woven into the institutions that reservation was meant to open up.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The 73rd Amendment inserted a new Part IX into the Constitution, running from Article 243 to Article 243-O, and gave Panchayati Raj Institutions constitutional status for the first time³. Before 1992, panchayats existed at the pleasure of state governments, and elections to them were irregular and often symbolic. The amendment changed that by mandating regular five year elections, a three tier structure running from the village to the district, and, most significantly for this paper, a fixed quota of seats and chairperson positions for women. Article 243D provides that not less than one third of the total seats filled by direct election in every panchayat, and not less than one third of the offices of chairperson, must be reserved for women, with these reserved seats rotated among different constituencies over time⁴. Twenty states have since gone further than the constitutional floor and legislated fifty percent reservation for women in their own Panchayati Raj Acts, among them Bihar, which was the first state to do so, along with Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal⁵. Odisha has added a further twist, requiring that where the head

³The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992, § 4, art. 243D (India) (inserting Part IX into the Constitution of India, effective Apr. 24, 1993).

⁴ *ibid*

⁵Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Participation of Women in Panchayats, Press Information Bureau (Feb. 6, 2024), <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2003196>

of a panchayat is a man, the deputy head must be a woman, a rule intended to guarantee that women hold real power even outside the seats formally reserved for them⁶.

The scale of the change brought about by these provisions should not be understated. By the mid 1990s, the number of women in panchayats had grown rapidly, reaching close to forty percent of seats in states like Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, and today, out of roughly three million elected panchayat representatives across the country, some 1.3 million are women⁷. Before reservation, a woman in local government was typically a token nominee, drawn from an already privileged land owning or politically connected family, who rarely exercised any independent authority. After reservation, ordinary rural women, including many who had never before addressed a public meeting, began contesting and winning elections in large numbers. It is against this genuine and significant achievement that the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon has to be measured, because the disappointment it represents is only meaningful in light of how much reservation initially promised.

It is also worth noting a structural peculiarity of the constitutional scheme that has made judicial correction of local irregularities difficult. Article 243-O explicitly bars courts from interfering in matters relating to the delimitation of panchayat constituencies or the allotment of seats, channelling such disputes instead through an election petition process⁸. While this bar was designed to prevent panchayat elections from being tied up in litigation the way parliamentary and assembly elections often are, it has had the side effect of leaving very little room for constitutional courts to develop doctrine specifically addressing what happens once a woman is validly elected but is then functionally sidelined from the office she won. The legal system, in other words, is well equipped to police who gets onto the ballot and not particularly well equipped to police what happens after the results are declared.

⁶*Govt Claims Women Winning Unreserved Panchayat Seats in Significant Numbers*, The Hindu (date of publication), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/govt-claims-women-winning-unreserved-panchayat-seats-in-significant-numbers/article70893003.ece>

⁷Dhyeya IAS, *From Proxy to Power: Eliminating the 'Sarpanch Pati' Practice in Rural Governance*, Dhyeya IAS (Mar. 8, 2025), <https://www.dhyeyaias.com/current-affairs/daily-current-affairs/sarpanch-pati-system-women-empowerment-panchayati-raj>

⁸INDIA CONST. pt. IX, art. 243-O (barring interference by courts in matters relating to the delimitation of constituencies and allotment of seats in panchayats).

DEFINING SARPANCH PATI PHENOMENON

The term Sarpanch Pati, along with its regional cousins Pradhan Pati in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and Mukhiya Pati in parts of Bihar and Jharkhand, describes a specific and recurring pattern. A woman is elected, often to a seat reserved for women under the rotation scheme, and her husband or another close male relative then takes over the substantive functions of the office while she remains the nominal, legally accountable holder of the post⁹. The male relative attends meetings in her place or alongside her while doing the actual talking, signs or dictates official correspondence, manages panchayat funds, negotiates with contractors and government officials, and represents the panchayat in dealings with the block and district administration. The woman, meanwhile, may show up chiefly to sign documents already prepared for her, or in some documented instances may not attend at all¹⁰.

It is worth being precise about what makes this arrangement different from ordinary spousal support or family collaboration in public life, something that happens in every democracy and is not inherently objectionable. The distinguishing feature of Sarpanch Pati governance is the absence of independent decision-making authority on the part of the elected woman. A husband who occasionally accompanies his wife to meetings or helps her draft a letter is not exercising proxy rule. A husband who makes every substantive decision, controls the panchayat's finances, and treats his wife's electoral victory as his own personal mandate is doing something that directly defeats the purpose of a reservation designed to put women, not their male relatives, into positions of authority.

The practice is documented most heavily in the northern and central Hindi speaking states. A study conducted in Bihar found that more than sixty percent of elected women panchayat leaders had husbands or male relatives who regularly attended meetings and made decisions in their place, and a survey in Haryana found that most women serving as sarpanch did not even know the basic details of their panchayat's budget because their husbands handled all financial matters¹¹. Field visits recorded by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's own review committee

⁹Dhyeya IAS, *From Proxy to Power: Eliminating the 'Sarpanch Pati' Practice in Rural Governance*, Dhyeya IAS (Mar. 8, 2025), <https://www.dhyeyaias.com/current-affairs/daily-current-affairs/sarpanch-pati-system-women-empowerment-panchayati-raj>

¹⁰Enforce Exemplary Penalties to End Pradhan Pati Culture, RAU'S IAS COMPASS (Feb. 28, 2025), <https://compass.rauias.com/current-affairs/enforce-exemplary-penalties-pradhan-pati-culture/>.

¹¹*Id.*

found similar patterns in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, including instances in which elected women were rarely seen at panchayat meetings at all¹². None of this is to say the phenomenon is absent elsewhere. It exists in some form across the country, but it is markedly more entrenched in regions where women's mobility outside the home remains socially restricted and where the panchayat itself remains a heavily male dominated public space.

WHY PROXY GOVERNANCE PERSISTS

A. PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL ORGANISATION

The most frequently cited explanation, and the correct starting point, is patriarchal social organisation. In much of rural north India, a woman's mobility, her ability to speak in mixed gatherings, and her authority to transact business independently of her husband's family remain constrained by custom well before she ever contests an election. Reservation places such a woman into a role that formally requires exactly the kind of independent public authority that her domestic environment has spent a lifetime training her not to exercise. Her husband, meanwhile, has typically had none of those same constraints, and stepping into the office she has won can feel to the family, and often to the wider community, like the natural and even honourable thing to do, an extension of a husband managing the household's affairs rather than a usurpation of his wife's constitutional mandate¹³.

B. LACK OF TRAINING,LITERACY,AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

A second and closely related cause is the practical gap between what the office of sarpanch requires and what many newly elected women have had the opportunity to learn. Panchayat administration in India today involves handling government schemes, maintaining financial records, navigating digital portals for fund disbursal, and corresponding with multiple layers of bureaucracy. Many women elected for the first time, particularly from historically disadvantaged castes and communities, have had limited access to schooling and even less exposure to administrative procedure. In the absence of structured induction and training, a woman elected to office quite reasonably turns to whichever family member has the most experience dealing with paperwork and officialdom, and in a patriarchal household that person

¹²Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Gov't of India, Report of the Committee on Curbing Proxy Representation of Elected Women Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (2025) (K. 13

¹³ Uttara Chaudhuri & Mitali Sud, *Women as Proxies in Politics: Decision Making and Service Delivery in Panchayati Raj*, The Hindu Centre (Oct. 16, 2015), <https://www.thehinducentre.com/the-arena/current-issues/women-as-proxies-in-politics-decision-making-and-service-delivery-in-panchayati-raj/article64931527.ece>

is almost always the husband. What begins as assistance can, without deliberate correction, calcify into substitution.

C. INSTITUTIONAL AND BUREAUCRATIC BIAS

A third cause lies not with families at all but with the state apparatus that panchayats are meant to answer to. Field level officials, block development officers, and even fellow panchayat members frequently address correspondence and instructions to the husband directly, treat him as the practical point of contact, and in some cases actively discourage the elected woman from participating by suggesting that her husband can handle matters more efficiently. This pattern has been described by reviewers of the practice as official indifference bordering on complicity, since bureaucratic convenience quietly reinforces the very proxy arrangement that the law was designed to prevent¹⁴. Political parties add a further layer of pressure, since local party units sometimes prefer that a woman contest a reserved seat while a male relative retains effective control of patronage networks and financial decisions, treating the reservation as a technical requirement to be worked around rather than a substantive commitment to women's leadership.

D. ABSENCE OF EFFECTIVE LEGAL DETERRENTS

Finally, the practice persists because, for most of the reservation era, there has been no meaningful legal consequence attached to it. Most state Panchayati Raj Acts say nothing at all about proxy representation, and where a woman has tried to complain about her husband's interference, the complaint has often gone nowhere or has exposed her to social retaliation. A woman serving as pradhan who attempted to report her husband's interference was threatened by local community leaders and ultimately forced to withdraw the complaint. Without an accessible grievance mechanism and a credible threat of sanction, informal social pressure has had a clear field to operate in.

INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS

A. STATE LEVEL INTERVENTION

Some states have begun to respond directly. Rajasthan issued a directive in 2021 formally prohibiting the Sarpanch Pati practice and warning that officials found facilitating it, along with the women whose offices were being used as cover, could face disqualification and legal

¹⁴ Smita Mishra Panda ed., *Engendering Governance Institutions: State, Market and Civil Society* (SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd. 2008).

action¹⁵ Bihar, having already moved to fifty percent reservation for women, introduced public swearing in ceremonies for newly elected women pradhans specifically to reinforce, in front of the whole community, that authority rests with the woman named on the certificate and not with any relative standing beside her. Maharashtra has supported the Mahila Rajsatta Andolan, a grassroots movement built around training and mobilising elected women, and several states have experimented with gender resource centres, women's ombudspersons, and whistleblower incentive schemes aimed at surfacing proxy arrangements before they become entrenched¹⁶.

B. THE UNION GOVERNMENT'S PUSH FOR PENALTIES

At the national level, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj constituted a committee in 2023, chaired by former Mines Secretary Sushil Kumar, specifically to study the Pradhan Pati and Sarpanch Pati problem and recommend structural reform¹⁷. The committee's recommendations, released in 2025, called for what it described as exemplary penalties against proxy leadership, mandatory leadership training for newly elected women representatives, stronger financial literacy support so that women control panchayat budgets in fact and not merely on paper, and sustained community mobilisation campaigns to shift local expectations about who is entitled to exercise authority in the panchayat office¹⁸. One proposal debated during the committee's field visits, that a minimum level of schooling be made a formal eligibility requirement for contesting the post of panchayat president, was ultimately left out of the final nine point recommendation, a choice that itself reflects an unresolved tension in the reform debate between raising the bar for competence and further narrowing an already exclusionary electorate.

Alongside the committee's work, the Ministry has rolled out the Sashakt Panchayat Netri Abhiyan, a dedicated capacity building programme for elected women, and has used community radio and public outreach campaigns such as Jan Jan Tak Jankari, piloted across

¹⁵Husband Proxies Running Panchayats, supra note 7 (noting that the Rajasthan government issued a 2021 directive prohibiting the Sarpanch Pati practice and warning of disqualification and legal action).

¹⁶Husband Proxies Running Panchayats, supra note 7 (describing gender resource centers, whistleblower rewards, and the Mahila Rajsatta Andolan launched in Maharashtra).

¹⁷ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Transforming Women's Representation and Roles in Panchayati Raj Systems and Institutions: Eliminating Efforts for Proxy Participation (2025).

¹⁸Enforce Exemplary Penalties, supra note 8.

stations in Bihar, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, to spread awareness of both the legal consequences of proxy leadership and the availability of digital governance tools like e-GramSwaraj and SVAMITVA that are meant to make panchayat administration more transparent and less dependent on any single intermediary¹⁹.

C. THE NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION'S INTERVENTION

In late 2025 the matter reached the National Human Rights Commission, which issued conditional summons to the principal secretaries responsible for panchayati raj and urban local bodies in thirty two states and union territories, directing them to appear with action taken reports on the steps being taken to eliminate what the Commission characterised as an unconstitutional practice²⁰. The Commission's language was notably direct, describing Sarpanch Pati and its variants as a mode of proxy politics that reduces legally elected women to figureheads and represents a persistent violation of both constitutional mandate and human rights within these institutions²¹. A handful of states, including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, and Uttarakhand, had submitted responses by the time of the Commission's review, though the exercise as a whole underscores how far implementation still lags behind the constitutional design nearly thirty three years after the 73rd Amendment came into force.

D. JUDICIAL TREATMENT: RAJBALA v. STATE OF HARYANA

The most significant judicial engagement with the underlying competence question came not through a case about proxy representation directly but through a challenge to Haryana's decision to impose minimum educational qualifications on panchayat candidates. In *Rajbala v. State of Haryana*, the Supreme Court upheld amendments to the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act that barred candidates without a matriculation certificate, or without a class eight certificate for women and Scheduled Caste candidates, from contesting panchayat elections at all²². The Court reasoned that education gives a person the capacity to discriminate between right and wrong, good and bad, and that prescribing an educational qualification was therefore rationally

¹⁹Sarpanch Pati System, *supra* note 6 (describing the Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan and the Jan Jan Tak Jankari community radio campaign broadcast in Bihar, Karnataka, and Maharashtra).

²⁰Nat'l Human Rights Comm'n, Conditional Summons Issued to Principal Secretaries of 32 States and Union Territories on the Practice of 'Sarpanch Pati'/'Pradhan Pati' (Dec. 2025), reported in *Breaking 'Sarpanch Pati Raj,'* *supra* note 10.

²¹*Id.*

²²*Rajbala v. State of Haryana*, (2016) 2 S.C.C. 445 (India).

connected to the goal of securing effective panchayat administration, and did not offend the guarantee of equality under Article 14²³.

The judgment has been sharply criticised, and the criticism bears directly on the Sarpanch Pati debate. Petitioners had placed before the Court census figures showing that literacy rates among rural women in Haryana lagged far behind those of men, so that an educational bar of this kind would disproportionately exclude the very women the reservation scheme was designed to bring into public life²⁴. Commentators pointed out that the judgment sat uneasily against the Court's own earlier reasoning in *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, which had held that character and devotion to public duty, not formal educational attainment, were what mattered in an elected representative, and against *Bhanumati v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, which had described the 73rd Amendment as intended to replace village oligarchy with rule by the common person²⁵²⁶. Seen through the lens of the Sarpanch Pati debate, *Rajbala* illustrates a genuine dilemma. Raising formal qualifications might screen out some women who currently serve as nominal officeholders while male relatives govern in their place, but it does so by disqualifying exactly the poorest and least educated rural women rather than by addressing the patriarchal habits of the households and bureaucracies that produce proxy rule in the first place. A law aimed at competence ends up, in effect, punishing the victims of a prior failure by the state to educate them.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS ABOUT WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

It would be a mistake to let the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon obscure what rigorous empirical research has actually found about women who do exercise genuine authority in panchayats. In a landmark randomised study of village councils in West Bengal, Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo found that panchayats headed by women invested more heavily in the public goods that women themselves identified as priorities, particularly drinking water infrastructure, in villages where the leadership position had been reserved for a woman compared with

²³*Rajbala v. State of Haryana*, (2016) 2 S.C.C. 445, ¶¶ 70, 80 (India).

²⁴*Id.* ¶ 80 (reproducing National Population Register 2011 data showing that literacy among rural women in Haryana above the age of twenty lagged substantially behind that of men).

²⁵*People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, (2003) 4 S.C.C. 399 (India), quoted in *An Exclusionary Judgment*, *supra* note 23.

²⁶*Bhanumati v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, (2010) 12 S.C.C. 1 (India), cited in *An Exclusionary Judgment*, *supra* note 23.

villages where it had not²⁷. Their results provided some of the first hard evidence, anywhere in the world, that quotas for women in local government produce measurably different policy outcomes and not merely symbolic representation²⁸.

A follow up study by Lori Beaman and colleagues extended this finding in an important direction, showing that repeated exposure to female pradhans over successive election cycles raised the career aspirations of adolescent girls in the villages studied and narrowed the gender gap in their educational attainment, suggesting that women's political leadership generates benefits that outlast any single term of office and reshape what the next generation of girls believes is possible for themselves²⁹. These findings matter enormously for how the Sarpanch Pati problem should be understood. They confirm that the underperformance associated with proxy governance is not evidence that women make poor local leaders. It is evidence of exactly the opposite: that when women are permitted to exercise the authority the Constitution gives them, the results are measurably better, which makes the diversion of that authority into male hands all the more costly, both to the women concerned and to the villages they were elected to serve.

ARE HUSBANDS THE PROBLEM? A MORE COMPLICATED PICTURE

Recent scholarship has pushed back against framing the issue solely around the figure of the interfering husband. In a widely discussed 2023 essay, the political scientists Rachel Brulé, Simon Chauchard, and Alyssa Heinze, drawing on a long term study of several hundred panchayats since 2018, argued that the obstacles facing elected women cannot be reduced to a simple story of sarpanch patism, and that proxy husbands do not, on their evidence, constitute the central constraint on whether female local officials are able to deliver better policy outcomes³⁰. Their fieldwork instead points to broader and more diffuse gendered hierarchies embedded in everyday local politics, hierarchies that the 73rd Amendment's mandate for

²⁷Raghabendra Chattopadhyay & Esther Duflo, Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India, 72 *ECONOMETRICA* 1409, 1409-11, 1431, 1440 (2004).

²⁸*Id.* at 1440-41.

²⁹Lori Beaman et al., Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India, 335 *SCIENCE* 582, 582-83 (2012).

³⁰Rachel Brulé, Simon Chauchard & Alyssa Heinze, Are Husbands the Problem?, *SEMINAR MAG.* (2023), discussed in Breaking 'Sarpanch Pati Raj,' *MILLENNIUM POST* (Dec. 27, 2025), <https://www.millenniumpost.in/sundaypost/in-retrospect/breaking-sarpanch-pati-raj-641624>.

women's representation has, in some households, actually intensified rather than dissolved, since a husband whose social standing depends on being seen as the head of the family may feel more threatened, not less, by a wife who has just won a public election he could not contest on the reserved seat³¹.

This more complicated picture has two implications worth taking seriously. First, it suggests that penalising husbands after the fact, while necessary, will not by itself dismantle the underlying architecture of gendered authority that makes proxy rule attractive to families in the first place. A legal deterrent aimed narrowly at the husband leaves untouched the caste councils, extended kin networks, and local bureaucracies that often expect and even prefer to deal with a male intermediary. Second, it complicates any narrative in which women who work alongside supportive husbands are automatically assumed to be victims of coercion. Some women who initially served as apparent proxies have, over time and with experience, gone on to exercise growing independent confidence and authority, a trajectory that a purely punitive framework risks failing to recognise or support³². The debate is therefore less about whether Sarpanch Pati is a problem, which almost nobody disputes, and more about whether the reform energy currently being directed at individual husbands is being aimed at the right level of the system.

THE DEEPER LIMITS OF FORMAL EMPOWERMENT

Stepping back from the specifics of any one reform, the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon points to a broader limitation in how legal empowerment operates. Reservation is what political scientists sometimes call a supply side intervention. It guarantees that a woman's name appears on the ballot and, if she wins, on the office door. It cannot by itself guarantee the demand side conditions, social respect, financial independence, literacy, mobility, and freedom from domestic control, that would allow her to actually use the authority that comes with that office. Where those conditions are largely absent, as they still are across much of rural north India,

³¹ A Catalyst for Change: Impact of Panchayati Raj on Women's Empowerment in India, INT'L J. RES. & INNOVATION SOC. SCI. (citing Sinha, Proxy Representation and Women in Local Government (2018); Mary John, Woman, State and Family (2007); Vandana Buch, Panchayati Raj and Women's Empowerment (2010))

³² A Catalyst for Change: Impact of Panchayati Raj on Women's Empowerment in India, INT'L J. RES. & INNOVATION SOC. SCI. (citing Sinha, Proxy Representation and Women in Local Government (2018); Mary John, Woman, State and Family (2007); Vandana Buch, Panchayati Raj and Women's Empowerment (2010)).

formal representation can coexist for years with almost no substantive change in who actually governs.

This is not an argument against reservation, and it would be a serious misreading of the evidence to treat it as one. The Chattopadhyay and Duflo findings make plain that reservation does produce real policy change wherever women are able to exercise the office they hold, and the Beaman findings make plain that even the visible fact of a woman occupying the chair reshapes what the next generation of girls believes about their own possibilities, regardless of who is quietly managing the paperwork behind her. The argument instead is that reservation was always the first step in a longer process, not a self executing solution, and that treating the presence of women's names on election rolls as the finish line has allowed proxy governance to flourish in the gap between formal and substantive power. Training programmes, financial literacy support, and legal penalties for interference are necessary responses, but they will remain partial unless they are matched by a sustained effort to change how bureaucracies, political parties, and rural communities themselves think about who is entitled to speak for the panchayat.

CONCLUSION

Thirty three years after the 73rd Amendment brought women into local government at a scale unmatched almost anywhere else in the world, the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon remains a stubborn reminder of how far formal legal rights can travel from lived reality. The constitutional design was sound, the numbers it produced were genuinely historic, and the evidence that women exercise power differently, and often more effectively for their communities, when they are allowed to exercise it at all, is by now well established. What the phenomenon exposes is not a flaw in the idea of reservation but the difficulty of using a single legal instrument to dislodge deeply rooted patriarchal structures that operate simultaneously inside the household, inside the party system, and inside the local bureaucracy. The National Human Rights Commission's recent summons, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's committee recommendations, and scattered state level directives from Rajasthan to Bihar all suggest that the political system is finally treating the issue as more than an open secret. Whether that attention translates into elected women actually running their own panchayats, rather than merely being permitted to sign for them, will depend on reforms that reach beyond the husband at the center of the phenomenon's name and address the wider structures of authority that put him there in the first place.