In Indian Villages, the Power of a Powerful Woman

By ROHINI PANDE  JAN. 14, 2015

NEW DELHI — There are two key requirements for a truly representative democracy: First, that anyone of good character can run for election, without regard to income, gender or social status; and second, that voters determine which qualities are most important in those they elect.

The Indian state of Rajasthan has struck a blow against both of these freedoms. Last month, the governor issued an executive order barring citizens with less than eight years of formal education from running for election for village council head. The rationale was to create more effective and less corrupt administrations. The effect, however, will be to disempower the historically disadvantaged — women and the poor. Upward of half the state’s adult male population and three-quarters of its adult female population have been disqualified from running in the elections that begin this week.

There are some 250,000 village councils, or Gram Panchayats, in India. Elections are held every five years, and voter turnout regularly surpasses that in state and national elections. The demographic makeup of those elected is also more diverse, in large part a result of the constitutional requirement that a certain fraction of council head positions, or Pradhans, be reserved for women, lower castes and tribal groups. As of 2009, only 11 percent of India’s national legislators were women, compared with 40 percent of village council heads.

The councils choose which public goods to invest in — from drinking-water facilities to roads — and where to put them. They implement welfare
schemes and public jobs programs, and decide who will benefit. Over the last
decade, as India has expanded its social safety net and increased investments
in rural infrastructure, the financial stakes of village elections have risen. The
politicians behind the education requirement have argued that less educated
leaders failed to be effective administrators and were less able to resist
corruption and negotiate with district officials.

There is some evidence that supports this position. However, it may also
reflect a less enlightened agenda. The election of villagers from historically
disadvantaged groups poses a major challenge to the traditional elite, who are
used to controlling council resources.

The recent order is only the latest example of Rajasthan’s limiting voters’
choices. Earlier in December, the governor issued another ordinance requiring
candidates to have a functional toilet, effectively eliminating many of the poor.
And unfortunately, other states tend to follow Rajasthan’s example. Back in
1992, it became the first state to require that candidates for village council
positions have no more than two children — a rule that particularly hurts
lower castes and tribal groups, where fertility rates are highest. Since then, 10
other states have passed fertility limits on local leaders (though four have since
revoked the law). A recent paper found that these limits increased the
incidence of sex-selective abortions, and a qualitative study in Northern India
from 2005 reported that men got around the law by disowning later-born
children and occasionally deserting their wives.

Rajasthan has a terrible record on women’s education and female
empowerment. The state has the country’s second-lowest female literacy rate:
52 percent. And it has some of the most skewed child sex ratios, as a result of
sex-selective abortion and reduced parental investment in daughters.
According to the 2011 census, there were 883 girls for every 1,000 boys under
age 6.

Village councils headed by women can catalyze change. In research
published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics in 2009 and in Science
magazine in 2012, my colleagues and I showed that living in a village that had
elected a female leader caused villagers to report lower bias against female
leaders. By creating empowered female role models, it led villagers to state more equal aspirations for their teenage sons and daughters and to reduce their daughters’ domestic chores and increase their schooling.

In 2010, my colleagues and I surveyed newly elected village chiefs in 247 village councils, in regions where women have historically faced significant discrimination. Our sample included 34 women who had defeated male candidates for the council head position. These women, who had successfully challenged the traditional village male elite, were the aspirational symbols for new India. But this year, 82 percent of them have been disqualified from running.

The governor’s order won’t hurt only women who want to run for office; it will have negative consequences for all women living in these villages.

The governor issued the education requirement when the state legislature was out of session. As a result, it is open to a legal challenge, and a case is being heard in the state’s High Court. Unfortunately, any change will most likely come too late for this election.

Education is, of course, vital. In surveys, including ones we conducted in Rajasthan in 2010, voters consistently report a strong preference for educated leaders. Requiring a benchmark for education, however, will discriminate against able leaders who have been denied schooling because of gender, poverty or caste, and who have nevertheless worked to educate themselves.

There are better ways of ensuring that elected politicians are competent and effective. In the month before the 2010 election, we worked with a local nonprofit group in Rajasthan on a voter awareness campaign involving theater shows and the distribution of posters and calendars. The campaign caused more literate villagers to enter the fray as candidates, and these candidates gained a higher fraction of the vote. And if the state government is truly worried about the increasing administrative demands on council heads, it could simply provide them with better support.

Voters, not distant state officials, are likely to make the best choices as to who will most effectively represent them. A de facto handing over of local political control to the better off will not help solve Rajasthan’s gap between
rich and poor, or stark gender inequality.  
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