WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: MYTH, REALITY AND CELLULOID REPRESENTATIONS

Somdatta Mandal  
Department of English & Other Modern European Languages,  
Visva-Bharati

One of the most revolutionary changes of the twentieth century was the rapid increase of women in leadership roles throughout our society. Women rose to unprecedented promise in business, government, science, the arts, and education, in unions, religion, sports and the professions. In 1995, the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing produced a remarkable Declaration and Platform for Action. Adopted unanimously, the documents linked women’s rights to human rights for the first time in UN history and laid out detailed and ambitious plans for the advancement of girls and women on twelve fronts, including health, political decision-making, education and economic opportunity. It connected women’s rights to poverty, environmental degradation, global inequality, warfare and various evils that affect women disparately. The declaration and platform were just pieces of paper – there was no real enforcement mechanism but as such things go, they were pretty strong, and where women have been able to hold their governments’ feet to the fire, they had made a difference.

Close on the heels of 8th of March, which is celebrated each year as the International Women’s Day, a lot of emphasis and media attention is drawn upon this fact and tons of assessment and statistical surveys are made each year to see how self-sufficient and self-reliant women are gradually turning and what dramatic progress they have been making in their own sphere of activities and also in those areas where they have to compete equally with men. Some of the major forces threatening women’s progress – the widening gap between rich and poor, the shredding of social safety nets to service debts, the explosion in forced trafficking and sexual slavery, the burgeoning AIDS crisis, war – are complex, intractable, hugely costly to solve. That makes it all the more reprehensible that governments have dragged their feet on legal reforms that cost no money, only political will: changing marriage laws that mandate wifely obedience and divorce laws that permit men, but not women, to dissolve the union at will or whim; removing restrictions on basic freedoms, like the right to travel, study or work without permission of a male ‘guardian.’ Nigeria permits husbands to “correct” their wives through physical punishment; Costa Rica and at least five other countries allow rapists to avoid prosecution if they marry the victim. In Saudi Arabia women still can’t drive. In Kuwait they still can’t vote. Then what is women’s empowerment for them?

My article is to question the stereotyped notions of women’s empowerment in the Indian context vis-a-vis the illiterate rural figure that has been overly represented in celluloid representations as well as other media, versus her liberated and educated counterpart living in the city. And to illustrate my point I will take recourse to two audio-visual representations, one a documentary made by a woman journalist and the other an award-winning Bengali feature film made by a director of repute and show how this common
belief about the vulnerability of the illiterate village woman is a myth as is the belief about empowerment of her educated, feminist, city-bred counterpart.

Perhaps the most compelling challenge facing women in every society is parity in politics. The nurturing and caring skills that come so naturally to women are desperately needed in our political institutions. There are many obstacles that prevent women from achieving parity in representative government, such as paternalistic attitudes that impair their developmental skills and refuse to take them seriously. In addition, women are two-thirds of the world’s illiterate population, and teaching them to read and write is a challenge in itself. Amendments as well as explore obstacles to their success, and discuss innovative strategies that could help advance them. The 73rd and 74th Indian Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992-93, reserved 33 per cent of seats at the local government level for women. As a result, an estimated five million women have entered local politics, directly or indirectly, in the last ten years. In 1993 one of the most important step for the empowerment of women and increasing their participation in decision making was taken by reserving 33% seats for women in Panchayat Raj institutions. This paved the way for election of around one million at the village, block and district level. By now most states with a few exceptions like Bihar have completed at least one five-year term. What has been the experience of around 7 to 8 lakh women during their first tenure? What lessons can be learnt for the future from this experience? Research shows that:

a) **Given the chance, they excel:**

It is easy to point out numerous examples of women who have worked entirely according to what they were told by their husbands or other male members of their families. In some cases elected women remained at home while their husbands attended the panchayat meetings and carried out official transactions on their behalf. Some of the elected women were approached by men only when their signatures (or thumb impressions) were needed.

All this is true to a substantial extent, but this is not the whole picture. In our male dominated society it is easy to hear jokes about the subservient role of several elected women, and some fierce arguments based on this that reservations for women has failed. Nothing could be further from the truth. In order to realize the greater potential created by these reservations, we should look at several other examples in which women got an opportunity to play an independent role. In such situations time and again, we see them making remarkable achievements for development of their village and quite often resisting the presence of vested interests with a lot of grit and determination. The second point to note is that:

**They bring new perspectives:**

The yearnings of several women to assert their independence and make a significant contribution to the welfare of the people are visible in many such examples. In many cases volunteer organizations and people’s movements active in their region have helped
them. In some cases enlightened family members, including husbands, have also encouraged them to realize their potential of initiating meaningful social change.

From such examples it is quite clear that when conducive conditions exist for women to play a leading and active role in the decision making of the village, the entire village community benefits. This increased participation of women is often associated with better utilization of financial resources, increased harmony in village and prioritization of some important but neglected aspects of development such as girls' education and sanitation. Social reform measures such as reduction in alcohol consumption and domestic violence clearly get more prominence when women come to the forefront in rural communities.

Corruption has been one of the main problems of panchayat raj institutions. Interviews in several villages confirm that when women representatives function in an independent way, possibilities for corruption are lesser. Even if a pradhan or sarpanch is honest, there is the other threat that government officials refuse to release money and do not cooperate in other ways unless a certain commission is paid to them. There have been numerous examples of women sarpanchs resisting these demands of officials. In fact one hears of such resistance from women more frequently than from men. This opposition to the demand for commission has been strongly voiced by several women pradhans at their open meetings and training programmes.

**Specific cases:**

Pushpa Rana, Pradhan of Arakfarm panchayat in Dehradun district strongly resisted the bribe demands of officials. Although this created a lot of delays and other problems, she finally had her way. Sojar Bai of Ramtek panchayat [district Harda in Madhya Pradesh] went one step further and got the corrupt official [who demanded a cut from her] suspended from his job. As for the careful use of scarce funds, Alka Chauhan provided a lesson to government engineers. A support wall that had been built in her village Nalapani [district Dehradun] at a cost of Rs. 42,000 had collapsed. A junior government engineer estimated that it will cost Rs.45,000 to rebuild the wall. But Alka Chauhan mobilised the villagers to build the wall at a cost of only Rs.23,500 and the money saved in this way could be spent on other development work.

When Suraiya Begum became the chairperson of Sultanpur Chilkana Nagar panchayat, it was saddled with debts and even some of her supporters feared that new development work might be hindered by the need to first clear old debts. But she managed the situation in such a way that by the time she completed her first five-year tenure, a record number of development works worth Rs.80 lakhs had been completed.

**More women leaders:**

As Rehana, a social worker of Sultanpur says, "Women are known to use money very carefully at home and somehow manage the family budget even when income is low. Women show the same abilities when they manage the village funds." Her colleague Shaheen adds, "When men are in-charge of development works, they indulge in a lot of
wasteful spending in inaugurations and completion ceremonies. Women know how to be frugal and concentrate on the real work." Women representatives have shown the capacity to increase the panchayat income to make the development work more self-reliant. Many elected women have been closely involved with the promotion of self-help groups in villages. Urmila Yadav, sarpanch from Kosli village [Haryana] first took a step to clear encroachments on panchayat land and then built some shops on it. The rent from these shops can provide a regular income to the panchayat.

Women are generally known to have a greater capacity for resolving disputes. When she was the chairperson Suraiya Begum's door always remained open for many victims of domestic violence. She helped to resolve many disputes. Pushpa Rana prevailed upon villagers to first settle all disputes locally and go to the police only if village level efforts failed. The result was that the money people had to spend on paying bribes to the police and middlemen was saved.

Many elected women representatives have made an effort to reduce liquor consumption and to remove liquor vends. In Ghazidipur village of Saharanpur district, a panchayat member Kamia confronted the pradhan who supported the location of a liquor vend in the village and successfully mobilised village women for the removal of this liquor vend. Veena Sajwan, who was elected block pradhan of Bhilangana block [Tehri Garhwal district] at the young age of only 23 says, "I have taken up anti-liquor issue as the most important issue to mobilize women. When I had the opportunity to meet the Chief Minister, I immediately reminded him of his promise to curb the liquor menace." All over Uttaranchal state this has been an important issue for elected women and they raised it vociferously at a recent 'Open Forum' meeting in Almora.

**Battling the male empire:**

It is hoped that greater participation of women will result in better implementation of water, sanitation, girl’s education, women's health and maternity. Chandravati Singh made a detailed survey of where exactly hand pumps were needed in her panchayat. [Garchapa in Chitrakut district, UP] which is spread over a wide area. This led to maximizing benefits from the limited budget at her disposal for drinking water schemes. Some women elected members have prioritized toilets for ladies at bus stops, a clear need which had been ignored earlier by men radians.

In Sirmaul panchayat of Indore district, the sarpanch Kiran Kanchal not only set up a maternity home but also set up a committee to run it on a viable basis without raising the service charges too high for villagers. Madhu Semval [Nathuvala panchayat, Dehradun district] helped to check the spread of a cholera epidemic. Natho Begum [pradhan of Enfield gram panchayat, Dehradun district] was so devoted to promoting the education of girls that she donated her own land for this purpose, even though she herself belongs to a poor family.

Some women have overcome heavy odds to accomplish very commendable work in panchayats. Sudha Patel [sarpanch of Changa village, Anand district of Gujarat] is blind,
but her work with the help of a friend has won widespread praise. Rajjo, a Dalit woman is completely illiterate and comes from a very poor family. However her work in Sultanpur Chilkana as deputy chairman was so good that almost the entire village adores her.

Some women have resisted efforts of vested interests to harass and dislodge them with a lot of courage and firmness. So many efforts were made to dislodge Ramali Behn from Ahmedabad zila panchayat by powerful vested interests, but she survived them all by her transparent way of functioning and by establishing direct relationship with people. When efforts were made to implicate Savita Behn Bharat Singh Pasaya [sarpanch of Pandra, Dohod district, Gujarat] and her family members in false allegations, she proved her innocence before a large gathering of villagers and officials.

**All round progress:**

When women succeed in overcoming heavy odds to achieve good results in panchayats and also face vested interests with courage, it has an exemplary impact on a large number of other women. They also want to come forward to participate more actively in village affairs and contribute to the welfare of the community. Apart from this, it is also quite evident from the examples given above that the more active role of women in village often contributes to the welfare of the entire community and several important areas which were neglected earlier, now get prioritized. Thus it is in the interests of not just women but the entire village community to encourage the further empowerment of women in village affairs. The 33% reservation for women in panchayat raj institutions is an important part of this empowerment of women. To further strengthen the effort of elected women representatives, the government should provide greater security to women from the anger of powerful vested interests that try to harm and harass them in various ways. Voluntary organizations should also play a crucial role in helping and training elected women representatives. Assess women’s participation in local government and their “empowerment” in the context of the Amendments as well as explore obstacles to their success, and discuss innovative strategies that could help advance them. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992-93, reserved 33 per cent of seats at the local government level for women. As a result, an estimated five million women have entered local politics, directly or indirectly, in the last ten years.

To illustrate the point I am trying to make, I cite examples from one book, which offers insights on participation and empowerment, discussing the prospects of a more gender-just society. 'And Who Will Make the Chapattis?': A Study of All-Women Pantheist in Maharashtra edited by Bishakha Datta (1998) is an in-depth study of some Indian rural women's attempts to carve out their own political space within an existing, male-dominated political system. 'If men and women are asked to devise programmes in panchayats, women will think of water and latrines, while men will talk of roads and buses.' This was observed by the authors when they went round twelve all-women panchayats in Maharashtra in order to understand the changing political experiences of rural women. The book has grown out of knowledge the village women shared with them.
Contents:

1. Nimbut : 'If I can run the house, why not a panchayat?'/ Meenakshi Shedde.
2. Mauje Rui : 'Do what you like, so long as you mind the kids.'/ Meenakshi Shedde.
4. Ralegan Siddhi : 'Women need to forget their "womanhood".'/ Sonali Sathaye.
5. Nimbgaon Bhogi : 'I learnt what true politics is about in this village.'/ Sonali Sathaye.
6. Brahmanghar " 'Instead of having fights between men, let women stand.'/
Bishakha Datta.
7. Bitargaon : 'I would like to do this work as long as I live.'/ Sharmila Joshi.

Part II. 'Now the gram panchayat will become a kitchen and a cowshed.'

1. Metikheda : 'The amount of work the ladies did, the men will not do.'/ Bishakha
Datta.
2. Vitner ; 'People say the men of Vitner are like women.'/ Sonali Sathaye.

A balanced examination of what has been achieved, the book points out that even if
women have come to power at the behest of men, they have managed to place their needs
on the political agenda. Women have also learnt to be creative tactically; lacking
knowledge of formal processes, they have come up with their own informal pressure
tactics as lobbyists. Yet it remains easier to address women's practical needs rather than
to combat effectively male domination.

Take Ananya Chatterjee's documentary 'Daughters of the 73rd Amendment'. Produced by
the Institute of Social Sciences, Calcutta, this documentary shows us the empowerment of
three women panchayats leaders from different parts of India. The Amendment that made it
mandatory for Panchayats (village councils) to reserve one third of the seats for women
has often been ridiculed, and elected women regarded as wooden dolls controlled by the
existing male power. But the amendment has also thrown up many achievers; Ananya's
chronicle is of such women of grit who have been given the opportunity. The 50-minute
long documentary focuses primarily upon three specific cases. The first is the case of
Gundia Bai Ahirwar of Pipra Village in the Bundelkhand district of Madhya Pradesh.
Married at the age of two, and mother of several children, Gundiya Bai holds up a
success story in the manner in which she functions. Her prime interests, like all villagers,
are at the micro-level – roads, primary school, and drinking water. It seems very ironic
when we hear that even as the village sarpanch, she has to wait in queue to draw water at
the village well till all the higher caste women finish their jobs because she belongs to a
lower caste. So much for ground realities in India.

The second case is that of a 24-year old Sudha Patel, from Anand district in Gujarat.
Blind since birth, Sudha has a bachelor’s degree and she reveals that she is alive today
only because a good harvest the year she was born prevented her parents of infanticide as
some villagers thought her to be lucky as ‘Lakshmi’. Sudha’s grit for working from a
doubly-marginalized position is also revealed in the way she sings and laughs her way to
office. The third example is of a middle-aged, burkha-clad Fatima Bee, whose house shelf is full of so many achievement and award medals that one might mistake it to be a leading sportsman’s or performer’s house. She is also the recipient of an award from the President of India. Her case is perhaps the finest example of what women can achieve if given the necessary support from the family members and from society at large. It has to be mentioned that Ananya titles the Documentary “Part I” as she feels that the mission is still incomplete and many other Sudha Patels or Fatima Bees might be existing somewhere else in India, or are in the process of gaining empowerment.

II

When we come to the representation of women in feature films, the situation is different. In most mainstream commercial productions, women fall into the well-established stereotypes, with the “bharatiya nari” image predominating the scene. There are very few film directors who venture out into changing these stereotypes. A middle-aged woman, beautiful and apparently content in a well-to-do Bengali household, commits the cardinal crime of falling in love with a young photographer. The world turns against her. Even to this day, two decades after Aparna Sen - the cerebral Indian filmmaker - made 'Parama', people debate on why a homemaker should have 'done' it. The fact that she was a nonentity - convenient for the smooth running of the house - and that there was marital rape are never looked into, says Sen at a discussion during the film festival 'Pratibimb' (Reflections of Reality), in Kolkata.

Documentary films - creative though they are - focus easily on issues because of their particular style. In feature films however, or theatre, the story takes precedence, and so the director's sensitivities have to come through in a different manner. Says Sen, "Lots of people ask me why the heroine in 'Paromitaar Ek Din' (A Day in Paromita's Life) got married for the second time though she went through a traumatic experience in her first marriage. But I say, the second time it was her own choice, in recognition of her own sexuality, which is important. Paromita went through marital rape too; coming out made her stronger and she had an ally in her mother-in-law. The two women bonded together." The director says she likes to show not just the problem but people trying to make a change. And her conviction on how economic independence has a vital role to play in this effort comes through. After an attempted suicide, Paroma takes up a job, and finds the confidence to fight and make a life of her own. Without slogan shouting, the identity and attitude of the woman director and the actress come out through such characterization.

Following her godmother’s footsteps, Rituporno Ghosh’s films focus on women-centered issues, most of them city-bred and educated. His Dahan (Crossfire) (1997) is an award-winning film where the focal point is a well-reported rape attempt. A bunch of ruffians try to molest a newly wed woman, while many pass by one offer to help, until a brave young teacher infuriated by what she sees, turns on the men and saves the girl. All this happens in the first twenty minutes of the film, the next two hours is about how various people react to the incident and the scandal it brings to the family reputation, the newly-wed, her husband, her in-laws, her parents, the brave young teacher, her parent, her grandmother with whom she shares a special bond, her brother who idolizes her.
This multitude of characters each add depth to the screenplay that is a brilliant insight into Indian middle moralities and what is justice, bravery, right and wrong, morals, crime, punishment and so on. While all this might have been too much in the hands of weaker men, the director thanks to the excellent screenplay manages to make sure there is enough on the plate without it brimming over. It is a deeply moving film, with sparks of bright wit, intelligence and underlying realism that shines like a beacon. The girl and her family are at the receiving end of society’s disapproval. It portrays the plight of a woman, assaulted by a group of men and who succumbs to the pressures of her husband and in-laws by giving a false statement in court.

As mentioned earlier, the story line of this film is once again quite simple. On her way home one evening from teaching school, Jhinuk witnesses an assault on a young woman, Romita, and her husband. Through this fateful and transforming event, the lives of the two women from different social backgrounds intersect. After rushing to assist Romita, Jhinuk convinces the couple to file a complaint with the police. The event becomes headline news and Jhinuk is hailed as a heroine. But these moments of glory are fleeting, and any feelings of goodwill evaporate as the families of the two women bristle at Jhinuk’s unwavering pursuit of justice. Such persistence becomes especially embarrassing for members of Romita’s upper-class family, who must endure endless questions and criticism from friends, relatives and neighbours. Fearful of any deeper involvement or further attention, both families pressure Jhinuk and Romita not to appear as witnesses at the final hearing. Individual liberties and the pursuit of justice collide with middle and upper class sensibilities and lose the battle for survival. In a very poignant scene in the film, the morally devastated Jhinuk visits her grandmother, who stays alone in an old age home (and someone who unconditionally supports her granddaughter’s beliefs) and tells her how she has been defeated in life. Apart from weeping profusely, she realizes that her feminist ideals of being an equal partner in society is a sham and however much one might talk of gender empowerment, in real life that does not work. (video clips to be shown)

As the director, Rituporno unflinchingly challenges society’s willingness to deny the rights of individuals when they threaten the comforts and conventions of the economically privileged. Women in Indian society are among those still enslaved by the restrictions and codes of behaviour born of society’s hypocrisy and complacency – Jhinuk and Romita both have to contend with unspoken codes that coil around them with a silent but oppressive strength. Viewers feel intimidated at the way the two women are asked embarrassing questions and the five men try to get free with the help of corruption and male domination. "Though the theme revolved around the molestation of a married woman in a Calcutta street, it was mainly the spirit of female bonding that attracted me to the story," says Ghosh.

The reason for narrating the story of this feature film is to also draw your attention here to an interesting controversy that raged in Kolkata regarding Dahan. And once again, Ananya Chatterjee, the director of the documentary mentioned earlier,
was directly involved in it. The film was screened on the third week of November in Kolkata as part of the international fortnight of violence against woman, organized by a NGO, Sanlaap. It was a platform where the ‘reel’ and ‘real’ life were starkly portrayed. On 27th November 2002, the audience at Nandan theatre got an insight into the situation of the couple harassed by four youths at the Tollygunj Metro station in 1992 and the woman who fought for the couple seeking justice. This formed the basis of the film. Present on the occasion were author Suchitra Bhattacharya and Ananya Chatterjee, the journalist who inspired the character Jhinuk in the film. Bhattacharya, who wrote Dahan, said,

My story was a little different from the original film. A lot of my readers asked me why I had portrayed Jhinuk, the sole witness to the assault of the couple, as a loser in the end. Because I wanted women to realize the pain and suffering I wanted readers to act.

Some in the audience said that though women were becoming more independent, it was up to the male members of society to react to such injustice and violence. But Ananya Chatterjee lambasted the film. In an act of unusual courage, she had come to the aid of a young couple when they were being roughed up by a bunch of hooligans. But when her story was adapted on celluloid, she found that it was flawed by male stereotyping. From the very beginning she had a problem with the film and felt that it had been majorly unfair to the male characters, especially the victim’s husband. She reported (The Times of India, November 28, 2001):

Though the film says that it is based on a true-life incident, I am surprised at the way the characters are portrayed. The woman’s husband has been portrayed in a negative role whereas in real life both the woman and the man fought against social pressure and always appeared in court seeking justice. In real life, the couple, who were college students, had got married after the incident. The man stood firmly by his girlfriend, and had supported her against immense societal pressure. The couple married in UP and the case is still in court.

Firm in her belief that she will certainly get justice, Ananya said, “They had no right to portray the couple as they have done in the film.” Emphasizing upon her firm belief that the actual cause of the trouble was that one cannot handle unwanted male attention, she also regretted that it had taken her such a long time to react to what happened at the metro station on the evening of June 24, 1992. Stating categorically that she never made any money out of the film, (The Statesman, November 18, 2001) nor was in any way involved in its production process, she put the entire blame on Rituporno Ghosh for misrepresenting the actual story and taking recourse to male stereotypes.

It would have made me greatly happy to see him (the victim’s husband) portrayed as the man he actually was – the first one to protest (not me) at the scene of the incident, who dared to speak up when everyone was looking away, who got beaten up badly because of this, who stood by the
girl in the police station, at the identification parade, in the court, at home, amongst friends and relatives. He was a man who chose to marry the woman he loved despite everything – a man who was clearly not a stereotype. When stereotypes take over, real images make way for plastic ones. Real people often fall prey to such situations when they have to live out of these images, often under immense stress. The stereotype takes away the rational thought process and encourages popular views to ride over reality. It would be wrong to assume, however that stereotyping happens only with women. A man can become a victim to the same stereotyping as can a relationship.

This clearly happened in the case of Dahan. I can never understand how a novel or a film can be referred to as based on a real life story when none of the characters concerned were consulted on what really happened, on the day and thereafter. As a result what happens is a stereotyping of characters where both the men are shown as villains, patriarchs who are insensitive to their women. This is clearly the fruit of a vision which has chosen to follow the beaten track and attempt at hitting ‘safe’ targets: men. Just like some men in real life hit at what they consider to be safe and soft targets: women – regardless of age, race, class, caste and colour. If she is a child, she can be molested, if she is a teenager she wants to be molested, if she is single she is waiting to be molested, and if she is married, she must be unhappy and therefore…..

If this stereotype has to be broken, it has to be attacked from both sides. For it is not some men who need to be broken, it is this easy, shortcut method of stereotyping to justify one’s actions and mind-set that needs to be addressed and broken down. When such stereotyping happens in a group or in a home it is dangerous enough. But when it happens in literature or in a film which leaves lasting impressions on people’s minds it is likely to be catastrophic…..We are not yet ready to accept real men and real women.

The debate about the authenticity of representation of fiction into film is perhaps a century old, beginning right from the days of cinematographic history. Whether we can rely on the director’s choice or deal with an adaptation as an interpretation is also a debatable point. But the kind of charges that Ananya Chatterjee has labelled upon the director of the film Dahan will need several thousands of storms over teacups to resolve the issue. Till date, Rituporno Ghosh, has not replied or reacted to this charge against him.

To conclude I must reiterate the point with which I began this paper, and that is, it is high time we did away with the mythical stereotypes of the innocent village belles versus the liberated feminists of the city. Women’s representation in the media is very problematic and the task of both the categories still remains to stand up against the inherent violence rooted in Indian society, both mental and physical.