

The Other Half: Wisdom beyond schooling

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Thousands of women who have graduated from the 'school of life' are transforming village panchayats with their able governance.

Veena Devi is unlettered. I use that word rather than 'uneducated'. When I met her more than five years ago, she was the mukhiya, or sarpanch, of Loharpura panchayat in Nawada district in south Bihar. She is now in her early forties. At a time when the government had reserved half the seats in panchayats for women, Veena Devi had been elected twice from general seats.

In her first term in the panchayat, she admitted that she felt lost. She did not understand fully what was going on. One could hardly blame her for this. Married at 13 to a man much older than herself, a widower with two children, she became a mother at 15 and a widow at 17. Veena had seen more than her share of life and its sorrows even before she became a major. Going to school was nowhere on the horizon.

Yet, perhaps because she was compelled to learn in the 'school of life', she had a wisdom beyond her years and certainly more profound than anything taught in our schools. Without being tutored, she had a sense of what people needed, how to order priorities in terms of the use of developmental funds, and how to listen to the people who came to her with problems.

I thought of Veena Devi when I learned that the Rajasthan Government had passed an ordinance stipulating that only those who have cleared Std. VIII or X can contest panchayat or zilla parishad elections in that state. If such a law had existed in Bihar, a woman like Veena Devi would never have had a chance to contest.

The assumption behind this ordinance, promulgated without any justification of its urgency, is that because panchayats have to handle considerable developmental funds, 'educated' people will be more efficient and less corrupt. The assumption defies not just logic but evidence that shows that corruption certainly has no connection with levels of education. Make a list of the most corrupt people in India and the majority would be so-called 'literate'.

My own experience of meeting women like Veena Devi has been humbling. How easily those of us with privilege and access to education think we are wiser. And yet the clarity of these women shouldering the responsibility of managing developmental funds for a panchayat remind us that reading numbers and letters, going to school or college in itself does not make you a wiser person or a better administrator. It does not automatically imbue you with a concern for other people. It does not necessarily teach you how to listen to people, how to empathise, how to understand what people are trying to tell you.

None of this means that we must not ensure that every child does go to school; that by the time she is ready to contest an election she does possess basic literacy skills. But let us not, while we wait for that to happen, cut off from our systems of governance women like Veena Devi.

The best part of the 73rd amendment that laid the grounds for elections to panchayats and reservation for women is that it has brought into governance systems over 1.5 million women, many of them poor, from the lower castes, and also often with very little schooling. And although one should not generalise, and there are many instances of such women being used by men as proxies, there are an increasing number now who understand the system and who are able to work it so that it serves the interests of the largest number of people.

Let me return to Veena Devi to illustrate what I mean. Despite the handicap of minimal education, she quickly worked out how to overcome it. For instance, when she was handed petitions, she would ask people to give her some time to get back to them. She would then get a trusted person to read and tell her the content of the petition and come to a decision.

She also had the benefit of some sympathetic higher officials, including a woman bureaucrat, and a non-governmental organisation that invested in training her and giving her sound advice. As a result, when she had to decide about the use of funds for one of the villages, she chose a scheme of installing solar lights in the public areas of the village, knowing that this would benefit women in particular. In return, people of that village expressed satisfaction with her leadership.

For every Veena Devi, there are literally thousands of other women who are providing decent governance inputs at the panchayat level. They are largely unseen; they do face problems; they could benefit from more training and from getting literacy skills. But their main qualification is their commitment and their desire to serve their community. These women do not deserve to be left out of the picture because some misguided people in Rajasthan have decided that schooling equals wisdom and honesty.

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