Governance Reforms and Rural Women in India: What Types of Women Citizens are Produced by the Will to Empower?

Abstract
In 1993, the Government of India reserved one-third of the seats in rural councils (panchayats) for women, and along with NGOs, set up programs to empower rural women. We examine the usefulness of a Foucauldian governmentality framework in analyzing how women participants in panchayati raj institutions in Pune District, India, have been produced and the ways in which they respond. We conclude that the emphasis of a strong Foucauldian perspective on structure at the expense of agency obscures the complexity of women’s responses. In contrast, a weak Foucauldian perspective is able to recognize that in some cases these incorporation processes create assertive, reformist, and resourceful citizens.
Introduction

Decades of antipoverty programs in India failed to reduce rural poverty or gender inequality significantly. Beginning in the 1990s, the Government of India added governance reforms to the mix, emphasizing democratization and participation. In 1993, one-third of the seats in panchayati raj institutions (PRIs), elected rural councils, were reserved for women through the seventy-third Constitutional Amendment, which also strengthened the role of PRI. The idea was that training programs would teach women how to negotiate local politics and become empowered by election to reserved seats in PRI. Elected women representatives (EWRs) would not only be from forward castes, as seats would be reserved for women from dalit, adivasi, and other backward caste communities (OBCs) based on their proportions in the local population. Village men and women more generally would participate in gram sabhas (village assemblies) held several times a year to express their views on panchayat priorities, and in some states, such as Maharashtra, government resolutions mandated that women’s gram sabhas be held before the general gram sabhas.

In Pune District, Maharashtra, government officials and NGOs funded by government and foundation grants have been engaged in running training programs attended by women and men PRI representatives and educating villagers about gram sabhas. Some NGOs have set up grassroots women’s organizations to increase panchayat accountability and mobilize villagers to attend gram sabhas. What do such initiatives mean for rural women?

Government boosters paint a rosy picture, but most scholars are more cautious in their assessments. The Minister for Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyar (2005), stated, “Panchayati Raj has led to an amazing development—the emergence of women as leaders.” Empirical research identifies social, economic, and political obstacles that confront EWRs and several factors that facilitate their performance (e.g. Bryld 2001; Buch 2003; Hust 2004; Isaac 2005). EWRs may be proxies for their male relatives and/or be so weighed down with household responsibilities they cannot attend meetings. The need to earn money through agricultural labor precludes attention to panchayat business for many EWRs. Political parties, often unsupportive of EWRs, do not hold meetings at convenient times. Facilitative factors include education, supportive families, and grassroots mobilization efforts, such as those in Kerala. Existing studies identify factors encouraging and limiting women’s participation, but there is so far little theorizing about the responses of rural women, a group marginalized in the Indian political system, to political incorporation.
One promising but problematic theoretical approach that has been recently applied to the political incorporation of marginalized groups is that of governmentality. Corbridge et al. (2005) draw on the theoretical work of Michel Foucault (1991) to provide nuanced perspectives on governance reforms in India. They assess the extent to which participatory governance projects empower the rural poor, as claimed by government boosters, or mainly serve to extend state rule over citizens, as claimed by critics such as James Ferguson (1990). This paper will assess the relevance of a Foucauldian governmentality framework in examining rural women’s participation in PRI. The discussion is based on fieldwork conducted in Pune District, Maharashtra, in 2005 and a visit to Bid District, Maharashtra in 2006.

Governmentality and Technologies of Rule

Foucault-inspired analytical frameworks of governmentality provide a way of understanding neoliberal governance schemes which work through both public and private institutions (Rose and Miller 1992). Dean (1999) points out that the global neoliberal project is not so much about reducing the reach of government as it is about working “through the freedom of the governed as a technical means of securing the ends of government” (15). Instead of relying exclusively on state agencies to carry out development goals, the government adopts what O’Malley (1996) labels “a responsibility strategy” that enlists state agencies to activate individuals and organizations in the private sector toward these ends. The Indian government, in its neoliberal incarnation, targets women and the poor, attempting to shape their conduct so that they become what the government calls “empowered citizens,” who act to further Indian economic development by improving the operation of local government so that corruption is reduced and education, social welfare, and infrastructure services are improved.

Rose and Miller (1992) define technologies of rule as “the complex of mundane programs, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, documents and procedures through which authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambitions” (175). Cruikshank (1999), argues that “the will to empower may be well intentioned, but it is a strategy for constituting and regulating the political subjectivities of the empowered” (68–9). Experts are entrusted to carry out government aims: “By means of expertise, self regulatory techniques can be installed in citizens that will align their personal choices with the end of government” (Rose and Miller 1992, 180).
However, technologies of rule do not necessarily achieve their intended objectives. Rose and Miller (1992) point out that “entities and agents within governmental networks are not faithful relays . . . Entities may defect from a network, may refuse to be enrolled, or may bend its operations at certain points beyond all recognition” (190). This point is made in scores of studies on the implementation of participatory development programs in India. Plans on paper to assist the disadvantaged are often hijacked by lower-level government officials, local political leaders, and economically and socially dominant groups (Corbridge et al. 2005). In these instances, few or none of the programs’ resources reach the disadvantaged groups, and their participation is only a façade.

But what are the implications for participants when technologies of rule successfully reach them? Should EWRs and gram sabha members be seen merely as disciplined subjects, speaking an internalized script? Does their involvement benefit them, as well as fulfill governance objectives? Are there instances when they talk back to government? Sharma (2006) suggests that a “productive question to ask is what kinds of subjects are being produced by the use of empowerment and the resulting increase in interfaces between subaltern women and state agencies” (81).

Some Foucauldian scholars do not directly address these questions. From their vantage point on participatory processes, they observe how the will to empower is actualized through technologies of rule which “extend relations of power and government” (Cruikshank 1999, 82) to the previously excluded. Cruikshank argues that the instilled subjectivity consists of self-government, as the will to empower has constituted the political. The implication is that questions about the ways in which citizens respond to technologies of rule are not important because all possible responses are subsumed under self-regulation. In a similar manner, Cooke and Kothari (2001) answer affirmatively to the question posed by their edited collection, Participation: The New Tyranny? We call this viewpoint a strong Foucauldian perspective.6

Other Foucauldian scholars do examine the responses of targeted citizens to participatory programs, concluding that it is an empirical question whether these citizens derive some benefits from incorporation efforts (Corbridge et al. 2005; Kesby 2005; Sharma 2006). Kesby asserts that “a Foucauldian understanding of power can and must encompass a central role for conscious reflective agency” (2046). While acknowledging that “agency is partial” (2046), Kesby argues that “the current obsession with deconstruction and resistance obscures the central role that reconstruction and empowerment play in explaining how change actually occurs in practice and how
transformation might realistically be facilitated” (2049). Corbridge et al. (2005) acknowledge that “governmental practices built around participation...often fail to meet the needs of poorer people” (261), but they also suggest that there is the potential for citizens to gain strength through encounters with the state: that these practices “can, slowly and unevenly, be instrumental in providing poorer people with a greater sense of self-worth, dignity and, more rarely, a degree of power over those who would govern them” (262). We call this viewpoint a weak Foucauldian perspective.7

This paper will investigate the relevance of strong and weak Foucauldian perspectives in making sense of rural women’s political incorporation in Maharashtra. In some cases, the will to empower is hijacked by lower-level government officials, dominant groups, and men, and women are not incorporated into local politics. In other cases, the will to empower reaches rural women, instilling in them a desire to participate and increased capacities to do so. The ways in which these desires and capacities are used to follow the instructions of government officials, talk back to the government, or subvert programs for either progressive purposes or personal gain will be explored.

Further, this paper will examine some of the meanings political participation has for the EWRs. Partha Chatterjee (2004) notes, “Participation, however, has one meaning when it is seen from the standpoint of those who govern, i.e., as a category of governance. It will have a very different meaning when seen from the position of the governed, i.e., as a practice of democracy” (69). What are the implications of viewing participation through the lens of governance, as strong Foucauldian interpretations do, versus through the lens of democracy, as weak Foucauldian interpretations do?

Women’s Political Incorporation through PRI

Maharashtrian government officials explicitly articulate their goal of empowering rural women through PRIs. The Minister of Rural Development writes, “Our responsibility does not end by giving them reservation, but we have to strengthen them by giving training and building their skills and make them the people’s representatives” (Patil 2002). For these officials, women’s empowerment means creating responsible women participants, first by instituting reservations for women in a revitalized panchayat system and second by enlisting experts to run PRI training programs and ensure women participate fully in gram sabhas. The idea is that these mechanisms will instill into women the subjective desires and capacities to work toward the
nation’s economic development goals along the lines the government has sketched out.

In Maharashtra, the production of empowered rural women has been undertaken by Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration (YASHADA), the state development administration staff training academy; district administrators; and NGOs working separately and in association with each other. This is a multi-layered phenomenon, extending from international to local levels, sometimes operating solely within government or within NGO networks, and more often involving both sectors. In 2005, we interviewed leaders from YASHADA and six NGOs working on rural women’s empowerment in Maharashtra: AFARM, BAIF, RSCD, Aalochana, Jnana Prabohini, and Sadhana Village.

**PRI Training**

The vast majority of PRI training in Maharashtra is conducted by district- and block-level government officials, most of whom have taken training courses at YASHADA. This institution trains the trainers—80 percent government and 20 percent NGO—who conduct sessions for PRI elected members and officials in general, and EWRs in PRI in particular. YASHADA has been training women EWRs since 1997, and in 2004 obtained a grant to fund training for over 250,000 PRI officials and elected members. The YASHADA written curriculum on women and PRI contains sections on the gendered nature of bureaucracy and a framework for gender-aware planning, but it fails to translate this academic discourse into everyday language. Designed by an official who had attended a 1996 course on gender designed by Naila Kabeer at the government staff college in Mussoorie, it begins,

> On the surface, most Govt. schemes are gender neutral and are supposed to benefit both men and women equally... But a deeper study of the policy designs will show that policies and schemes have been devised by men, for men, taking into consideration men’s life experiences and needs. Women are “the other”, the “exception to the rule”, while males are the “mainstream” and “normal” and logical targets (Chavan n.d., 6).

Since the guide is filled with academic jargon, it is not surprising that no traces of it are visible at the grassroots level. None of the 40 panchayat members we interviewed in Pune District in 2005 mentioned any gender components in their training. There were none in notes taken of sarpanch (chairperson of the GP) training that we obtained. According to the notes, officials gave lectures on the 73rd Amendment, relevant laws, government schemes, gram sabha,
revenue sources, sarpanch responsibilities, and personality development. The last component consisted of admonitions to think positively, laugh, be closer to God, seek balance, and to practice “I’m OK, you’re OK.”

Almost all of the men and women we interviewed had attended a training session, a majority having attended training two or more times. Both men and women said they gained knowledge and learned how to conduct panchayat meetings at the training, but few remembered any specifics. One aspect of the training included in the notes we obtained was the statement, “The gramsevak [village-level government employee] is the servant of the gram panchayat.” Several of the EWRs interviewed indicated that this was a new piece of information they learned at the training, as they had assumed the village official was their boss.

In their training programs, Maharashtra NGOs claim that they emphasize educating women about their rights and giving them the skills to be effective panchayat members. According to its description, Aalochana’s PRI training program seeks “to create consciousness about larger issues on gender inequity, caste and class so that the women are more informed and can work towards addressing these issues as elected representatives” (Aalochana 2006). An AFARM leader told us that earlier there had been no chair for EWRs in some GPs, so she told members of the training class take turns sitting in her chair, showing them how to assert their rights.

**Mobilizing Grassroots NGOs**

RSCD and Aalochana have been involved in mobilizing grassroots NGOs to raise women’s awareness of PRI and build their capacities to take active roles in local politics. An RSCD (2002, 7) pamphlet states that from 2000 to 2002, the MRA network organized 3781 village awareness programs held by local NGOs involving over 130,000 people, 85 percent of them women across the five regions of Maharashtra. During this same period, Aalochana (2004) ran a program designed to encourage women to run for office, promote gram sabhas, and start SHGs.

RSCD and Aalochana view village politics as being controlled by dominant groups—men of the upper castes and classes—and believe that women and other disadvantaged groups need “an enabling atmosphere” in order to participate effectively by challenging these dominant groups’ control of politics. According to these NGOs, the enabling atmosphere comes from the social mobilization of disadvantaged groups, especially women. RSCD and Aalochana concentrate on a process of consciousness raising around PRI among existing grassroots organizations, so that these
groups will be able to support women panchayat members to be active PRI participants fighting for women’s issues. RSCD goes further, successfully lobbying the Maharashtra legislature to institute a women’s gram sabha the day before the general gram sabha, to raise the required majority for removal of sarpanches from two-thirds to three-fourths of the PRI members, as a number of women sarpanches had been removed, and to allocate 10 percent of the panchayat’s budget to women.

Technologies of Rule

The processes described above undertaken by government agencies and NGOs directed toward women’s empowerment can be seen as technologies of rule intended to incorporate rural women into the political system. The PRI training programs and mobilization of grassroots NGOs to build women’s political capacities are instances of the will to empower. These technologies of rule all attempt to create knowledgeable, active women with participatory skills and a commitment to economic development. The differences in the content of the programs have to do with what types of knowledge and skills are emphasized and the strategies of economic development advanced. For example, government PRI trainings stress information about government schemes, the duties of PRI members, how meetings are run, and how to take minutes, while NGO programs emphasize women’s rights and organizing skills. The strategies of economic development put forward by government may be more bureaucratic and technical, while those of NGOs may be more political. As pointed out by Rose and Miller (1992) and illustrated by the dilution in the YASHADA curriculum when presented to the EWRs, there may also be substantial differences in content between program formulation and implementation.

If the will to empower is a useful way of understanding the myriad of activities directed at producing active women members of panchayats from the points of view of government and NGOs, what are the results of these efforts from the points of view of rural women? The next section explores this question.

The Responses of Rural Women

On the basis of the fieldwork we conducted in Maharashtra, it appears that the technologies of rule sometimes reach the women targets and sometimes do not, and in either case women respond in a variety of ways. In this section, we use material from the interviews conducted and the documents collected to answer the question, “What kinds of women citizens are produced by the will to
empower?” We have created a “middle-range” typology to categorize the women’s responses in table 1. We intend these categories as a heuristic device to encourage further thought about the agency of actually existing women in rural India.\(^{13}\)

**Compliance**

Whether or not technologies of rule reach EWRs, there are cases when they do what they are told. We have labeled this type of response, “compliance,” because EWRs are following the rules. When the technologies of rule do reach the EWRs and they respond accordingly, these are cases of “responsible citizens.” When the technologies of rule are hijacked by others whose orders the women follow, these are cases of “sham citizens.”

Sometimes the training programs provide EWRs with knowledge about government schemes that the EWRs use to implement these schemes. Many EWRs interviewed told us that they had formed SHGs,\(^{14}\) organized village cleanliness campaigns, and motivated village women to participate in the development process. In carrying out these actions as responsible citizens, we see the EWRs as more than disciplined subjects. They are learning political roles, increasing their spatial mobility and interactions with other people, and often receiving some benefits, if only a cleaner neighborhood.

Sometimes EWRs do not seem to learn anything from training programs, and their families call the shots regarding their role in the *panchayat*. Bezboruah (2003) concludes that 30 percent of the North Indian EWRs studied were proxies, and we encountered several women who fit this description. An uneducated forty-five-year-old representative told us, “I take my husband’s advice for every work.” Another explained, “My son looks after all of my

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Table 1. The Will to Empower Rural Indian Women Technologies of Rule

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<tr>
<th>Women’s response</th>
<th>Reach women</th>
<th>Hijacked</th>
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<tr>
<td>Women comply</td>
<td>Responsible citizen e.g., village cleanliness campaign</td>
<td>Sham citizen e.g., proxy <em>panchayat</em> representative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women talk back</td>
<td>Assertive citizen e.g., reporting campaign violations</td>
<td>Reformist citizen e.g., demand revision of BPL list</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women subvert</td>
<td>Resourceful citizen e.g., anti-liquor Campaign</td>
<td>Corrupt citizen e.g., kickback from a government contractor</td>
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work; [there are] no problems as my son knows everything.” In these cases of sham citizens, the technologies of rule have been hijacked before ever reaching the EWR. Even here compliance does not always last forever. One woman indicated that she was going to exert her will against her husband and withdraw from politics: “My husband forced me to enter politics, as he is interested in it. I am unable to provide attention in my home. Even if my husband forces me, then also I will not stand for election again.”

**Talking Back**

There are instances when women stand up for their rights by talking back to the government using what they have learned through training and life experiences to assert themselves. They bring their grievances to the authorities or directly confront individuals treating them in dismissive ways; these are cases of “assertive citizens.” Two EWRs that we interviewed recounted that they had reported campaign violations committed by their opponents. One woman explained, “There is one member of our party who always opposes me. He got elected as sarpanch, but we complained to the panchayat samiti saying that he used foul practices for his election to sarpanch. A re-election was taken and then I became sarpanch.” Another woman told the following story:

When I was contesting the elections, the road was closed for me as it was passing through my opponent’s land. My family was threatened. My opponents also complained to the police that I had Ganja trees in my farm. So when I knew this, I went to the police station in advance and informed the police of the false complaint they were going to lodge against me.

We encountered several examples of EWRs confronting leaders who discouraged women’s involvement. One woman mentioned harassment by party leaders: “In a meeting the top party boss said that women should do cooking. I got very angry and on the spot said to the leader that I did not like a person like him saying so.” Another EWR felt that at times, the administrative machinery did not cooperate with women. She said, “They don’t tell the schemes and women had to find out on their own by asking them again and again.” We observed another situation of this type at an SHG meeting organized by Sadhana Village. Participants began to criticize their woman sarpanch, who was also in attendance, for being a proxy, following the lead of the deputy sarpanch who was her brother in law and not addressing the issues brought up by SHG members.
There are also times when women and their advocates intervene to restore a panchayat process that has been hijacked. In these situations, women act as “reformist citizens.” For example, in a 2004 Pune Zilla Parishad meeting, EWRs charged that one of the road contractors being considered was discriminatory, due to his reluctance to build roads in the dalit neighborhood, and so should not get the contract. In this case, women were exercising due diligence in a way that might benefit a disadvantaged community.

Other instances of intervention involved RSCD leadership. For example, RSCD demanded that women be able to enjoy the ceremonial honors according sarpanches on important holidays. As a result, forty women sarpanches hoisted the flag on Republic Day, and women participated in the ceremonies in 678 villages in 2002. This was an important symbolic act, from which women had previously been excluded. Another example can be seen in the successful demand by women in the RSCD network in Marathwada, Maharashtra, for revision of below-poverty level (BPL) lists, compiled by the government to identify disadvantaged families eligible for certain government schemes. According to Aalochana (2004), “The network across twenty-five talukas of Marathwada, organized protests on the same day on this very issue. This had a tremendous impact and the collectors were compelled to order a reformulation of the BPL lists through the gram sabha” (70).

Subversion

In the situations described above, women operated within the framework set out for them through the technologies of rule of the political system or through the patriarchal family culture. They are following the scripts handed to them, although this may entail learning new skills and opportunities to practice assertiveness. There are also cases in which women EWRs use their position and what they have learned to revise the scripts for their own purposes. These are cases of subversion which can be for progressive ends as when EWRs work for social change outside of the parameters of PRI programs as “resourceful citizens.” Cases of subversion can also be self-serving as when the women use the public purposes of PRI for private gain as “corrupt citizens.”

Four women representatives talked about their work on the issue of prohibition—trying to get the sale of liquor stopped in their villages, as easy availability led village men to drink more, spending all of their money on liquor, and being more likely to engage in domestic violence. This was an issue that was not on the panchayat agenda. These women were resourceful in expanding the scope of their efforts. However, resourceful citizens do not always succeed.
Only one of the women had been successful in stopping the sale of liquor in her village. The others had advocated closing down the liquor shops and organized *morchas* (marches), but they discovered that influential people in the village, sometimes *panchayat* members, had financial interests at stake. One woman related that she was threatened by the liquor shop owner who belonged to her community. This general lack of success was corroborated by an official who mentioned that several women *sarpanches* had gotten antiliquor resolutions passed in their *panchayats*, but state government follow-up did not occur. He noted, “It is a revenue-earning source and it is difficult to put out of operation.” Another official pointed out that the illicit liquor business in the villages was usually run by the village leaders.

The successful representative had been able to find alternative means of earning for the men involved in the liquor trade. She described how she accomplished this:

A few anti social elements daily brought country [without license] liquor to the village. I mobilized men and youth as well as women, more than 500 people. One day they all caught hold of the people selling the liquor and broke the drums full of liquor. This was done in January 2003. Since then there is no liquor sold in village and all the women support me. Earlier the liquor sellers threatened me, but I helped them to get a loan from the credit cooperative for starting a new business. They purchased a Tempo and are now earning well. Those who threatened me earlier now bless me as they say because of me, their children are in school and get food to eat.

Subverting the *panchayat* agenda is not always done for progressive purposes. There are many cases in the literature describing *panchayat* leaders engaging in corrupt practices for personal gain (Veron et al. 2006). Needless to say, none of the men or women interviewed told us of instances of their own corruption, although one of the more affluent *panchayats* in the district was under investigation for corruption.

This section has shown that the technologies of rule having to do with decentralized development and democracy in Maharashtra, India, produce a variety of types of women citizens. On the one hand, there are sham and corrupt citizens, but on the other hand, there are also responsible, assertive, reformist, and resourceful citizens. Scholars disagree about whether or not citizens engaging in grassroots participation make any difference. In the next section, we enter into this debate.
What Difference Does It Make?

There appear to be three levels that scholars are talking about when they theorize about the implications of participation—what difference participation makes. The first is the level of the individual—what difference, if any, does participation make in the life of a rural woman? The second is the level of democratic practice and governance—what difference does participation make for the nature of democracy and governance in rural India? The third level is that of development and/or social transformation—what difference does participation make for trajectory of India’s economic and social development? This third level lies outside the scope of this paper.15

Regarding the significance of participation to the individual, scholars exemplifying a weak Foucauldian perspective tend to emphasize learning and agency among participants while those with a strong Foucauldian perspective tend to emphasize what is taught by the trainers. For example, Cornwall and Coelho (2006) view participatory institutions as enabling individuals to “recognise themselves as citizens” and “where through learning to participate citizens cut their political teeth and acquire skills that can be transferred to other spheres” (8). They highlight the skills and outlook that participants acquire, which they can use as resources. In contrast, Quaghebeur, Masschelein, and Nguyen (2004) emphasize the channeling of participants by others who “offer the model or the norm for this ‘acting by oneself?’” (162).

Our fieldwork suggests that both perspectives have some validity, but the strong Foucauldian perspective of Quaghebeur, Masschelein, and Nguyen (2004) presents participation as more constricted than it can be in some circumstances. Rose and Miller (1992) point out that there is the potential for each actor in a network of governmentality to defect from the network or subvert its operations. These possibilities exist for the targets of rule as well as for the agents along the chain of policy implementation. We observed cases of defection and subversion among the rural women we studied. In addition, cases of compliance appeared to offer the opportunity for learning citizenship skills that might be used in different ways at a later date.

The women we interviewed believed that the experience of being an EWR had increased their confidence, giving them the ability to talk back and to take pride in their accomplishments. One said, “I got a lot of confidence. I now face the people’s talk and confront them. Earlier I did not know how to ride a cycle, but now I ride on a scooter and come to the gram panchayat.” The increased confidence was associated with making new demands on the political
A number of women representatives advocated raising the women’s quota to 50 percent. One said, “Women must get 50 percent reservation and that is our right.” Younger women, who tended to have more education (up to tenth standard), were usually the ones showing greater confidence and initiative. For example, four young women sarpanches told us how they met together once a month on their own to share ideas about their panchayat work.

At the level of governance and democratic practice, several scholars using a weak Foucauldian perspective point to the spatial dimension of participation, as sites for democratic practice. Kesby (2005) argues that the “discourses and practices constituting empowerment are likely to be embedded in, and be constitutive of, particular material sites and spaces” (2055). Cornwall and Coelho (2006) perceive the new democratic arenas as spaces for citizenship education. In contrast, scholars using a strong Foucauldian perspective, such as Cooke and Kothari (2001), conceptualize such sites as “front stages” where performances are enacted. The implication is that there is only the appearance and not the reality of participation at these sites.

There is some support for both arguments in our findings. The spaces created by the seventy-third amendment—panchayats and gram sabhaas—are valuable resources for democratic practice, although they are yet not fully realized. On the one hand, women and men representatives raise questions and critique government officials, demonstrating that they are learning how to be democratic citizens. On the other hand, these questions and criticisms do not appear to have much effect on the operation (or lack thereof) of government programs.

Our review of panchayat proceedings in Pune District reveals that discussion generally centered on the core issues of local government: water, sanitation, education, roads, and facilities. While usually women spoke less than men, they typically spoke on the same issues, which included criticizing perceived failures at the state government level. For example, both women and men complained about teachers’ salaries not being paid and textbooks not arriving for the entire school year. A water shortage in one village resulted in the decision by panchayat members to block roads and to break illegal water connections. Only EWRs raised issues specifically affecting women, such as allocating benefits for BPL women and starting women’s SHGs, suggesting these issues might have been ignored by an all-male panchayat.

At a Women and Child Development meeting of the Pune ZP that we observed, officials announced various government programs that were clearly top-down government initiatives lacking local input.
One program was a survey of 350,000 district children in conjunction with a campaign against malnutrition. The EWRs pricked holes in the officials’ imperious manner by informing them about the many shortcomings in actually existing children’s nutrition programs in the district. One EWR stated that *anganwadi* (a child-care and nutrition program) teachers in Maval Block had not been paid for the past year and lacked the kerosene necessary for midday meal preparation. Another EWR pointed out that many of the scales given *anganwadis* by the World Bank to weigh children were broken and spare parts unavailable. Several EWRs demanded that locally made scales be provided. An EWR complained that the 20-liter pressure cooker purchased by officials for the *anganwadi* meal preparation was too small for the numbers of children that had to be fed. While the EWRs talked back to the government, for the most part their concerns were brushed off by the officials who claimed they had written letters to higher authorities.

Most of the men and women representatives we interviewed said that both *gram sabhas* and women’s *gram sabhas* were held in their village, although the frequency was often below what was set out in government regulations, and many representatives admitted that attendance was low. At some of these meetings, women insisted that the 10 percent allocation for women’s welfare be spent by the *panchayat* (Aalochana 2004). At the women’s *gram sabhas*, EWRs reported that women made demands regarding sanitation, income generation, and prohibition, and in some cases talked about their problems, such as domestic violence. The reports on the *gram sabhas* suggest the development of a public forum for women in some villages, but the process is sporadic and uneven.

Cornwall and Coelho (2006) point out that the ability of participants to voice their own needs is compromised by the fact that the participatory institutions are “framed by those who create them and infused with power relations and cultures of interaction carried into them from other spaces” (11). The hierarchical power relations between bureaucratic state and citizen are clearly visible in the Women and Child Development Committee and are likely present in the other forums described above. In spite of the hierarchical relations, these are public spaces in which women are speaking out, criticizing the government and making demands. Women’s participation in these institutions is expanding democratic practice through the addition of their voices. From our study, however, it does not appear that citizen voices are changing bureaucratic practice very often.

Some women are demonstrating their awareness of social hierarchies operating in these spaces as shown in interviews where the
EWRs identified caste and gender hierarchies in *panchayat* dynamics. One EWR related, “The male puts psychological pressure on the woman by not listening to her, neglecting her. If we sit mum and cry they feel happy, but our work will suffer.” Another EWR said, “People in the *gram panchayat* always remind me that I am of lower caste and never forget my caste.” The consciousness these EWRs showed about rural social hierarchies is the necessary first step toward challenging them.

For a strong Foucauldian perspective, there must be resistance for real democratic practice to occur. Quaghebeur, Masschelein, and Nguyen (2004) state that “this is what ‘real’ participation might be about: the contestation, discussion, struggle, and negotiation about the framework offered by the ‘participatory’ project” (163). For Quaghebeur, Masschelein, and Nguyen (2004) resistance is the only form of meaningful participation. In contrast, Cornwall and Coelho (2006) take a more inclusive perspective, viewing meaningful participation as a “contingent, contested process” which “enable[es] citizens to transgress positions as passive recipients and assert their rights in contestations over governmentality” (11). According to Quaghebeur, Masschelein, and Nguyen (2004), only subversive citizens would be engaging in meaningful participation, but Cornwall and Coelho’s criteria (2006) would add assertive, reformist, and resourceful citizens as well. We would add responsible citizens to this list because all of these types of participation involve learning, and women can move from one to another as they become more experienced. If participation is understood as a contingent, open-ended, and unpredictable process, the skills learned by EWRs can be seen as resources for future political contestation.

Democratic practice also requires that the perspectives of marginalized groups are incorporated into policy outcomes. This has not yet happened in Pune District. Kumud Sharma (2004) notes that “the impact of macro-economic and social dynamics and the larger political environment cannot be ignored” when considering the impact of women’s reservations. The literature on *panchayats* argues that the devolution of power, resources, and functions from the state government to PRI and a state government with a redistributive agenda are necessary for PRI policies to reflect the demands and needs of marginalized groups (Johnson, Deshingkar, and Start 2005; Narayana 2005). While neither condition exists in Maharashtra at present, rural women (and men) participating in *panchayats* and *gram sabhas* are publicly speaking out about the shortcomings of government and the problems they face in their families and communities. Sometimes, they come up with creative solutions for problems, as in the successful prohibition initiative. Those who have
been marginalized are criticizing government performance and demanding better outcomes. The government is beginning to be held accountable by local elected representatives. These are necessary first steps in changing policy outcomes.

Conclusion

There seems to be a developmental process occurring with many EWRs learning about the content and process of local government and politics. In cases where the technologies of rule are hijacked by male family members, dominant groups in the village, or government officials, the results are generally sham or corrupt citizens except in a few cases where reformist citizens protest. When the will to empower does reach EWRs, their responses run the gamut from compliance to assertion and subversion. “[C]onscious reflective agency” (Kesby 2005, 2046) is apparent in at least some of the EWRs we interviewed. In these cases, active participants have been produced through PRI and associated technologies of rule. The women carry out government schemes, attempt to hold local officials accountable, and contribute their ideas to the political process.

That said, it must also be acknowledged that EWRs continue to face many obstacles. The triple burden facing women creates stress as well as overwork among EWRs and needs to be addressed. The low level of education among rural women is an additional handicap. EWRs who are poor and from lower castes are the most disadvantaged. Although illiteracy, housework, and income-earning responsibilities may prevent the participatory technologies of rule from fully incorporating many rural women, this does not mean the women are free. Rather they are enmeshed in social/cultural/economic systems of gender, caste, and class that may be more prescriptive and disempowering than neoliberal governmentality.

On balance, we find that a weak Foucaudian perspective is more useful than a strong version for understanding women’s participation through PRI. Both perspectives direct the researcher to examine the skills and knowledge intended to be installed in rural women and the various technologies of rule employed. A strong Foucauldian perspective offers insights into the processes of women’s political incorporation by showing how neoliberal governance approaches attempt to create citizens whose actions are aligned with those of government. But this analysis is incomplete because it does not consider how particular women respond to the will to empower. It is also misleading: giving the impression that there is greater coherence and consistency in the technologies of rule than is likely the case (Larner 2000).
The two Foucauldian perspectives differ in how they understand women’s responses. In dismissing human agency, a strong Foucauldian perspective makes a binary distinction between success and failure in the installation of the intended subjectivities. This is a viewpoint from above looking down at the targeted women, able only to distinguish proxy women from those who are engaged. It does not consider the possibility that the actions of the engaged women are shaped by their own agendas, as well as by the technologies of rule.

In positing “a central role for conscious reflective agency” (Kesby 2005, 2046), a weak Foucauldian perspective attempts to understand the incorporation process from the point of view of a woman herself. Her engagement in the political process can take a variety of forms: following directives, asserting herself, demanding that processes be changed, and/or subverting the governance agenda for her own purposes—progressive or self-serving. Through participating in politics, a woman is involved in renegotiating her caste/class/gender position in the family and community, as well as learning how to negotiate a new position and a new sphere of activity.17 There is a degree of unpredictability in the form(s) and manner of engagement chosen by a woman at any given time. A weak Foucauldian perspective illuminates the complexity of women’s responses, while a strong Foucauldian perspective does not. It is unnecessarily cynical about the potential for transformation through engagement and is unable to recognize the tentative first steps Maharashtra EWRs are making.

It has been little more than a decade since women first entered local government in large numbers. The agenda of local government was already established, and so much of what EWRs have done involves fitting into a system new to them. Nevertheless, learning is going on among EWRs. Most of the EWRs interviewed appear to relish attending meetings and establishing identities other than housewife, and these women have begun to change stereotyped images. Even so, in fieldwork, we encountered few instances of local-level bureaucrats changing their practices in response to democratic input. This suggests that bureaucrats also need training in democratic participation.18

The incorporation of women into local government councils has not magically fixed all the deficiencies of these bodies, nor should this be expected. It is unfair to place the responsibility for ending corruption and poverty on EWRs alone. In rural areas, women are rarely seen in public space, but EWRs attend GP meetings, and they are driven in government cars to block or district meetings. Slowly, women are being able to move out of their houses into sites for democratic practice.
Sharma (2006) argues that women’s increased engagement with the state can be seen as “both promising and precarious” (82). On the basis of her case study of women activists in a feminist NGO linked to the government in Uttar Pradesh, Sharma is optimistic, concluding that the “governmentalization of empowerment” may produce women who fight for justice (82). Our case-study findings are more ambiguous in their implications. Many types of women citizens can be seen among the EWRs interviewed in Pune District. The proxy representatives, under the control of male relatives, are sham citizens. But overall, reservations for women in PRI have increased women’s knowledge about politics, spatial mobility, and presence in local politics. As a result, some EWRs have become active citizens, raising questions about corrupt practices, organizing citizens against liquor, and hoisting flags on Republic Day in their villages. Younger EWRs seem the most active and enthusiastic. Political engagement is changing women, who in turn are changing local politics in small ways. A process of political education has begun among women. It is too soon to know how it will play out.

NOTES

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1. The PRI system has three levels: gram panchayat (GP), panchayat samiti (PS), at the sub-district level, generally called the block or taluka level, and zilla parishad (ZP), district council.

2. Dalits are members of the lowest castes earlier referred to as “untouchables”; adivasis or tribals are members of the original inhabitants of India; OBCs are members of shudra castes just above dalits in the caste hierarchy.
3. Pune District was chosen as the research site because the headquarters of a large number of NGOs that conduct PRI training programs and the government training institute, YASHADA, are located there. My fieldwork was made possible by a Fulbright Research Fellowship and affiliation with the Women’s Studies Centre, Pune University, and its Director, Dr. Vidyut Bhagwat, January to April 2005, and supplemented by a grant from the University of Colorado Denver for a visit to India, December 2005 to January 2006. I wish to thank Mangala Daithankar and Mira Savara for their research and translation assistance, emotional support, and theoretical insights during my fieldwork.

4. O’Malley (1996) and Garland (2001) talk about “responsibilization” in the field of criminal justice where processes similar to those of participatory development occur.

5. Most of the governmentality literature focusses on advanced industrial nations, but a number of scholars have utilized a governmentality perspective in their studies of India. In addition to Corbridge et al. (2005), these include Gupta and Sharma (2006) and Sharma (2006) who discuss women’s empowerment in terms of neoliberal governmentality.

6. The reference by the London Feminist Salon Collective (2004) to “strong postmodernist” positions is similar to what I have called a strong Foucauldian perspective. I came across this article after characterizing interpretations of Foucault as strong and weak.

7. By using the terms “strong” and “weak” to categorize various interpretations of Foucault, we are not suggesting that a “strong” Foucauldian perspective is closer to Foucault’s theories, merely that it is a more abstract interpretation. We do not intend strong/weak to be a binary opposition, rather to indicate two ends of a continuum. Feminist scholars have debated the absence of agency in (strong) postmodern theory (e.g. the London Feminist Salon Collective 2004) and a number of scholars have criticized the depoliticizing effects of strong postmodernism (e.g., Corbridge et al. 2005).

8. In comparison with government projects, there is less continuity in the projects NGOs undertake because of greater NGO dependence on fixed-term contracts to finance their activities. Donors often change their priorities by the end of a project cycle. NGOs then have to try to mesh their own objectives with the new goals articulated in the funders’ requests for proposals. This may be challenging for the NGO leaders we interviewed, but it is potentially catastrophic to the grassroots NGOs that have an ongoing relationship with the people they serve. Resource and Support Centre for Development (RSCD) had lost much of its funding before we conducted our study, so some of its affiliated NGOs had to break off and establish linkages with other donor organizations. Grassroots NGO leaders often creatively adapt to these new circumstances, but they need to be able to speak and write in English, compose project reports, and keep good financial records if they want to establish a direct relationship with funders. Otherwise they must depend on the grant getting success of the NGOs at state or higher levels. The funders’ requirements for project reports has created an income stream for individuals in the NGO sector who
understand those requirements and are hired by grassroots NGOs to translate their Marathi records into English narratives that follow the report requirements. The funders’ emphasis on reports and financial records illustrates technologies of rule at work.


10. BAIF and AFARM began in the 1960s, providing technical assistance in agriculture and have added women’s empowerment programs. AFARM (Action for Agricultural Renewal in Maharashtra) interviews took place on March 31, 2005, in Pune. BAIF (Bharatiya Agro Industrial Fund) Development Research Foundation interviews took place on April 1, 2005, in Pune. RSCD is a development collective launched in 1994 to work with NGOs in five Maharashtra regions to empower the rural poor and in 2001 created the Mahila Rajyarta Andolan (MRA or women’s governance campaign), a statewide network to promote women’s role in governance. RSCD interviews took place on December 28, 2004, and March 18, 2005, in Belapur, Maharashtra, and January 15, 2005, in Pune. Aalochana is a Pune feminist organization which began in 1989 as a resource center (Sekhon 2006). Aalochana interviews took place on January 21 and April 21, 2005, in Pune. Jnana Prabodhini is a Pune educational foundation based on the teaching of Swami Vivekananda which runs several schools and a rural development program that has coordinated 150 women’s self-help groups (SHGs) in Pune District. Jnana Prabodhini interviews took place on April 1, 2005, in Pune. Sadhana Village began in 1994 as a small NGO in rural Pune District operating a home for mentally challenged adults and has women’s SHGs in twenty-one villages as part of its commitment to address the needs of the surrounding area. Sadhana Village interviews took place on February 2, 2005, in rural Pune District. Further information is available from organization websites, www.afarm.org/; www.baif.org.in/; www.rscd.org.in/; www.aalochana.org/; www.jnanaprabodhini.org/; http://sadhana-village.org/ (accessed September 3, 2006).

11. A survey of twenty-one women and nineteen men panchayat members, primarily sarpanches, in Haveli and Mulshi Blocks of Pune District was conducted during January–April 2005. Interviews with panchayat members and some officials, proceedings of PRI meetings, and other materials were translated from Marathi by Mangala Daithankar.

12. An EWR that we interviewed gave us the notes taken by her niece of a three day training they attended in 2004.

13. As an exploratory study, our methodology is not meant to quantify the incidence of responses across the various categories or to generate generalizable findings. Pune District, which is 42 percent rural, is more prosperous than the average Indian district. In Maharashtra (2008), the rural poverty rate was 30 percent in 2001 and the rural literacy rates were 82 percent for men and 58 percent for women. Of the twenty-one women interviewed, three or four gave responses in each of the categories identified. Some women’s responses ranged across several categories. We recognize that the interviews conducted only afford partial access to the
interviewees’ points of view, which are mediated by the interview situation, its location, and the individuals present.

14. Since the early 1990s, the government has encouraged the formation of SHGs, which are intended to provide loans to start micro-businesses. The majority of SHGs are women’s groups, see Sekhon (2006).

15. For a discussion, see Hickey and Mohan (2005).

16. The availability of records varied considerably. This discussion is based on fourteen meetings of the Vadholi GP from May 2003 to December 2004, seven meetings of the Haveli PS from March to December 2004, four meetings of the Mulshi PS from September 2004 to January 2005, and three meetings of the Pune ZP from June to December 2004.

17. Even some of the responses of proxy women, such as the EWR’s decision to withdraw from politics in spite of her husband’s wishes, suggest that they are involved in renegotiating their role in the family.

18. Further research would be necessary to identify the conditions under which bureaucrats follow the advice of EWRs. It is likely that political pressure is more effective than training. For example, the intervention and support of RSCD in demanding that EWRs hoist the flag on Republic Day resulted in changes in bureaucratic practice, so the presence of grassroots NGOs may lead bureaucrats to pay attention to what EWRs say. RSCD engaged in consciousness raising among women, supporting the argument made by Rankin (2002) that “[s]olidarity among women can, however, serves as a powerful tool for progressive social change, as long as it fosters critiques of dominant cultural ideologies” (18).

REFERENCES


