Gendered Subjects, the State and Participatory Spaces: The Politics of Domesticating Participation in Rural India

Ranjita Mohanty

In the last two decades, a variety of institutional spaces have been created by the Indian state at the village level to invite, encourage and enhance the participation of poor, low-caste (dalit), and tribal groups and women. Claiming to be based on democratic principles and procedures, such spaces promise to include the excluded people in deliberations and decision-making. The spaces are attractive to people for the sheer logic that they are created by the state, yet there are caveats, problematics and challenges that characterize their participation in these democratic institutions and the processes that take place within them. Often the existence of other spaces created by movements, NGOs or people themselves, where they practise participation, enable them to transfer their learning and skills to state-created spaces and energize them (Mohanty 2004). However, in the absence of other spaces, the state is possibly the only actor that is expected to create conditions for the actualization and animation of the institutional spaces it constructs. If the state fails to do that, the spaces remain largely empty ones, where otherwise excluded groups, such as women, may never gain entry to actualize participation, despite their eagerness.

This chapter examines the presence and absence of women in three institutionalized spaces created by the state to promote development and democracy: sectoral institutions of health and watershed development, and the constitutionally mandated institutions of local government called panchayats. It traces the practices and dynamics of representation, inclusion and voice within these spaces in three
villages in Karuali district in the state of Rajasthan: Khubnagar, Akolpura and Bhikampura. The first is the home of the local panchayat headquarters, the second is a revenue village which has basic service institutions, and the third is a hamlet. All three are mostly populated by scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) in a context marked by extremes of poverty and exclusion.

My analysis raises questions about how women are represented in these institutions, whether their inclusion leads to substantive participation and voice, and whether these spaces are capable of enhancing the political agency of women, fashioning their political imagination and resulting in their political empowerment. In analysing women’s experiences of participation in this setting, I explore the challenges of building genuinely inclusive and substantive representation and voice for marginalized actors.

**Visions of the State**

Women in Karuali have known the state in many forms: as provider of essential services such as the post office, school, health centre and roads. They have images of the state as it manifests itself in ostentatious election campaigns – cascades of motor cars on the dusty and uneven roads, shining flags, larger-than-life photographs of future leaders, and public meetings where people gather in their millions. They have also known the state as the police, and as the revenue officer, essential in ensuring legal order. The might of the state, despite its non-performance, is a seductive force. The idea of the state as the powerful big brother is also in the post-colonial imagination. A combination of welfarism, developmental and social justice agendas are also associated with the state. Out of both fear and respect, people would like to associate with the state. Hence, despite being a merely formal presence, and notwithstanding all the humiliations that they are subjected to, women may still want to be part of the institutional spaces created by the state.

The contemporary democratic revival, with its emphasis on building and strengthening local institutions, has brought the role of the state into sharp focus. Studies have shown that in many contexts, poor and resourceless people continue to look to the state to intervene and solve their problems when it comes to the fulfilling of basic needs, physical security and conditions of dignified living.
For historical reasons, the state still looms large in the perception of millions of people. Notwithstanding the retreat of the state under a globalized and liberalized economy, in countries like India the state is an everyday presence in the lives of poor and vulnerable sectors such as low castes, women and tribal people. As codified power, ultimate decision-maker and resource mobilizer, the state impinges on the lives of people more than any other force, thereby determining how affairs in society are to be managed.

As Chandhoke puts it, political preferences for the state over other actors are ‘the outcome of historical processes…that preference formation takes place in a historical context, that of specific institutions or systems of rules. These shape interest, fix responsibility and guide the formation of expectations’ (2005: 1037). To understand participation in state-created developmental spaces, it is important to understand the nature of the post-colonial state and the depth of people’s relationships of dependence and patronage with it. It is important to capture how the state features in the imagination of people, since it is their relationship with the state, ranging from disillusionment and despair to seeing it as a patron and a benefit, which is reflected in their relationship with state-created institutions. Despite the failure of the state to erase unequal material and social relationships, it has instilled a sense of political consciousness among the deprived section, though that consciousness is often played out on the basis of groups, which try to compete with each other for social and political dominance. In this competition and negotiation for power, women in general and low-caste and tribal women in particular are left at the margins. It is only with the creation of local institutions and reinforcement of affirmative action through reservations in political, educational and development institutions that their political participation has gained some impetus.

The local institutional spaces that I explore in this chapter have come into existence through different traditions of thought and policy decisions. Sectoral development projects, such as for watershed management and health, are guided by the state’s mandate of uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the rural poor. The health institutions are part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) in which women are selected by government functionaries to run anganwadi, which are children’s schools and health centres for expectant mothers and small children. The watershed project is a time-bound sectoral project. It has a village-level committee in each
village to implement the project, to which representation of women and men is sought through nomination; each village committee has a total of ten or eleven members, out of which three or four members are women.

The panchayats, unlike the development committees, were created as units of local governance though the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. Understood variously as the grassroots units of governance, village republic, and local governance (Sinha and Nandy 2000; Hiremath 1997; Mathew and Nayak 1996; Jain 1996; Rai et al. 2001) the panchayats are part of a three-tier system of governance that begins at the village and ends at the district. Each panchayat consists of several revenue villages and hamlets, and is divided into several wards from which candidates are elected to the panchayat. These members are referred to as ward members/panch, and the head of the panchayat is called sarpanch. Gram sabha, or the village council, which is the general body of all the adult residents in the villages of which the panchayat is constituted, is the body to which the panchayat members are accountable. A third of the seats in each panchayat are reserved for women. Women are expected to stand for the seats that are reserved for them, as well as for the general/open seats. Provisions are also made to reserve seats for SCs and STs in accordance with their numerical presence in a particular panchayat.

The different routes through which these spaces have evolved historically explain some dimensions of the way women's membership is constructed within them. Watershed development projects, which are fixed-duration target-oriented projects, constitute the committee to engage women actively in the project so that they can influence poverty outcomes through effective resource management, decision-making and ensuring an equitable distribution of benefits. The new policy guidelines are based on a process change approach and call for the state to change from a controlling authority to becoming a provider of technical advice and support services in the development of the watershed. To strengthen the local institutions, the policy speaks of developing the institutional, managerial and technical capacity of people so that they can manage natural resources. It calls upon the state to develop a new role based on a spirit of partnership with the users of the natural resources in the village.

The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) of the Department of Women and Child Development has a thirty-year history,
and aims to improve the nutritional and health status of vulnerable groups through a package of services, including supplementary nutrition, preschool education, immunization, health check-ups, referral services, and nutrition and health education. It provides an integrated approach for converging basic services through community-based anganwadi workers and helpers, through supportive community structures/women’s groups and the anganwadi centre, which is a meeting ground for mothers and frontline workers. At the village level, the anganwadi centre has become a pivot of basic healthcare activities, contraceptive counselling and supply, nutrition education and supplementation and preschool activities. As part of its thrust on building the community organization of women, the ICDS forms self-help groups of women to engage in saving and credit activities.

Panchayats, in contrast to these two developmental spaces, have a constitutional mandate to encourage political participation of women and engage them in governance so that they can participate as well as ensure democracy at the local level. Evolved as a result of decentralization of decision-making, panchayats are supposed to engage people in assessing local needs, planning and executing solutions. While development projects have a welfarist approach in providing for women’s membership in the committees, membership in panchayats is guided by the principles and legalities of affirmative action emanating from the state’s agenda of social justice. Developmental thinking, directed towards changing the socio-economic landscape, engages women as committee members, users and beneficiaries; governance institutions, directed towards involving rural communities in local democracy, engage women as elected representatives in the framework of democracy. In their normative orientation, both institutions have a transformative agenda and women, at least theoretically, come to occupy different categories and are expected to enact roles that make them agents in influencing the developmental and democratic outcomes of the institutions.

Invited spaces as empty spaces

‘Invited spaces’ are conceptualized by Cornwall (2002) as spaces created by external agencies such as the state into which people are invited to participate. She contrasts invited spaces with the social and associational spaces of everyday life by suggesting that externally
created spaces can be sites in which participation is domesticated, and in which the dynamics of power between actors within them offer very different possibilities for exercising voice and agency from those spaces people create for themselves. In the villages where this study is located, women’s visibility in public spaces and their participation in state-created local institutions are negligible. Situations of chronic poverty together with rigid caste hierarchies, entrenched patriarchy and an apathetic bureaucracy have given rise to a situation where women have failed to participate in a meaningful way. Hence when we look at these institutional spaces through the lens of gender we find them largely empty and non-functional for women. One way of analysing this is through the conceptual category of empty spaces, a subcategory of invited spaces, denoting contexts where a marginalized group fails to populate an official invited space. The procedures and structures are there; also in some cases formal membership of women can be found. Yet all these do not translate into meaningful political participation.

In reality, an empty space is seldom completely empty. Even in the dismal scenario where women are purposely kept outside the boundaries of officially created spaces, in their own ways they try to enter that space. In my earlier research in Uttaranchal, where I could see traces of women’s engagement, I argued that institutional spaces such as these can be considered as necessary though not sufficient conditions for participation and democracy (Mohanty 2004). In the context of empty spaces, can we hold the same argument that institutional spaces, despite all their shortcomings, have a normative grounding which can be activated to create conditions for women’s engagement in development and democracy? What would explain the ‘emptiness’ of the panchayat and watershed committees as participatory spaces for women? And how can we best understand women’s engagement with these spaces – either in seeking entry, or in maintaining their ‘emptiness’? What do they see as the benefits of engagement, and how do they view the barriers they experience to inclusion and voice?

In what follows I describe my own standpoint in investigating this question, and point to three key elements that explain the failures of these invited spaces to secure the meaningful political participation of women: the control by men of the recruitment of women and of women’s representative voices; women’s relegation to being beneficiaries and wage earners within invited spaces; and
stereotypes of women’s public roles that go unchallenged by a putatively neutral state.

**Investigating women's roles in participatory spaces**

Conducting research, I would like to think, is a different experience for a researcher who is also an activist. At one level it is a deeply satisfying act, to visit the villages, talk to the women, develop a relationship. At another level, it is frustrating to see the poor conditions: to contrast it with the urban centre where I live. I am acutely aware of my personal and professional locations that drive me to Karuali: my academic training in the university in social sciences and my long years of working with NGOs. I try to be a disciplined, systematic scientific researcher; I also try to be empathetic and sensitive. The cognitive and emotive threads run inside me, making research at once a cathartic and a disturbing experience.

I visit the Society for Sustainable Development, an NGO based in the district town of Karuali. I spend long hours talking to them, before I visit the villages. I tell them that I want to visit villages where they are not working, in fact where no NGO has ever gone and worked. I had a mental picture of what the villages would look like. But regrettably the reality is somewhat different. The roads are dusty, dust from stone mines casting a thick veil over our heads. When we step into the first village, I decide almost intuitively that I will just make a round of the village talking to people informally. I do not want to be, at the moment, pressured with the thought that I have a research agenda. The **varanda** where I am sitting is a post office, and I develop a friendship with the person who distributes the mail. I know from my days spent with my grandparents in their village that this is a person whom everybody likes, who knows who lives where and who does what. I am fortunate to have met him. We fall into conversation. I request that he accompany me to the village. He agrees and we start walking. We meet many people on the way and greet them. People are friendly and courteous, inviting us to their homes for tea. I am not constrained by time or research methodology. I sit drinking tea, chatting. Preethi, my colleague, who is still researching her M.Phil., is excited, but thinks I am crazy: ‘We have not yet met a single woman – Ranjita, lets try to meet them.’

By now it is obvious that we have to meet the women in their homes; I have gathered some sense of the social positioning of
women, which – it is not difficult to make the link – influences their political position in local institutions. But women reveal, during that first meeting, a far deeper fracture in their relationship with the spaces that exist at the local level for their participation:

roji roti mein sari jindagi nikal gayi ham garibon ki, kya pata kameti mein kya hota hai- furshat ho to pata karen ('Poor people like us spend all their time in pursuing their livelihood; if we had the luxury of time, we would find out what happens in the committees').

Jab apne ghar aour samaj ham par pabandi lagata hai to ham use kaise todien ('When our family and our community restrict us, how can we break that?').

Ham kuchh kaehn koi sunta bhi hai ('does anyone listen to what we say?').

Jab ham aksham hai, jab hamra sajna aisa hai to sarkark ko li hi to kosis karna chhiye na? Aour kaun karega ('When we are poor and not capable of engaging our society, government must act').

Hame bas itna malum hai ki ham kameti ke sadshya hai, uske bad pata nahin ('I only know this much, that I am a member, nothing beyond that').

Ghar ke longon ne kha kin mahil ke liye arkshan hai- tum choonab mein khadi ho jayo, baki uske bad ham smbhal lenge ('Family members said that there is a seat reserved for women; you contest the election, we will manage it after that').

A vivid picture of Uttaranchal comes to my mind, different people, different narratives: women visible in public spaces, eager to do things, have belief in their own agency. I return to my hotel room and start arranging my thoughts. A few things become clear: looked at through women’s eyes, the institutional spaces created by the state are largely empty, women trying but are not gaining inclusion; the state, except for creating these spaces, has done nothing to actualize the spaces; women’s identities are being manipulated in a manner that restricts their participation in these spaces. These impressions shaped the contextual background and analytical constructs I developed for the study.

I have my own understanding what participation is. I try not to impose, but to find threads of similarities, albeit in different contexts. Does exclusion create similar feelings, does inclusion mean similar struggle? Intuitively we achieve a rapport – the urban educated middle-class researcher and the women in the villages. Despite our belonging to different places, wearing different kinds of clothes, speaking different languages, we begin to talk. I am aware, like many
of these women, that there are many differences and barriers between us that cannot be dismantled; yet there is an element of trust that I will understand their stories. They, as much as I, know that there is nothing to offer except an empathetic ear. A comradeship grows – after a few meetings, women open up, pour out their stories. I am aware that when I go back to Delhi, my university colleagues will tease me for turning social science research methods upside down, but I am convinced that there could not have been a better methodology to study participation.

**Recruiting Members: Denial of Choice, Imposition of Choice**

The genesis of representation in the Indian context has its base in the principles of affirmative action. Special efforts in the form of affirmative action to ensure political participation are meant to rescue excluded groups such as SCs, STs and women from social discrimination. Thus political participation and social participation are meant to reinforce each other – that is, political participation, by bringing excluded identities into the political spaces of decision-making, would bring them political equality that would negate some of the social inequalities they are subjected to, and social equality would equip them to seek inclusion in political spaces of decision-making and achieve political equality. Both are essential for citizenship and participation and both require that women, low castes and tribals as ascribed social categories be recognized by the state.

In practice, however, these norms of representation are dissonant with the realities of the inclusion – and indeed exclusion – of women from local institutional spaces. In the watershed developmental committee, women members are often selected in the village meeting. Selection is an informal process even though it takes place in the formal meeting. At times, the project bureaucracy selects women to be representatives because they are educated, or part of the panchayat system, or family members of ‘influential’ people in the village who have economic, political and/or social dominance at village level. At times, project bureaucrats ask these influential people to select women members. Women’s willingness to be part of the committee is often taken for granted, and they are never asked about their choice as representatives. Representation in the ICDS is of a different nature
to that of the watershed committee. Women from the community are recruited to implement the project – that is, they run the health centre-cum-school and provide healthcare assistance to women. Hence there is a professional aspect to ICDS and it is treated as a salaried job. The community worker at village level is called the *anganwadi* worker; as education is a requirement, it is often the most educated woman from the community who is recruited. The project also has provisions to recruit widows and women who are ‘deserted’ by their husbands, and in such cases education no longer remains the sole criterion.

It is all too obvious that women are recruited to the watershed committee to meet procedural requirements. It seems ironic to talk about ‘choice’, since most women members are not even aware that they have membership of the committee. Both the project bureaucracy and male members know that women will merely be decorative members, leaving men the prerogative to rule the committee. Thus from the very beginning, the stage is set for keeping women outside and excluded from the committee. Women, too, get this sense; hence during the course of the project when meetings take place in their absence and they are sent papers to sign, endorsing decisions taken by male members, they do not resist.

Even in panchayats where women get elected, who will stand for election is a matter rarely decided by women. The ‘politics’ of representation in these invited spaces is a combination of local dominance, cultural codes of patriarchy and the working of the local administrative bureaucracy. The study villages are mostly populated by SCs and STs who live together with upper-caste Hindus. Often there is a village hierarchy in which groups who have numerical strength, together with economic and political resources, come to dominate. For example, most women from Bhikampura, which is densely populated by Jatavs, an SC community, are of the opinion that they are not treated very well in the panchayat, where an open seat for the *sarpanch* is occupied by Rajputs, the higher-caste Hindus from Harnagar, which is a panchayat village. Men obviously want their family members to stand for the reserved seats so that the ‘power’ of panchayat membership remains within the family. Though being elected gives women representatives a political and constitutional legitimacy, in the micro-contexts of the village, these are inconsequential as men determine not only who will be given representation but also ‘who will be represented by whom’. We
therefore find husbands, brothers and sons conducting all the affairs in the village meeting on behalf of actual members.

When participation is imposed because there is a seat reserved for women, women are subjected to multiple humiliations. Women remain formal members, but men from their families exercise all the power associated with that membership. At the same time other women in the village find the situation difficult to accept. It is of course not a good feeling, even in a patriarchal system, to know that they are being used and domesticated by the very system that is intended to bring them empowerment and emancipation. I heard about Rajana Jatav, a low-caste woman, who contested and won election to the panchayat in the village of Akolpura, but whose husband attends the meetings to represent his wife. He also takes all the decisions which, as a panchayat member, she should be taking.

I wanted to meet Rajana, but she never came to any meeting I organized with women in the village. ‘She is shy’, they said; ‘you must meet her at her home’. I asked if someone could take me to her home. There was a surge of excitement among them as they walked with me towards her house. We reached Rajana’s house. She came out into the courtyard to greet us – a young woman, certainly shy, with a long veil. I asked her if she is required keep that on while talking to us. She nods silently, but does not remove the veil. We begin talking; she hardly answers the questions. All she has to say is that she never attends the meetings, adding that her husband is quite active. Why did she contest the election then, I ask. Her voice chokes: ‘family members insisted, but you see, it’s so humiliating. All these women make fun of me all the time and tell me that I am no more than a peon in the panchayat.’ I refrain from hurting her sensibilities further, promising that I will see her when I come to her village next time, and leave quietly.

I am tempted to compare Rajana with Ankuri Jatav, the only woman member who claims to have subverted the male local bureaucracy’s agenda of using women only as ‘proxy’ representatives. A Jatav low-caste woman, Ankuri says that she has the support of her community and therefore could win the election. There probably is some truth in that since the SCs in Bhikampura actively compete with upper-caste Rajputs of Harngar, particularly because the post of the sarpanch in Harngar panchayat is an open post occupied by a Rajput. The Jatavas, working as labourers on the farms of Rajput, have found Ankuri an ally in their determination to challenge
their Rajput masters politically. However, her own persona has to a certain extent shaped her political aspirations. She says that she is not intimidated by men or local bureaucrats, she goes to meetings and makes her point; she has struggled, but has created a space in which she has won acceptance. ‘Why, then, have other women not followed you?’ I ask. She responds thoughtfully: ‘It is not often easy for women to ignore or even infuriate their family and society.’ That simple truth indicates how the choices that women might exercise in fulfilling their political ambition are hijacked by the state and the larger society to keep women confined to what the culture demands of them.

Creating Identities and Assumptions: Reinforcing Stereotypes

Cultural roles of subservience within the family support a dynamic whereby women tend to be relegated to the roles of beneficiaries, wage earners and proxy representatives within the invited spaces under study (Cornwall 2004). Mere formal membership, stripped of the choices and freedoms that might come with representative authority, creates a scenario in which women come across as formal members in development committees, and as beneficiaries and users of the project, which often takes the shape of their being employed by the project as wage workers, and as proxy representatives in the panchayat, who legitimize the use of their position and power by male members of the family.

In the spaces provided by the panchayat, women’s inclusion in gram sabha meetings merely serves the purpose of including their physical presence. They are neither encouraged nor discouraged to attend meetings. Men do not show overt aggression to women attending meetings or speaking in public, but there is an indifference which women find very humiliating. In watershed committees their role is even further diminished as even women’s physical presence is not considered desirable by male members. The head of the institution, together with his allies in the committee and in local administration, sets the agenda for the meeting, and this often determines who will be included or excluded. Women in watershed projects are often found attending meetings when work is to be distributed during implementation, thereby reducing themselves to no more than labourers, ironically in the very context that is
designed to give them ownership and participation in the project (Mohanty 2004). While membership of the panchayat, and therefore inclusion, is largely driven by the male members of the family, in the watershed committee membership is required to fulfil formal provisions. Inclusion is therefore never thought about as important, or as something that women may find desirable and on which basis they might make their claim. More than their presence and inclusion, it is their signature on official documents that is valued. ‘What stops them refusing to sign such documents?’ I ask. ‘The fear and risk involved in annoying powerful people in the village and one’s own family members’, Nirmala, an anganwadi worker, argued:

Few women here have awareness about their rights. Some of us who are educated and are aware about our rights, we are seen as a ‘nuisance’ and a constant threat within the village. Hence, while women who are silent and docile will be called to meetings, we will be deliberately kept outside.

In Akolpura, one of the women members – wife of the chairperson of the watershed committee – looked embarrassed to talk about her role in the committee. ‘I do not need to be there all the time – my husband plays an important role in the committee. We do not have disagreements on issues’, she says. In the social relations of power within patriarchy, women often echo what men think appropriate. Earlier on that day, talking to a group of women in the village, I gathered that in their view ‘power’ is transferred from a man to a woman – if a man is powerful in the public domain, so is his wife. Why, then, must women claim their ‘own share of power’?

While women are not encouraged to take part in deliberations in the watershed committee meeting and influence decisions in the project, they are encouraged to step out of their homes to earn extra income for their families. Since most people have very small land holdings and work as wage labourers, women often go out of their houses to work. Hence watershed projects, which create this opportunity for local employment in dam construction, building rain-harvesting structures, maintaining plantations, raising nurseries, and so on, are able to include women only as labourers. Further reduction of their agency takes place in the panchayats, where, except for the rare occasions where they come across as elected members, women behave as good supportive wives and mothers, transferring their position and power in the panchayat to their husbands and sons.
In the case of the ICDS, women are actively included – indeed, it is not difficult to find women in a programme exclusively designed for them. Women have no hesitation in frequenting the *anganwadi* centre. Since the programme reinforces the traditional images and assumptions that families and society have of women as wives and mothers, it is considered safe for women to visit the *anganwadis*. Everyone seems to be happy as long as women are part of a programme that prepares them to be better wives and mothers; it is even better if they can build some savings and credit that the family can fall back upon during times of crisis. No one seems to mind women frequenting a non-threatening space where they interact only with other women. Yet the ICSD has had effects on the agency of women recruited as *anganwadi* workers. We find Nirmala, for instance, very vocal, often raising issues during my meeting with her: ‘We have started from scratch – there was nothing available to women in this village to prove that they could excel in education and prove their capabilities. Projects like this have given us this space.’ One can appreciate their sense of self-worth being acknowledged by the project. But the ‘professional identity’ that ICDS constructs for women like her and the sense of professional satisfaction that the work gives to them do not translate into any radical possibilities for the large number of women receiving healthcare in ICDS, who participate only as ‘mothers’ eulogizing the domesticated conflict-free identity which is so valued by the larger society and their own families.

These identities of beneficiaries, wage earners and proxy representatives are intricately linked with the assumptions that go with them, and these assumptions then begin to govern the local institutions:

*Auraten ghar mein khus rahti hain* (‘Women are happy serving their family’).

*Jo faishla uske pati aur putra kartein hain, bahi uska bhi faishal hota hai* (‘She would naturally want to support her husband’s and son’s decisions’).

*Parivar ki khushali ke liye woh ghar ke bhur bhi kam kar leti hai, lekin rajniti uske bas ki bat nahin, yah woh bhi smmajhti hai* (‘She has an obligation to work to fulfil livelihood demands, but she also understands that politics is not her cup of tea’).

*Unhe samaj aur sanskriti ki parvah karni chahiye – unko ijjat usi mein milta hai* (‘They are taught to respect society and its culture – that is where they have to gain her respect’).
Constructions of Gendered Participation

Stereotyped understandings of women’s public roles restrict their participation in invited spaces, so long as the state – in its role as space-maker – acts as a putatively neutral facilitator of this participation. The state sides with the dominant social forces, groups and individuals to avoid conflicts. The process take place in such a manner that women are excluded from its sphere. A dominant construction of gendered participation manipulates the state institutions and shapes participation, and is premised upon four critical aspects of participation: wisdom, space, power and voice.

I am talking to a group of women, some of them quiet, some eager to talk. It is impossible to keep men out of such meetings. They are curious to know what is going on. The men are trying to assess my identity and are anxious to be party to the conversation that is going on. Some of them watch from a distance, some gradually draw closer. They interrupt the women, give their version of the issue. The presence of men makes women self-conscious. I ask the men not to interrupt a woman while she is talking. One of them is sharp. He says: ‘Then you have to talk to us separately after you finish here.’ Then they withdraw; a few more men gather in the meanwhile and wait at a distance. I finish talking to the women; it is getting dark, but I will have to talk to these men who have waited patiently for so long. So I join them. More tea is served. First they want to know whether or not I am a government officer. It takes a while to convince them that I am just doing a study. ‘What are you going to do with the study?’ one of them asks. ‘Let’s see’, I try to be evasive, ‘maybe some good recommendation for your village will come up’. We begin talking. Gradually the suspicion gives way to a kind of temporary camaraderie.

Seen through the lens of these forces, we get a particular picture of the *wisdom* that women exercise in the pursuit of participation, the *spaces* where women seek inclusion, the *power* that participation offers to those who pursue it, and the *voices* that can be raised to animate participatory spaces.

*Wisdom*  *Unki samajh mein nahi ayega* (‘they will not understand’) is the common refrain from men regarding women’s interest in what goes on in the village meetings. The institutional space is seen by men as technical in its content, masculine in its manner of deliberation,
and external in its goal, as opposed to the generic discussions women have within the household, which more often than not refer to the feminine pursuits of nurturing and caring for family members.

**Space**  Women’s space is never seen as external – it is always space within the four walls of the house where they are expected to participate. If women seek inclusion, it has to be within the family; if they seek deliberation and negotiation, it has to be with family members. The family space is almost sacrosanct, and women seeking inclusion in the external spaces offered by the institutions are looked upon as transgressing the boundaries of their defined spaces.

**Power**  The majority of men feel that the power a woman has is directly proportional to that which her husband wields. If the male is powerful, so is his wife. Making men the reference point for power also gets its impetus from the fear that empowering women can have political consequences. Hence we find men happy with their women so long as they are part of the saving and credit group, which is perceived as non-threatening and non-political, and do not aspire to be watershed committee members or panchayat members, where deliberation and negotiation of a different kind take place.

**Voice**  Male reactions to female voices raised outside of the home are either indifferent, or amused, or simply dismissive. The reactions understandably are directed towards keeping women silent. As sarpanch of Harnagar says, *hamri gaon ki aurtaen to bas baat karna janti hai, sauk hai unki* (‘Oh they love to talk and talk. That, after all, is their habit!’), implying that women’s speech is without much substance. A common reason men cite for keeping women silent is their lack of political language – ‘they do not know what to say in a meeting’. Hence the fear is that women may annoy government officials and influential people in the village by uttering something ‘useless’.

If participation is all about political negotiation, democratization and empowerment, certainly these conventional patriarchal notions of participation do not offer much possibility to women. But things are worse when these notions get transferred to state institutions created to promote participation. The state, rather than critically looking at the forces that subvert its developmental and democratic agenda, poses as innocent, pretending that everything is alright with the way its institutions function. For instance, it is fairly well understood that women are often silent in public spaces because cultural
codes do not allow them to speak in front of older men – fathers, fathers-in-law, brothers and uncles. It is considered disrespectful and brings dishonour to families if women are found talking in public meetings. Hence one of the ways to keep women silent is by not bringing any women-related issues to the meeting for discussion.

In institutions where women find representation following specific directives issued by the state, discussion of women’s issues, where women might represent a collective interest, has been superseded by discussion of more generic issues. Two women sarpanch who won panchayat elections because seats were ‘reserved’ for women have spent their five years’ tenure planning the construction of school buildings and roads, because in popular perceptions that is what village development is all about and the sarpanch is expected to develop infrastructure facilities in the village. In ICSD, since it is a health project targeted at children and women, women’s issues are understandably represented in meetings. In the watershed committee, which is a forum to implement a highly specialized project, however, discussion invariably centres on issues pertaining to that project. It is seldom that women, as a collective or as individuals, or their issues, are represented in committee spaces. By treating certain issues as ‘non-decisionable’ and thereby keeping them outside the institutional decision-making process and concentrating on popular ‘safe’ issues, which will not result in conflict because women will not participate in such deliberations, the institutions help society exercise its power over women (Kabeer 1994). This eventually turns women into absentee members or silent spectators.

It is not only that women speak or do not speak, but the extent to which when they do speak they are comprehensible to men and the local bureaucracy. Women are not encouraged to speak because they do not know the political language of the public space or the language of the state. In the context of distance between the state and people, activists have often worked as interpreters. In our particular context, where a highly negligent state distances itself from poor, dalit and tribal women and the activist-interpreter is not present, women’s voices are virtually absent from official institutional spaces.

**Conclusion**

State-created spaces are attractive because they are grounded in the normative principles of equality, justice and empowerment. However,
in contexts where these institutions reproduce stereotyped identities, assumptions and expectations for women, women – instead of fashioning their political imagination and democratic aspirations – come to experience multiple doses of humiliation, discrimination and exclusion. As a result, and despite the provision for representation, looked at from rural women’s vantage points, these spaces appear largely empty. In such situations, even the normative grounding of these spaces is not enough to create the necessary conditions for participation to take off. Women, incapacitated by poverty and social exclusion, display a sense of resignation, and it seems unlikely that they will organize on their own to negotiate and claim their equitable stake in these local participatory institutions. The state, which is expected to facilitate women’s participation, has failed them in many ways.

Let me, at the risk of sounding prescriptive, end this chapter with a small note on what would help in such contexts to mobilize women’s substantive representation, inclusion and voice. My earlier research in Uttarakhand shows that women’s participation, facilitated by NGOs, movements, and at times even by the state, in ‘other supportive spaces’, enables them to participate in the invited spaces of development and governance institutions. Their participation receives further impetus when local bureaucrats, particularly those placed at the higher level, encourage, mobilize and create conditions for women’s participation by directly intervening at the village and district levels. The coexistence of these two conditions is essential, because the absence of one will result in too much dependency on the other. Too much dependency on the state, as the three villages in Rajasthan indicate, creates a situation where women will unquestioningly accept what the state offers to them. Likewise, too much dependency on women’s organizations or NGOs will result in bypassing the state. When these organizations facilitate women’s participation, they help in creating a larger supportive environment for women to gain entry to and participate in the official invited spaces. When the state, through its local bureaucracy, accommodates women’s genuine interests in the local institutional spaces, it helps in building the participatory character of these spaces to institutionalize such interests as women’s rightful stake in processes of development and democracy.
Notes

1. Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are identified in the Constitution of India for special consideration in the form of protective discrimination/affirmative action. Scheduled castes, known as untouchables or dalits, occupy the lowest rung in the Hindu caste hierarchy. It needs to be noted that in Indian villages, although the SCs and STs live together with the upper castes, their habitats are often located on the outskirts of the village. The peripheral physical space they occupy within the village is reflective of the many layers of social and economic inequalities persistent in the Indian countryside.

2. Affirmative action has been a contested issue in India. It is seen both ways: as a transformative tool in liberal democracy, as well as a means to polarize the electorate in a democracy for political gain. Readings that illuminate these aspects include: Gupta 1998; Mahajan 1998; John 2000; Kumar 2001.

References