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Beyond the Boundaries of Power: Digital Media, Women's Political Participation, RSS Outreach, and Grassroots Democracy in Haryana

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Abstract

In this chapter the relationship between digital media and women's political participation, outgrowths of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and grassroots democracy in the state of Haryana is examined. It believes that digital technologies have created new spaces for political visibility, communication, mobilisation and participation of women in local governance which are not equally enjoyed and are socially mediated. In addition to constitutional provisions and electoral institutions, Haryana's family structure (patriarchy), caste hierarchy, rural social norms, digital access, and the influence of political and ideological networks also form a significant part in molding women's political agency. The chapter starts with an overall context of women's political participation in general and the socio-political environment of Haryana in particular in the context of Indian democracy. It then examines how digital media is enabling the political awareness, electoral communication, local governance and collective mobilisation of women. A special focus is on the Panchayati Raj Institutions where the reserved quota for women has led to a greater level of formal representation, but has not necessarily resulted in women having any autonomous decision-making power. The chapter also critically reviews how this outreach, extending to women's organisation networks, ideological training, community service and digital communication were also crucial avenues for women's political socialisation and mobilisation within the context of RSS. It is argued here that digital media can contribute to the possibility of women's empowerment "beyond the boundaries of power" only if they have access to technology, yet are also politically educated, are held accountable for their institutions, are safe on digital media and are not subjected to gatekeeping by patriarchal power and institutions. Digital engagement should not be seen as a replacement for real, meaningful engagement. It should instead be viewed as a politically contested resource that can only be effective if it is under the control of those who wish to use it, whose

voices are heard, and in which women can have tangible impact on panchayats, political parties and public bodies.

Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Digital Media, Grassroots Democracy, Panchayati Raj, Haryana, RSS Outreach, Gender and Politics, Political Communication, Digital Divide, Women Sarpanches.

Introduction

Democracy doesn't just happen during elections and in legislatures and formal politics. It can also be found in villages and neighbourhoods, community organisations, families, in social movements, and in digital networks. The issue of women's participation in politics has always held greater significance for women than just voting and contesting elections. It encompasses speaking in public, searching for information, collective organisation, decision-making influence, representative accountability and not being a symbolic presence in institutions.

The involvement of women in political process has grown substantially since independence in India, especially following the introduction of women's reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies by the Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth Constitutional Amendments. But the struggle from form to substance is not over yet. While women can hold elected offices, these can be restricted by male kin, powerful castes, local elites, party hierarchies, lack of livelihoods and entrenched gender norms.

Last but not least, Haryana provides a significant setting to examine these conflicts. The state is traditionally known for its patriarchal practices, imbalanced sex ratio, caste politics and less participation of women in the state legislature. Concurrently, Haryana has a significant number of women in the local government institutions in the rural areas, rising penetration in smartphones and internet usage, active political communication networks, and women's rights and leadership are discussed more frequently in the public discourse. The mix of these factors makes Haryana a telling example of the potential of digital media and outreach by the organisation to bring wider women's engagement into politics, or to simply reinstate the old order in a new guise.

There are four themes here that are interrelated and are explored in this chapter: Women's political participation, digital media, RSS outreach, and grassroots democracy. It queries the role of digital platforms in women's participation in politics in Haryana; experience of women elected to panchayats with digital tools; grassroots democracy and RSS's outreach on digital platforms; and the effects of these developments in strengthening or weakening of grassroots democracy.

The chapter adopts a multi-disciplinary perspective, incorporating aspects of political science, gender studies and media studies as well as rural sociology. Does not state that digital media is the panacea to gendered power relations. Rather, digital media needs to be understood in the broader context of power, not only in the households of the user groups but in the context of caste groups, political parties, state institutions, civil society and ideological institutions.

Conceptualising Women's Political Participation

There are different perspectives from which to view the role of political participation of women. The most apparent is electoral involvement - that of voting, standing for office, campaigning, and being elected. The second is being a member of political parties, pressure groups, trade unions, student organisations and social movements. The third level is related to involvement in local governance while particularly gram panchayat, block panchayat, zila parishad, municipality and gram sabha. At a fourth, less official level of civic involvement are everyday activities like raising issues in the community, attending public meetings, petitioning officials, taking part in demonstrations and social activism, and the use of social media to spread political opinions.

The barriers vary for each of these levels for women. While voting is frequently the easiest type of participation, family heads, husbands, fathers, caste leaders and community elders can still influence voting. Election contestation is not free of costs and it is not an action that can be taken by anyone. It is contingent upon financial resources, social legitimacy, mobility, public visibility and support networks. A member of the ruling class has to be able to attend meetings, deal with officials, handle money, engage in debate with those in command and bear the slurs of the public.

There is then more to political participation than just an individual decision. It is structurally determined by the access to education, income, property, mobility, safety and social approval. There may be less time for women to do public political work when they are engaged in unpaid domestic and care work. Limited education among women may pose a problem in dealing with the bureaucracy. Women belonging to weaker sections of society (such as marginalised castes or minority religions) may be subjected to multiple discrimination. For married women, there may be some expectation that they will focus mainly on their domestic duties instead of on the public sphere.

One of the key concepts of this chapter is the concept of descriptive versus substantive representation. Descriptive Representation is the representation of women in political institutions. Substantive representation is about whether women can have an impact on the agenda, policies, budgets and outcomes. If the female sarpanch holds office, she can be descriptively represented; but if the husband or

other male member of the family makes the decisions of the sarpanch, then the female sarpanch can not be substantively represented.

This is very significant in the state of Haryana. The research on the elected women representatives in rural local government has revealed that women sarpanches are often constrained by sociocultural factors such as their lack of mobility, resistance at home, dominance of men in village politics and proxy leadership in their community. But studies reveal that many women representatives are slowly building confidence, administrative expertise and political abilities over time which allow them to become more autonomous.

Number of women, therefore, is not the only measure of political participation of women. It should be judged on the basis of their participation: their ability to speak, decide, lead, challenge injustice, use resources and influence public priorities - all of which must be demonstrated by the presence of women.

Haryana: Patriarchy, Politics, and Grassroots Democracy

Haryana stands in a paradoxical situation with regard to gender-politics in India. The state has nurtured excellent women sports personalities, administrators, entrepreneurs and politicians on the other hand. At the same time, it still has many problems with gender discrimination, son preference, violence against women, low participation of women in the labour force and Patriarchal control of women's mobility and sexuality.

These conflicts are apparent in politics. In the past, the representation of women in the legislative assembly of Haryana has always been less than the proportion of the female population. There are fewer women candidates nominated by political parties, especially for the winnable seats. Even women who do get into electoral politics are stereotyped as leaders of political families.

At the grassroots-level, however, the reservations have resulted in a more visible female political voice. In the Panchayat Raj system of Haryana, there are elected women sarpanches, panchayat members, block sarpanches and zila parishad members. The impact of the reservation policy in rural local governance is evident in the fact that in the recent years, close to 50% of sarpanch posts are occupied by women in the state.

But social hierarchies can't be swept aside by numbers. Women's presence in panchayat politics has been elevated using reservation quotas in many villages and political power might still reside with male family members. Sarpanch pati or "husband sarpanch" is a phenomenon where a woman is elected as sarpanch but her husband plays a de facto role. Similar relationships can be with fathers, fathers-in-law, brothers or sons.

It would also be wrong to think that all women representatives are without power. As the chairperson of the Panchayat, many women have made efforts to solve the water supply problem, sanitation, making roads, providing anganwadi facilities, tackling alcoholism, domestic violence and women safety issues. Some have established linkages with the officials, self-help groups, mahila mandals and civil-society organisations. Some have stood up in public to oppose those in power in their area.

So, the grassroots democracy of Haryana is not an easy tale of exclusion or empowerment. It's a space of discussion. Women are entering political institutions through reservations and family affiliations, caste networks, party affiliations, community service, and now more and more digitally visible. The interplay of these factors determines their power to exercise power.

Digital Media and the Transformation of Political Participation

Citizens' relationship to politics has shifted as a result of digital media. Political information is now able to flow quickly on a variety of digital platforms, including smartphones, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and the local-language equivalent. WhatsApp groups have gained significance in the rural and semi-urban areas of Haryana for disseminating information, government schemes, election announcements, community concerns, public images and rallies.

Digital media can have a number of political roles for women.

First, it can be an information access. Digital platforms will help women to learn about various welfare schemes, voter registration, panchayat meetings, legal rights, health services, education programmes, and employment opportunities. This is especially significant if women are not mobile or have limited access to public offices.

Second, digital media can be used to make spaces of expression. Women can comment on a topic, upload photos of what's going on in the community, point out civic issues, and respond to discussions. A female sanchalini can post notices on WhatsApp/ Facebook about any repairs on the streets, water schemes, sanitation drives or village gathering.

Third, digital media can be used as an enabler to mobilise. Women groups, self-help groups, student groups, community network can schedule the meeting, campaign, protest and awareness drives. Social media can also serve as another way for women to reach them out to a larger community outside of their own village.

Fourthly, digital media provides the opportunity for political monitoring. Citizens can take photos of roads that are broken, officials that are absent, irregular distribution of welfare, unsafe public places and share them publicly. This can put pressure for accountability, but doesn't guarantee institutional response.

Finally, digital media can be used to promote a political campaign. Short videos, memes, posters, WhatsApp forwards and livestreams are used to communicate with voters by candidates, ideological groups and political parties. Digital campaigning can also decrease some of the practical challenges for women candidates, such as the challenges of travelling to polling stations and attending public events, but can also be a source of abuse and criticism online.

The study of digital political communication in the non-Western world has suggested that gender is related to social context in terms of influencing political participation. Digital spaces are not apolitical, but a reflection of current inequities of class, caste, education, language, religion and patriarchy. In India, although mobile connectivity, and the ability to access political information has grown, this exposure is still unequal, with some women in rural areas having an easier access to political information than others.

Digital Media in Haryana's Rural Political Culture

Digital media is a part of a unique rural political culture in Haryana. Politics in the village often revolves around caste associations, khap panchayats, kinship networks, strongmen in the village, agricultural interest groups and party factions. These structures are not being superseded by digital structures, but rather they can be extensions of each other.

A WhatsApp group setup to a village could involve male and female members, but if the male-dominated members of the caste or male family members do the talking then women may not say anything. A woman can have a smart phone, but the family members could be monitoring her online activity. While a woman running for office can campaign online, her image online can still be managed by male campaign managers.

Digital media brings about minor but significant change at the same time. One woman panchayat member, who had relied on male relatives to get the information, can now click on the government portals or join whatsapp groups. A young woman can be reading pages that represent women leaders, law pages or news stories that expand her political imagination. A rural women's group can record an issue that is public and bring it to the public's notice.

Social media has been shown to facilitate grassroots political participation, particularly with regard to the ability to share information, receive feedback instantly and engage in new types of participation, including among younger people. Social media has been leveraged by women taking part in Panchayati Raj Institutions to disseminate information about the development of the villages and civic concerns.

Digital participation, however, can at the same time exacerbate gendered surveillance. Comments regarding women's morals, family honour, dress, sexuality and political loyalty may be directed towards women who are perceived as speaking

online. Women may not feel comfortable in expressing their opinions due to the pressure of online harassment and bullying, particularly in conservative society settings. The digital public sphere might thus create similar restrictions on the participation of women as those that are found offline.

Hence, the digital empowerment must not be simply equated with owning a smartphone. Digital Participation is meaningful when privacy is guaranteed, digital skills are developed, confidence is built, online spaces are safe, and speaking online is socially acceptable.

Women, Panchayats, and the Limits of Formal Representation

The Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment provided for a significant institutional space for political engagement of women through reservation of seats for women in panchayats. This policy has led to the inclusion of women in large numbers in elected local bodies in Haryana. Nowadays, women sarpanches and ward members are involved in decision-making in the areas of village development, sanitation, water, education, health, roads and social welfare.

However, the experiences of women in panchayats points to this difference between formal and substantive representation. There are many women who enter politics due to seat reservation but they may not have prior political background, administrative training, financial autonomy, or family support. Others encounter overt opposition from their male peers, village leaders or officials.

Even if they are capable, the elected women representatives face obstacles in sociocultural sphere in Haryana based on studies conducted through interviews with the women sarpanches. This implies that reserve is required, but not enough. Women must have the enabling conditions to make formal roles effective leadership roles.

Digital media can help women representatives in a number of ways. It can assist them in accessing government circulars, contacting the officials, documenting the issues in the village, communicating with the villagers and publicizing work. It can also help to counteract efforts to wipe it out. When a woman sarpanch uploads pictures of a project completed or writes about a gram sabha meeting, she is creating a public history of her efforts as leader.

Digital tools can also be used against women representatives, however. There is a possibility of male relatives controlling their accounts. Rumours and manipulated content can be spread by political competitors. They may be criticized on the web for their looks, relation with the family, or for lacking respectability, instead of for their administrative efficiency. So digital media has the capacity to both defend and reveal women in public sphere.

The question now is whether women representatives can be self-directed in utilizing digital tools. The women whose online activities are entirely run by male

relatives or party workers have lesser agency compared to the women who post under their own names, reply directly to villagers, and records their own decisions.

Gram Sabhas, Digital Governance, and Participatory Democracy

Grassroots democracy in rural India has its base in the gram sabha. It is supposed to contain members of the register of voters of a village, and to give the opportunity for direct involvement in local decision-making. In reality, gram sabhas are poorly attended, dominated by men, and with little control over panchayat decisions and have irregular meetings.

Women members of gram sabha may find it to be a challenge. The norms or restrictions in mobility, fear of public speaking, lack of childcare or domestic duties can hinder active participation. But, if they attend they may not be able to speak freely if the meeting is dominated by male relatives, caste leaders or the local elites.

The potential solutions lie in digital governance, however, so do new risks. Digital gram sabha experiments aim to do more with technology, to have more participation in the gram sabha, transparency and accessibility. These can include providing citizens with meeting notices, agendas, questions, giving them access to view proceedings and/or participate remotely. The implementation of digital gram sabha has been talked about in Haryana to address the “digital divide” and to promote grassroots democracy.

Digital gram sabhas can have a significant impact on women, in a number of ways:

- Women who are not able to attend the venues for the meetings may attend remotely. The minutes and agenda of meetings may be public. Women can submit concerns on the digital platform without having to speak up in front of the dominant groups. Access and availability of expenditure and project data of Panchayats may improve. Collectives for the women can organize prior to their meetings and formulate collective demands.
- Digital participation, however, may be beyond the reach of women who do not have control of the devices at their household, digital literacy, or access to internet connectivity and/or a smartphone. A meeting without addressing these barriers may perpetuate inequalities if a digital meeting is organised. If the household phone is run by a man, the woman will be unable to participate if she doesn't have her own phone.

Hence, gender sensitive features should be incorporated in Digital Governance. These include community access points, digital literacy camps for women only, local-language interfaces, helplines, childcare support at meetings and protection from online abuse.

RSS Outreach and Women's Political Socialisation

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is one of the most prominent and influential ideological and organisational networks in India. While the RSS is not a political party, the organisations it has as part of its network, along with other socialising, volunteering, educational, cultural and electoral activities, have significant importance. It positively impacts on student organisations, labour organisations, religious and cultural organisations, service organisations and women's organisations.

RSS outreach can be looked upon in two ways in the context of women's involvement in politics. For one, it could open up opportunities for women in the organisation to get into public life. Women involved in any RSS associated network can join in the attendances of shakhas, cultural programmes, awareness programmes, relief programmes, educational programmes and community service programmes. These activities can build up confidence, organisational skills, visibility in the public eye, and networks of support.

Secondly, RSS campaigning can influence the way in which women think about politics. It can look at cultural nationalism, Hindu unity, values of the family, discipline, service and national regeneration. Women can be given opportunities to think of themselves as agents of cultural development and nation building. This can help to create a public purpose and language of collective identity.

Meanwhile, a critical scholarship needs to question whether and how such outreach increases women's autonomy or whether it is limited to within the patriarchal and ideological frameworks. Women can be brought into the public arena, but their duties are conditioned mostly on what is seen as their role as a mother, a family honour, a cultural keeper, a country-servant. They might be seen as having a political agency when it reinforces the organisation's agenda while it may be called into question when it challenges the dominant gender norms and/or ideologies.

The outreach in Haryana could be done through these following mediums: local networks, educational institutions, cultural events, religious festivals, service activities and digital communication, all of which are linked to RSS. Organisational messages can be sent to WhatsApp groups, local workers can be mobilised and localised to larger campaigns via channels on YouTube, Facebook pages and short videos.

This outreach is enhanced by digital media. Local event can be recorded, edited and shared to the masses. Photographs and videos can be created which may highlight the participation of women. Online can be used to recruit volunteers, disseminate ideology and organise campaigns as well.

The political implications of this outreach are that it may give a sense of meaning to women's participation organisationally. Although not all women go into

electoral politics, they might do door-to-door campaigns, voter awareness drives, community meetings or cultural programmes or social media promotion. This approach to engagement may lead to political skills development and connections, but not always to independent leadership.

Digital Hindutva, Gender, and Political Mobilisation

Digital media has come to play a significant role in mobilisation of ideas. Political parties employ social media to spread narratives, symbols, slogans, videos and emotions. Digital platforms can help local cultural activity to be tied to broader national narratives in the context of Hindu nationalist politics.

This forms a complicated political situation for women. Women could acquire public jobs as speakers, organizers, volunteers and digital communicators, on the other hand. They can take part in campaigns, speeches, social-media presence, and be involved in the activities of the organisation in their communities. This exposure can issue a critical challenge to the notion of politics being an exclusively male domain.

However, the participation of women can also be seen as part of conservative gender values. Women can be honored as mother, sister, daughter and protector of culture instead of as independent political beings. They can serve, sacrifice and have moral obligations rather than rights, equality, and make own decisions for their public role to be legitimate.

This does not imply that the women that are part of such networks do not have agency. Women engage in leadership development and are actively taking part in organisations that are gaining access to public life. But their agency is to be grasped in a relational way. It is practiced in organizational frameworks, normative beliefs and values.

An analysis should not, therefore, be conducted at either end of the spectrum. It should not idealize electronic outreach for Hindutva as a step towards empowerment for women. Nor should it negate women's ability to avail themselves of these networks strategically for mobility, recognition and political experience. The key issue is what can be done for women to shift from being participants of the organisation to having their own political voice.

Caste, Class, and Digital Inequality

Caste and class should be a part of every discussion about women's political participation in Haryana. Caste based social relationship, land ownership and resources inequality is a feature of the rural society of Haryana. There is a tendency of the dominant caste groups to influence the politics, decision making of panchayat and the outcome of the elections in the village at any given time.

Digital inequality is linked to these inequities. For women from privileged and higher caste backgrounds, they might have greater access to a smartphone, education, Internet and social networks. There might be added difficulties for women from Dalit, Adivasi, minority, migrant or economically weaker communities. These barriers are poor digital literacy, poor access to a private telephone, language difficulties, and not being included in key networks.

Digital media has the potential to amplify the voices of marginalised women, but it can also make them more vulnerable. If a dalit woman speaks out against caste discrimination online, she may be subjected to casteist abuse. If a dalit woman speaks up against casteist abuse online, she may be subjected to casteist abuse. There is the possibility of communal harassment to be faced by a Muslim woman. Time, privacy, and technical know-how may be limited for a poor woman to engage in digital activities in a way that is sustainable.

Therefore each one of the aspects of digital democracy has to be understood through an intersectional approach. There is no separation between gender and caste, class, religion, age, disability and place. Giving women free internet connection in the village could be counter-productive if they are unable to move around freely in public areas. A digital literacy programme that fails to take into account the dynamics of household power relations may fail.

Digital access must be connected with social justice for grass-roots democracy to be inclusive. Women from marginalized group should not only be provided with devices and connectivity, they should also be protected, represented and given institutional support.

Political Parties, Candidate Selection, and Women's Leadership

This topic covers political parties, candidate selection and women's leadership. Political parties continue to play a key role as gatekeepers to political participation of women. They determine who's going to be issued tickets, campaign support, financial resources and organisational assistance. Like in most Indian states, women in Haryana continue to be under-represented in the legislative elections, particularly in the winnable constituencies.

Digital media has also altered the way people communicate as campaigns, but it hasn't always resulted in an altered process for how candidates are selected. A party can use women's pictures in their campaigning activities and keep to their list of a handful of women to fill key positions. Women could be called on to recruit other women, organize social-media pages or lead rallies, but men are still in charge of who runs for office and who leads the party.

This is a paradox because not only do women enter more visibly into political communication, but they are not necessarily more influential in political decision-making.

The mass media, however, can have a positive impact on the development of women's independent political identity, digital media. Beyond party lines, a woman leader who is accessible to her constituents, able to articulate her actions, and available to discuss local concerns can become a recognized leader. This could be particularly significant for women who are not of a political family.

To enable women's leadership to increase, parties should have internal democracy, transparent selection of candidates, funding opportunities for women candidates and safeguard against harassment. Digital platforms can be used to achieve these objectives by increasing the transparency of party processes, but cannot substitute institutional change.

Online Abuse, Safety, and Women's Public Voice

Internet is not necessarily a safe environment for women. Women can be silenced by online abuse, trolling, sexual harassment, doxxing, rumours and manipulated images, which can deter women from participating in politics. This is an especially serious issue for women who contest the prevailing social norms, criticize local elites or engage in electoral politics.

In Haryana, a place where the image of family honour, and women's respectability, is strongly rooted in society, such attacks online can have serious repercussions. Being targeted with respect to political views is not the only reason a woman candidate is targeted; they can also be targeted for their clothing, marital status, mobility or family relationships. These attacks are aimed at women's marginalisation in the private sphere.

Digital safety is thus a political problem. Women empowerment to be part of democracy is dependent on their fearlessness to speak. All platforms, state agencies, political parties and civil society organizations need to respond to online violence.

Possible measures include:

Training on digital literacy and Internet safety for women. Knowledge of the legal consequences of cyber harassment and complaint process. Quick assistance by Police Cyber cells. Platformization of accountability for gendered abuse and misinformation. Codes of conduct for online abuse of women candidates (at party level). Networks to assist women in trolling and defamation. If not, digital media can be another arena in which women are disciplined by the patriarchy.

Education, Digital Literacy, and Political Confidence

There is a strong link between education, confidence and political participation. Access to education enables women to have greater knowledge about the workings of politics, take a more active role in public institutions and claim their rights. The addition of digital literacy is a new element in this process.

Digital Literacy is not just about using a smart phone. It has the skills to search for trustworthy information, detect misinformation, safeguard personal information, access government portals, interact safely online, and comprehend the political implications of online material.

Digital Literacy initiatives in the rural area for women would create a significant political impact in Haryana. They might be able to facilitate women in accessing schemes, opine about their legal rights, watch how panchayat proceedings are conducted, get in touch with women groups and get involved with local governance. These programmes should be tailored to the needs and requirements of women who have limited formal education, and created in their local languages.

It is also essential to have political confidence. Many women may have information but may not be able to speak in public because they feel they will be ridiculed, their family will disapprove or the community will reject them. Women can turn knowledge into action through leadership training, public-speaking training sessions, role models and mentors.

The digital media can contribute to this process by bringing visibility to women leaders. For young women, witnessing women sarpanches, legislators, activists and community organisers speaking openly in public could start to make them think about political leadership.

Civil Society, Self-Help Groups, and Alternative Political Spaces

Political participation of women does not happen only in the context of parties and/or ideological organisations. Civil-society groups, mahila mandals, self-help groups, non-governmental organisations, student collectives and community-based organisations also are important.

Self-help groups can develop economic confidence, a sense of community and local leadership. Skills acquired in savings groups, microenterprises or community projects can be translated to political participation for women running these enterprises. They are taught how to conduct meetings, keep minutes and records, and to discuss the issues of the group with officials and represent the collective voice of the group.

Digital tools can be used to help women's collectives coordinate activities, market products, access government schemes etc. and raise issues in the local community in Haryana. A women's group can create WhatsApp group to arrange a health camp, convey information regarding a health camp, or a problem regarding water or sanitation can be recorded in a WhatsApp group.

The political spaces are important not only because they give women the chance to gain confidence before they take the leap into formal politics but also because they are alternative political spaces that are not as formal as the other ones. It is more likely for a woman to be able to speak in a gram sabha if she has participated in a self-help group meeting. The woman who has been involved in a collective project might be better able to contest an election for the panchayat.

But civil-society places are by no means democratic in and of themselves. They also can be influenced by caste, class, religion or patriarchal norms. These spaces have political significance if they provide women with the opportunity to establish their own agendas and to question unequal power relationships.

Beyond Symbolic Participation

One of the biggest pitfalls of women's political involvement is symbolic involvement. Though women can appear in photos, in rallies or in committees, they are absent from the decisions made. During election campaigns, political parties may have women leaders on display but not give them any power in the organisation. Women can become members of Panchayats but male relatives and/or dominant groups can control resources.

The symbolic participation can be enhanced by digital media. A woman can be seen in a political campaign ad or take a picture at a public occasion and the picture can be shown without her having any actual role in the policy-making. Her portrait could be used as an icon of inclusion in contexts where the existing power dynamic is not about to shift.

If symbolic participation is to be overcome, there are three conditions to be fulfilled.

One of the first steps is for women to have information. They need to be aware of their rights, understand budgets, be aware of procedures followed, and know about government schemes. Secondly, women need to be supported in their organisation. They require network to protect them from intimidation, train them, and give voice to their voice. Thirdly, the institutional authority must be given to women. Reservation, visibility online and organisational membership should be translated to effective control over the agenda, budget and decision.

Digital media can help each of the three, but can not take the place of. It's a device, not an assurance.

Policy Recommendations

To increase the political engagement and grassroots democracy of women in Haryana, digital and social barriers need to be taken care of.

- **Digital Access**

The state should make Internet connectivity available to women from low income households, through affordable devices and affordable community digital centres. The women in rural areas, Dalit, minority and economically disadvantaged should be paid particular attention.

- **Digital Literacy**

Digital literacy programmes should be organized in the anganwadi, self help groups, schools and colleges in villages. Online safety, awareness about misinformation, use of government portals and digital communication skills should be covered in these programmes.

To ensure that the women representatives are supported.

Women representatives elected to panchayats should be trained in panchayat administration, budgeting, procurement, social auditing, Digital governance and public speaking. It may be particularly helpful to have mentorship programs in place to pair new women leaders with established leaders.

- **Transparent Panchayat Governance**

The minutes, meeting agendas, budgets, project lists and beneficiary information of the panchayats should be accessible online in an accessible format. This would assist women and the citizens to supervise the local governance.

- **Gender-Sensitive Gram Sabhas**

Women's rights to speak at gram sabha meetings should be encouraged, childcare made available, safe facilities provided and organizing the meetings at convenient hours for the women. Digital ways to engage in democracy should not take the place of in-person democracy.

- **Online Safety**

Police cyber cells, women's commissions, educational institutes etc. should celebrate the strengthening of mechanisms to deal with online harassment of women politicians. There should be clear codes of conduct towards gendered abuse of political parties.

- **Political Party Reform**

Parties should make a greater effort to ensure that there are more women on candidate lists, in organisational committees and on campaign leadership and decision-making bodies. Digital visibility should not be a substitute to internal power sharing.

- **Independent Civil-Society Support**

Women's proper experience in the political field should be recorded by women organisations, legal-aid organisations, academic institutions and media organisations, train women and establish a platform for the voice of rural women.

Conclusion

Digital media and women's political participation, as well as grassroots democracy and outreach through RSS, are intertwined and complex in Haryana. Digital media has opened up new opportunities to access information, voice opinions, mobilise together and engage in local governance for women. It can overcome some distance, mobility and access to the public institutions barriers.

Digital media, however, is not social in and of itself. It is an expression of and at times reproduces patriarchy, caste hierarchy, class inequality, ideological control. Women can be heard online but not offline. They can be called on to campaign politically without having become independent decision makers. They can navigate online effectively, but are subject to surveillance, harassment and exclusion of power.

Outreach with links to the RSS is another element. Can offer women organizational networks and working in the public sphere, and political socialization. It can also establish women's political agency in specific cultural and ideological contexts, however. The challenge is to be able to separate out participation that offers women autonomy and participation that directs women's energy without changing the existing hierarchy.

The strength of grassroots democracy in Haryana can be seen when women are not just added as a symbol but are acknowledged as a political subject. Digital media is a powerful tool to help bring this about, helping to provide access, transparency, communication and collective action. But education, safety, institutional change and social transformation must go hand-in-hand with technology.

Finally, moving “beyond the boundaries of power” goes beyond being connected – it is about doing so. It demands a culture of democracy in which women are allowed to say, lead, disagree, organise and govern equally. Digital media can contribute to the development of such a culture, but this requires political commitment and a social change.

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