

George Mathew

It has been 20 years since the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts were passed by Parliament. They were translated into laws on April 24 and June 1, 1993, respectively. These two amendments could be termed as post-Independent India's most revolutionary exercises in democratic decentralisation and devolution of power. What gave these laws even more relevance was the fact that they mandated that one-third seats in all local governments would be reserved for women.

Sometimes the women who stood for office were stripped naked by forces that just could not accept the idea of women taking positions of leadership. But because of interventions from enlightened citizens, these attempts failed.

In the early 1990s, Geeta Rathore was elected a sarpanch from a reserved seat in Jamonia Talab gram panchayat in Madhya Pradesh's Sehore district. In 2000 she

They're at home as leaders

Reservations in panchayats have been a catalyst in empowering women

RESERVATION FOR WOMEN IN PANCHAYATS HAS BEEN ABLE TO SEND OUT A MESSAGE TO EVERY FAMILY IN A PANCHAYAT - THAT WOMEN ARE EQUAL TO MEN

repeated this feat from a non-reserved seat. From being a shy home-maker to a community leader, she worked hard to change the face of her panchayat. She was able to renovate water tanks, build a school, construct roads, get people to plant trees — and even fight against domestic violence.

In 1996, K Leelavathi, who came from the weavers' community, was elected as

councillor of Madurai Corporation. Water shortage was a huge problem in her area and even after pipelines were laid, no water came through the taps. This meant that even the poorest of the poor had to pay for water, which was being supplied by the local mafia who ran water tanker services. Six months after she was elected, Leelavathi's efforts to get water for her locality bore fruit. The next day, she was murdered in broad daylight.

When radical change brings women like Leelavathi to the forefront, it is inevitable that there will be resistance — often leading to bloodshed. It is the price that is often demanded for the transition we make to a more humane and evolved society.

But with all its challenges, the 73rd

Amendment proved to be a catalyst for change. Today 1.2 million women are making their entry into public life every five years breaking the barriers of class, caste and culture. Initially, they may have depended on the men within their families to help them, but this trend too has changed in many parts of the country with women showing the ability to discharge their duties as public representatives.

Many significant social interventions have taken their cue from the panchayati raj. For instance, the idea of gender budgeting, where the component for women in budgetary allocations is clearly demarcated, emerged from this process. But what I consider its single biggest impact is that it has been able to send out a message to every family — and there are at least 300 families in every panchayat — that women are equal to men.

George Mathew is chairman, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi

The views expressed by the author are personal