Chapter 6

Reservation and Women’s Political Freedom

The Experience in Panchayat Election 2010

6.1 Introduction

Globally, there has been ‘considerable progress in developing women’s capabilities, but their participation in economic and political decision making remains very limited’ (UNDP, 1995: 4). Studies have established that social and institutional barriers have contributed to such situations (Norris & Inglehart, 2000 & 2001). Kerala’s experience is not an exception to this; where the social opportunities for enhancing women’s participation in the public realm remain severely constrained (Kannan, 2000). The remarkable progress that Kerala achieved in its social front, particularly in mass-education and public health care, is known for its gender balance. However, ‘it does not lead to dramatic change in the status of women or in political structures’ (Jeffrey, 2001:216). The representation of women in decision making bodies of political parties and trade unions is very low. The state assembly never had more than 10 per cent women members in its long history (Vijayan, 2007:145). Several factors keep women away from active participation in the political field, which include the belief that politics is a field that is not suitable for women; a theory that has been propagated over the ages (Georgekutty, 2003).

Affirmative action and positive discrimination for women have been proposed for enhancing the ability of women to participate in political decision making (CLRA, 2008; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Dahlerup, 2007; Deininger, Jin & Nagarajan, 2012; Duflo, 2004; Raabe, Sekher & Birner, 2009). Representation of women in elected bodies
is often treated both as a sign of an increase in their capabilities as well as an effective instrument to further increase their freedoms. It has been argued that ‘women cannot occupy their rightful place in the life of the nation without the support of reservation. Thus political parties and the central government cogitated on the question and came out with the proposal for reservation of seats for women in the local self-government institutions as a first step towards the same at the higher levels… The experience in the Panchayati Raj institutions has given an impetus to the cause of reservation at all levels for women’ (Georgekutty, 2003: 313). At the same time, there exist concerns over the effectiveness of reservation in empowering women, especially in the long run. When a reserved seat becomes a general, most of the existing women candidates are not able to retain their position (Vijayan, 2007).

Studies on India’s decentralisation experience often cite Kerala as a successful case for establishing a decentralised local governing system in the state. Having a well-established decentralised democratic system; Kerala also introduced reservation policies and revised them over time. In 2010, the state introduced a new reservation policy that extends women’s reservation in Panchayats (elected local bodies) from 33 per cent to 50 per cent.¹ A detailed discussion on the fact, that such a radical change (without much controversy) never took place in other levels of electoral democracy, and the basic political and socio-economic forces which enabled Kerala to implement the revised reservation policy are beyond the scope of the present study. As per the revised reservation policy, the share of seats and the positions of president and vice president reserved for women was increased to fifty per cent at all the three levels, Gram Panchayats (GPs), Block Panchayats and District Panchayats.

Based on insights drawn from the panchayat election held in October 2010, this chapter tries to understand the implications of this revised reservation policy on the political freedom of women in Kerala. It seeks to do so by capturing indicators of both the constitutive role and the instrumental role of political freedom. The constitutive role is

¹ Following the 73rd Amendment and state legislations, one-third of total seats in local governing bodies are reserved for women. Unlike in the case of SCs and STs (number of reserved seats determined by the proportionate share in the population), this was simple and uniform (Kaushik, 1999).
reflected in the process through which they are elected. Literature identifies various indicators to measure the degree of political freedom of elected women representatives such as their access and control over political space, government schemes, the position held in other organisations and the support they receive from ward members and higher levels of governance (Vanishree, 2011). The instrumental role in this chapter is restricted to the capability of the women to retain the same degree of political freedom after they have had the benefit of reservation. At the same time, we have some evidence which was collected later; to suggest the improvement in the instrumental effect of reservation on women candidates.

6.2 Background: The Gender Relations and Decentralisation in Kerala

Along with its highest rank in country’s HDI, Kerala state is considered relatively free from conventional restrictions against women’s education, employment or owning property and therefore Kerala experiences a much lower gender gap in terms of basic capabilities (Planning Commission, 2008: 403). Various social, political and administrative reforms that took place in the 20th century played an important role in facilitating such an impressive pattern of development in the state. The contribution of women in achieving basic developmental capabilities such as in controlling population growth, enhancing literacy, schooling, child care and life expectancy are widely acknowledged. At the same time, there are many negative trends in women's property rights, the rapid growth and spread of dowry, and rising gender-based violence (Kodoth & Eapen, 2005) which question this impressive past.

Kerala’s experience in decentralised planning serves as an effective backdrop for this study. The first attempt to decentralise power to local level democratic institutions in Kerala came in 1957, immediately after the re-organisation of the state (Chathukulam, 1991). However, it was only when the People’s Planning Campaign (PPC) was introduced in 1996, that participatory planning programme became as a model for democratic decentralisation. The state was praised for the successful implementation of

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2 It is a fact that high female literacy made possible greater spread of family planning information among women. However, the webs of power-relations within which they perceived of it as desirable and acceptable may question the same as a ‘liberationist’ project (Devika, 2002).
decentralised planning for local self-governance (Bandyopadhyay, 1997; Chathukulam & John, 2002; Das, 2000; Isaac, 2001; Isaac & Franke, 2000; Isaac & Harilal, 1997; Heller, 2001; Mohanakumar, 2003; Narayana, 2007; Oommen, 2007; Sharma, 2003; Tharakan & Rawal, 2001). These participatory development programmes and local self-governing bodies are instrumental in targeting resources towards the disadvantaged social groups (Besley, Besley. Pande & Rao 2005). These programmes are crucial in sustaining the earlier development achievements of the state as well as in shaping the present and future trends.

There has been some criticism about whether this exercise has fallen short of its more ambitious targets. The lack of knowledge made popular consciousness eclectic and depoliticized and in a political situation where there was a coalition of conflicting interests the full potential of decentralization was not realized (Gurukkal, 2001). Compared to the earlier mass-mobilising programmes like land reforms or unification of Kerala, this ‘seems to have not been completely successful in realizing the expectation that further developmental initiatives will be driven by social movements and civil society organizations in the wake of the campaign’ (as cited in Tharakan, 2006). Such criticism of decentralisation is however more in relation to the high expectations rather than any abject failure of the process.

An election to local governing bodies in Kerala thus provides useful insights on political freedom of women gained through reservations. The election, held in October 2010 (on 23rd and 25th October), is particularly important as it was the first one after implementing a revised reservation policy. As per the new policy regime, 11,135 seats (out of 21,612 seats) and the leadership of 605 local bodies (out of 1,208) in Kerala are reserved for women.3 This includes 489 village councils, 76 block councils, seven district councils, 30 municipalities and three corporations in the state.

The experience of Malappuram; a Muslim majority district in the Hindu majority state, throws up a wide range of party and non-party dynamics, particularly the role of religious

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groupings on the political participation of women in the region. As in the rest of Kerala, the two major political alliances in Malappuram, the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) accounted for the largest number of candidates. Indian National Congress (INC) including various groups of Kerala Congress, Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and Indian National League (INL) were the major parties aligned in the UDF while Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI(M)), Communist Party of India (CPI), were the major parties that contested in the LDF. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and some of the new alliances like Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Janakeeya Vikasana Munnani\(^4\) had their candidates in certain pockets of the district.

6.3 Method

In the 1992, the third Human Development Report (HDR) introduced the Political Freedom Index (PFI)\(^5\) and pointed out that political freedom and human development do seem to move in tandem or move one behind another (UNDP, 1992: 32). However, there was a feeling that HDI should not be overloaded with such extensions and the PFI was removed from the subsequent reports. It has been argued that any attempt to extend the HDI to include political capabilities should focus on the political and civil institutions that affect individuals’ opportunities to pursue their goals, that is, that affect their capabilities (Cheibub, 2010).

Political freedom can be defined as ‘the condition of individual existence in a collectivity where every individual concerned certain particular freedoms either personally or collectively’ (Desai, 2011:192). Civil and political rights are two instruments that have been widely used to assess political freedom. Indicators such as personal security, rule of law, freedom of expression, political participation and equality of opportunity are among the common indicators. Political participation can be directly related to the freedom of

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\(^4\) This was a local alliance for the peoples’ development front, in most of the places led by Jama’ate Islami, one of the Muslim organisations functioning at national level

\(^5\) Political freedom index focused on five freedoms and drew on judgments of a range of experts, scoring each country from 1 to 10 and found that countries with a high HDI have an average PFI of 84 percent while countries with a low HDI have an average PFI of 48 percent
association, universal adult franchise, democratic structure, candidature and level of decentralisation in community and local decision making (UNDP, 1992: 29-31). Political freedom makes the individual capable of communicating with others and participating in the political life of the community (Desai, 2011). Political freedom enables people to affect the decisions that shape their destiny. Thus, the capabilities approach considers political freedom as a key instrument to influence and guide development policies (Deneulin, 2006). Hence, a competitive election will be a useful case to explore the implications of reservation on different aspects of political freedom.

From an instrumental perspective, Sen identifies ‘political freedom’ as one of the instrumental freedoms that contribute directly or indirectly, to the overall freedom. Political freedoms refer to ‘the opportunities that people have to determine who should govern and on what principles, and … including the political entitlements associated with democracies in the broadest sense’ (Sen, 2000: 38).

While looking at the capability of elected women representatives, studies found very strong positive correlation between that their freedom and functions (Vanishree, 2011). It is the constitutive role of political freedom that helps us to visualise what constitutes the degree of political freedom prevailing in a society. As a primary end, i.e. what constitutes freedom by itself, constitutive freedom should be evident in any situation. In contrast, the instrumental role of political freedom i.e. how much a particular freedom contributes or means to other freedoms, has to be looked at from a long-term experience.

Based on the insights drawn from the experience of candidates from three different gram panchayats in Malappuram district, this chapter tries to explore the implications of revised reservation policy on the constitutive and instrumental roles of political freedom. A micro-study was conducted through a questionnaire survey and personal interviews with candidates who contested seat in the three gram panchayats chosen from Malappuram district for this thesis. The survey covered 196 candidates (out of 198) who contested the elections for the three gram panchayats. Only two candidates from Highland GP were excluded as, with names similar to the main contestants, they participated only to distract supporters of other contestants.
The study was carried out in two phases: the first phase covered the whole process of elections, from the process of nomination, candidature, campaign, elections, counting and immediate responses to the result; and the second phase consisted of the questionnaire survey leading up to detailed personal interviews with the candidates. The first phase consisted of extensive traveling to participate in meetings and campaigns organised by various political parties and religious organisations. The second phase was for interviewing the candidates. 182 candidates were personally interviewed whereas the information for the remaining 14 was collected from the family members and was verified from members of the public, mostly neighbours or party workers. The support of party workers, local leaders, and friends from political and non-political organisations was very useful in getting access to various programmes and informal discussions.

6.5 The Constitutive Role of Political Freedom

The study found that women’s candidature in the three gram panchayats is almost entirely limited to the thirty-two seats, which are reserved for women. Only one woman in the selected gram panchayats contested in an unreserved seat and lost by a huge margin, getting less than three per cent of the total vote. The fact that ninety-four women candidates used the facility of reservation and entered into local politics can be seen as an improvement of constitutive political freedom. While choosing these ninety-four women the parties considered several of their capabilities, the most important was education. Educated women are considered to be more capable and potential women candidates with lower levels of education have a lesser chance. The overall pattern shows that female candidates have higher educational status and this trend is even sharper in the higher education levels with the exception of Christian candidates (Table: 6.1).

It was found that 42 per cent of the female candidates (against 23% of males) were less than 35 years old. Higher education may be prominent among young candidates, because they have benefited from the growth of mass education that has been instrumental for generating economic growth in Kerala (Pani & Jafar, 2010). Thus, it can be argued that higher educational qualification can be an important factor which enabled many potential young female candidates to contest in the panchayat election.
Kerala is known for having high unemployment and low work participation rates for many decades and this pattern is very prominent among the educated youth (Mathew, 1997). Figures show that the unemployment rate among the youth (men and women belonging to the age group of 15-29 years) is very high. The educational status of the work-seekers shows that most of them have higher educational qualification (Devi, 2009:158-160). In 2003, 18 per cent of the educated men remained unemployed; the corresponding figure for women was 71 per cent (Planning Commission, 2008: 33). Between 1991 and 2001, the state experienced the sharpest decline in the shares of main workers from agriculture and allied activities (Census of India, 2001). During the same period Malappuram district also follows a similar pattern, with a sharp decline in the share of agricultural workers and lowest work participation among the female population. In both cases, the withdrawal of workers from agriculture and allied activities was not accompanied by the expected growth in urbanisation. It can be argued that the same freedom that enabled Keralites to be educated could influence the choice of jobs an individual makes (Pani & Jafar, 2010).

The district leads the pattern of Kerala’s international migration, to the Gulf countries. Malappuram district is known for sending the largest number of emigrants from Kerala (Zachariah & Rajan, 2004). Among the total candidates, thirty-three percent have at least one migrant and another five per cent have some returned migrants as a family member. Across the three GPs, Midland GP has a relatively larger share of migrant families (42.31 %), followed by Coastal (33.16 %) and Highland GPs (26.32 %). The fact that none of
the migrants happened to contest in the election, except some male returned migrants, suggests that non-migrants are preferred as candidates indicating the limited effect of migration on local politics. At the same time, there was some evidence to show that migration played an indirect role in local politics, especially when remittance money financed the party events. As it was noticed in the coastal GP, the local political leaders always rely on their party workers who have migrated to Gulf countries. Depending on their personal relations and the migrant’s status in the local party, the local leaders get promises for bearing the financial burden of the election.

In the case of female candidates, there were two Gulf-wives among the candidates (one from the midland GP and the other from Coastal GP). Interestingly, it was reported by the former that her husband came all the way from the Gulf to support her in the election. She said he came for her nomination, campaign and returned after the elections. Since he was doing the entire job for her, she did not have any idea about the money spent for her election. During the survey she reported that her husband had to come back so as to submit the relevant documents on her election expenditure to the concerned authority.

The occupational pattern of the candidates as per the geographical terrain varies across fishing, agrarian and plantation activities. The occupational pattern can explain the long-term development experience of the region, including the impact of educational status and several socio-cultural factors that can affect the political capability of a potential woman candidate. The Coastal GP has the least share of candidates engaged in agriculture and plantation activities (1.15%) but a larger share is engaged in fishing and allied activities (13.79%).

Based on the education and occupational status of the women chosen by various political parties, it is possible to identify certain groups as a pool of potential candidates. The study identifies three such groups which account for nearly ninety per cent (89.47%) of the total female candidates who contested from the three gram panchayats (Table: 6.2). Broadly, the first group consists of homemakers, the second group consists of women

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6 Woman whose work is to maintain and organise household and look after their husbands and children, this includes washing, cleaning, cooking and full time care of pre-school children (Bhaskar, 1997).
engaged in rural-women empowerment programmes (workers in Government schemes) and the third group is mainly formed by professional women especially school teachers (professionals).

Table 6.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates’ primary occupation and sex (Share in %)</th>
<th>Midland GP</th>
<th>Highland GP</th>
<th>Coastal GP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivation/ Plantation</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled &amp; Un-Skilled Worker</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-Maker(I)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MGNREGA/Kudumbashree/Jalanidhi/ASHA worker (II)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals (III)</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing allied</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary Survey 2010-11

Home-makers account for 42 per cent of the total female candidates from three gram panchayats (Table: 6.2). Among them, 65 per cent are Muslims and the remaining are Hindus (32.5 %) and Christians (2.5 %). As they are concentrated in the Muslim majority regions, the Coastal GP has a larger share. It can be argued that Muslim homemakers in Malappuram do not find it difficult to enter into politics, instead the fact favours their candidature.

The second largest group of female candidates (27.37 %) is drawn from those who are engaged in various rural-women empowerment programmes like MGNREGA, Kudumbashree, Jalanidhi programme seventh or ASHA eighth workers associated with the gram

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7 Jalanidhi, the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme initiated by Kerala government

8 Rural health workers, who have been appointed under the National Rural Health Mission to educate rural women, particularly pregnant women, about healthcare and get them treated at general hospitals in urban places
This group is generally known for having a strong social network in the community and functions as promoters of various welfare schemes. Through the self-help groups and women neighbourhoods they mobilise local community and resource for various development programmes. It was observed that this group was sought after wherever a party found it difficult to find a suitable candidate from the party-families, or the local social climate did not encourage the entry of women into the political field. Across Kerala, there has been a sharp increase in the number of Kudumbashree members who represented various political parties and contested to the local governing bodies; the number rose from 2,240 in 2005 to 11,264 in 2010 (Devika, 2012:87). This pattern can be seen as an indicator for the growing importance of this group; as a critical group of potential candidates.

The third group is drawn from professionals, which accounts for 26 cent of the total female candidates (Table 6.2). This group is dominated by school teachers (74%) who work in local primary schools and are often active in teachers’ associations and local issues which enable them to build a strong social network. The banning of Anganwadi teachers, (the pre-primary/nursery school teacher) from contesting in panchayat elections is a reflection of the importance of such ‘social capital’. They generally have educational qualifications up to SSLC and play a key role in implementing various government programmes, particularly rural health, and maternal and child care, which brings them closer to the rural women. As per the rule, these Anganwadi teachers cannot contest in panchayat elections, but a large number of primary school teachers contested and their presence might continue further.

Since these three groups are endowed with different levels of education, public exposure, and capabilities, the ways through which they were chosen as candidates and deal with election process and result are different. It has been found that a majority of homemakers (52.5%) had somebody from their family, mostly their husbands (42.5%) active in local politics. The corresponding shares of the workers in government schemes and professionals are not that high and this is reflected in their engagement in local politics.

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9 A ‘party family’ can be identified as one family where the head of the household or other senior members are active in politics
and development issues. Homemakers, compared to the workers in government schemes and professionals, are not very active in local politics. Though many of the homemakers claimed that they are formal members of the party they contested for, observation suggests that they took the membership to avoid technical complications. In many cases, their husbands or the male member who was present during the interviews was very keen to claim that ‘she is a party member’. However, there are cases, where the female candidates are well aware of the political processes and party dynamics, even at national level. This indicates that the difference in the nature of political engagement varies across the three groups.

### Table: 6.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relation</th>
<th>Homemakers</th>
<th>Workers in Govt programmes</th>
<th>Professionals</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Formal Campaign</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one from the Family</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary Survey 2010-11

Candidates belonging to these three groups also had different experiences in getting family support for the election campaign. Except one woman candidate, all homemakers had somebody from their family to campaign for them. But, thirty per cent of the women candidates working in various government schemes, with their strong personal network in the community, managed their election campaign without any help from their families. In terms of receiving family support for the election campaign, the professionals lie between the first and the second groups. By and large, most of them were supported by the family and very few (15.2 %) received support from outside. For all the three groups, husbands seem to be the most common family member to support a woman candidate from the family (Table: 6.3).
Many educated young women have entered the political field, irrespective of their experience in the field. Their experience in contesting in previous elections, when there was only 33 per cent reservation, is very limited (Table: 6.4). It can be argued that reservation is one of the main forces which brought many of the young, educated female candidates into the political field or resulted in improving their political freedom.

Table: 6.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates’ experience in previous elections (Share in %)</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never Contested</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gram Panchayat</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block Panchayat</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP and BP</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary Survey 2010-11

The fact that these young women are new to the field makes them dependent on their family. In terms of support for election campaign, it was found that 83.53 per cent of the support came from within the family (Table: 6.3). Most of them had at-least one of their family members with some experience in local politics. In terms of financial support, sixty-six per cent of them were supported by their parties (against 55.5 % of males), whereas less than ten per cent of the female candidates (against 19.8 % of males) spent for themselves. For those who have the facility of reservation, particularly for SC and ST candidates and women, political parties are the major source of finance, but some of the existing candidates, mostly rich male candidates, spent for themselves.

Since they come through their families, their candidature can be seen as a useful examples to capture the impact of family’s engagement in local politics. There are situations, where women got a chance to contest and win the election, when the ward was reserved for women candidates. But in the subsequent election she was replaced by her husband as the ward became unreserved. In some other cases, women candidates replaced their husbands or relatives, but they may be replaced in the absence of reservation. On the other hand, it is the family not the individual who decides which political party to contest.
for and support. Therefore most of the candidates, particularly female candidates contested for the same party which the family is affiliated to.

In such cases, the entire process including candidature and party affiliation becomes as a family affair and presence of unique social climate finally leads to dynamic relationship between family and religion. The study found that large number of Muslim candidates from the sample gram panchayats either contested as independents (29.4 %) or affiliated to parties like IUML/INL (34.31 %) compared to other secular parties like CPI(M)/CPI (18.63 %) or INC (10.78 %). In the Coastal GP where Muslims constitute the majority of the local population, a major political party like CPI(M) did not have a party candidate to contest with party symbol, where INC had only four candidates. It seems Muslims are very reluctant to support parties like CPI(M) and the same was effectively exploited by the IUML. In one of the Coastal wards, the IUML supporting Muslims were a vast majority so the opposite alliance could not get even an independent candidate to contest against the IUML candidate. Finally, the INC workers, along with the local CPI(M) workers with whom they had some local informal alliance, found a Muslim woman from the same ward. Apparently, she was a supporter of IUML and did not know about the new alliance between INC and CPI(M) and happened to contest against IUML.

The religious groups may not appreciate any compromise on their religious or cultural identity, and therefore political parties are very conscious to identify candidates who get the maximum community support and promote them accordingly. In the case of Malappuram, there are places where the Muslim population is so high and almost all Muslim organizations/sects have an active presence. If such a seat is reserved for women, even the Muslim woman contesting for CPI(M) as a comrade in the party symbol will be using a scarf to cover her hair and keep all kinds of religious symbols. In order to absorb the maximum number of votes, political parties may keep silent about such majority feelings. It can be argued that the non-party element formed with family-religion becomes very important. There can be cases where the party cannot afford this and that can lead the person to contest as an independent supported by the party. The fact that a large number of candidates, (43.4 %) contested as independent candidates can be seen as a useful example of how such a social climate affects local politics and the political
freedom of women. A higher share of Muslim population does not seem to affect the candidature of potential candidates from other religions. On the contrary the share of Muslim candidates from the three panchayats is always lower than their share in taluk population (Table 6.5).

This can lead to a basic question, i.e. to what extent, do the family, religion or any such non-party forces dominate the local political process in Malappuram? Many of the facts discussed above suggest that non-party forces, particularly family and religion influence local politics and therefore political freedom. However, there are situations where the party forces are strong enough to dominate over the non-party factors such as caste and religious composition. For instance, one of the Coastal wards is reserved for SC candidates, but there was no SC family in the entire ward and therefore the political parties had to bring candidates from outside the ward. Thus, the Indian Union Muslim League put up a Hindu SC candidate\(^\text{10}\), who had some earlier experience as a ward member. When the public campaign was about to finish with a demonstration rally in town, the IUML supporting crowd added ‘Mohammed’ to his name and created a slogan ‘Mohammed … Zindabad’\(^\text{11}\). Incidentally, in the 2005 election the IUML candidate from the same ward got the highest lead (916) in any gram panchayat ward in Kerala.

In the case of two SC candidates who won the election against general candidates (out of the six who contested in unreserved seats) there is evidence of both party and non-party elements at work. One of them, a male candidate was a very active CPI(M) local leader whereas the other female candidate was completely new to the field, but her husband was a district leader of INC with experience in politics and election. It can be assumed that candidates’ personal engagement or family’s involvement in politics and political leadership can enable even SC/ST candidates to contest in general seats and win the election.

\(^{10}\) It was told that initially he was not interested in accepting the candidature from IUML and it was only after some negotiation with the party leadership he agreed to contest.

\(^{11}\) After listening to this, one of the bystanders shared a popular joke: even if Prophet Muhammad were to come and contest with the Quran as the symbol against a candidate with ladder (The IUML symbol), the prophet might lose the election as the majority of voters would not have looked beyond the symbols.
Table: 6.5

Distribution of total population* and candidates across major religions (Share in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Christian</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of candidates (Midland GP)</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Proportion of taluk population )</td>
<td>(69.6)</td>
<td>(28.4)</td>
<td>(2.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of candidates (Highland GP)</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Proportion of taluk population )</td>
<td>(55.5)</td>
<td>(34.8)</td>
<td>(9.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of candidates (Coastal GP)</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Proportion of taluk population )</td>
<td>(73.8)</td>
<td>(25.5)</td>
<td>(0.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Source: Primary Survey 2010-11 and Census of India (2001)

Note: *Taluk was the smallest unit for which religion-wise population figures available

The overall pattern suggests that reservation has enabled many educated young women to enter local politics and the leadership of decision making bodies, but their candidature is largely limited to the reserved seats. The study identifies three groups which accounts for nearly ninety per cent of the total female candidates who contested from the three gram panchayats. The precise role of the family differs across the three groups, but their candidature reflects the political and social affiliation of their families. It has been argued that compared to the experience of first-generation women politicians, the way in which these women are linked to their parties differs significantly. In the past, women’s mobility into the spaces of paid work and politics was ‘largely limited only to new elite women, such as the presence of the husband/male member as escort and guide, and interestingly, access to cash’ (Devika & Thampi, 2011). There are women in the current generation who do not have to go through the tensions which the old generation passed through.

6.6 The Instrumental Role of Political Freedom

The limited scope for political participation available to women is reflected in the fact that very few women expect to be elected without reservations. The question that arises now is whether the existing degree of political freedom, based on the revised policy, enhances the overall freedom of women in Kerala. The existing literature gives some
impression that the reservation for women candidates can affect the status of women and policy decisions in various ways. One of the earlier studies distinguishes this as 'reservational empowerment', implying the effectiveness of women empowerment at the initiative of the state; proved that they are capable of acquiring the qualities of a good representative (Georgekutty, 2003: 312-318). From the perspective of women who got elected through reservation, to serve as an elected woman’s representative was a positive experience as it helped them to bring ‘self-respect, respect from others and a greater capacity for social interaction’ (Getz, 2005: 157).

At the same time, there are experienced women candidates, including those who won but do not belong to the ruling parties and those who lost the current election, who were not as active as when they were in power. It was pointed out that after they are ‘elected panchayat members on the strength of reservation and become instruments of women empowerment, they evince little inclination to continue in public life when their tenure comes to an end’ (Georgekutty, 2003: 318). Though many women representatives and women leaders in the panchayats are related by family and kinship to men in politics, they have often felt the heat from men and their political visibility remains low (Kannan, 2000). Therefore, the representation in numbers does not automatically translate into equivalent influence in decision making. In many cases, the community sees the elected woman representative as inactive and largely a 'front' for her husband (Sharma, 2003). There exists a culture of 'tokenism' in the political parties providing a role for women. This has to be replaced by a genuine partnership of men and women in socio-political organisation and that might need structural change in party politics and hierarchy in favour of women (Bhaskar, 1997). It has been argued that strengthening relationships among women is a crucial aspect in identifying strategies for change that address issues that women face and only then the huge numbers of women passing through the gateway into the political arena can make any change (Getz, 2005: 164-166).

In this particular case, we may not be in a position to conclusively assess the impact of reservation on the instrumental effectiveness of political freedom on the capability of women in Malappuram. However, based on insights from field observations, we may try to explore the same. It has been found that existing political freedom does not promote
women to contest in unreserved seats and therefore their candidature was limited to the reserved seats. As a result, a woman candidate cannot contest in the same seat again, if the seat is later not reserved for women. It was observed that the sitting woman ward member, who has been elected when the ward was reserved for women, is replaced by men belonging to her party or family. In the absence of reservation, such women who have benefited from reservation earlier and served as elected representatives of local bodies need not continue in the political field and avoid contesting in unreserved seats.

Kerala’s legislative assembly election (held in 2011, April) experience is a good example to see what happens when there is no reservation. The share of women candidates was less than eight per cent of the total 971. A major party like IUML did not have a single female candidate in the list where other popular parties like INC and CPI(M) also had a small number of female candidates. The assembly election does not have such reservation policy and the same was effectively used by some of the Muslim organizations to make a point that the current situation does not force Muslim women to contest in assembly elections. They believed it was not practical to prevent Muslim women from contesting the reserved seats. Therefore, Muslim organizations considered panchayat elections as a special case to allow Muslim women in public space and introduced special circulars consisting rules and regulations for Muslim women candidates who contest in the panchayat election. This indicates that there are differences in the way Muslim organizations and community promoted their female candidates in these two elections. Such interventions will have their own impact on the political freedom of Muslim women in Kerala.

When IUML proposed one young Muslim woman from one of the Coastal wards as a candidate, she was not ready to accept the offer until she got permission from the local Imam (who leads the prayer at the Masjid and was authorized to issue ‘fatwa’, the religious law based on texts). Interestingly, she won the election with a high margin (61.54 % of total votes) and made her way to the local leadership. From such a

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12 Election Department, Government of Kerala (2011)
13 She was known for her commitment and impressive image as pious person, which may be very crucial to fetch the local support in a Muslim dominated Coastal place
background, she gradually evolved as an active ward member as it was observed during the field survey conducted later. For instance, we found her actively engaged with the forestation programmes implemented in the Coast. The local people also recognise her transformation and appreciate her for the same. Though very limited in number, such instances clearly indicate the possibility of improving the instrumental effect of reservation on women’s political freedom.

As most of the young women do not have any experience in politics and social work outside the home, it makes them dependent on their family. Once they enter the field and get proper training and support, the situation may change. Some newly elected representatives acknowledge this fact and add that they want to be active in this field. There are cases where the sitting ward member loses the current election, but participates in various kinds of activities she has been doing as an elected ward member. One of the Muslim woman candidates from the Highland GP\textsuperscript{14} explained that it was her and her family’s religious belief that inspired her to serve the public. As a previous ward member she finds the candidature as an effective way to practice what she believes, even though she has some reservations about the level up to which Muslim women can enter political life.

Those who had earlier experience and were active in local politics were preferred for higher posts like chairmanship of various standing committees. This gave them wider exposure and power in local bodies. However, it was reported by one senior elected woman representative,\textsuperscript{15} that major decisions are always taken by the local political leaders of the ruling party, and not in the panchayat office. When the panchayat president’s position is reserved for women but the ruling party chooses a strong male candidate as vice-president. He is expected to support the newly elected female president (often without previous experience) but in many cases the strong male vice-president take over the control. As a result, the role of elected women representatives seems passive. It

\textsuperscript{14}She has been very active in public domain from 1996, and she finds some group dynamics among the Muslim sects as the reason for the failure.

\textsuperscript{15}Apparently, she has been a gram panchayat president earlier and a ward member for a long period and a retired school teacher from a family with strong political lineage.
was found that two female candidates did not know who spent money towards their election expenditure, because their husbands were doing everything for them. One of them happened to be the wife of a senior party leader and the other was a Gulf-wife\textsuperscript{16} (whose husband is a Gulf-migrant).

Some of the earlier experience of elected representatives suggest that even if there are women representatives from various parties, the special programmes and fund reserved for women empowerment or targeted towards women are underutilised. The previous experiences show many instances where the elected women members are not a critical mass to influence the local policies and gender mainstreaming (Vijayan, 2007). The fact that they represent different political parties with their own interest also plays a critical role in dividing them. One can expect that a sharp increase in numbers may change this situation, as the equal share may enable the women representatives to stay together. If women representatives from various political parties and social background are able to unite and negotiate for causes that address the problems of women, their political freedom will increase. In such situations, the improvement in constitutive freedom will be followed by gradual improvement in instrumental political freedom. This gives an impression that the reservation may change the nature of local party dynamics, because it brings more educated young women candidates into the political field. Therefore, this study recognises reservation as a necessary step for empowering women in enlarging their overall choices, particularly in places like Malappuram which experiences a unique social climate and party dynamics.

6.7 Conclusion

It has been found that the reservation policy has resulted in improving constitutive political freedom of educated, young women in Kerala, but the instrumental effectiveness of reservation based political freedom is not that evident. Reservation has been the only factor that enabled many educated young women to participate in the decision making of local bodies. These young women have advantages of the mass education-led growth

\textsuperscript{16} She reported that her husband came to Kerala and went back after supporting her during the election and she expects him to come back again, for submitting the documents related to her election expenditure to the authority
which Kerala has experienced from 1980’s. Such an increase in participation of women in decentralised planning can be seen as an improvement in the existing degree of political freedom. However, women’s candidature is limited in those seats reserved for women. It can be argued that the existing political freedom of women, which is essentially constituted by the reservation, does not promote them to contest in unreserved seats. The study identifies three groups which account for nearly ninety per cent of the total female candidates who contested from the three gram panchayats. The political parties might consider the three groups, as a reserve of potential women candidates in future and that may improve their chances to enter into politics. Several factors, including the reservation, age, education, family support etc. make these three groups a pool of suitable candidates for the panchayat election.

For educated young women, especially for the non-earning homemakers, the family’s engagement in local politics and party leadership is more crucial than their own engagement and personal experience in political activism. Their family decides which party to contest for and therefore they contest for the same party which their family is affiliated to. The dynamics between the party forces and non-party forces such as family and religion has produced a large number of independent candidates in all the three panchayats. This affects the ability of a potential woman candidate to stand alone and contest a local body election which reflects the prevailing degree of political freedom. Reservation has brought many female leaders into the political sphere and to leading positions of local bodies in Kerala. The increase in number to an equal share in total representatives can change this situation as it may help them to organise themselves and stand together for the benefit of women representatives.

These findings suggest that the revised policy has been the factor that constituted the degree of political freedom to the extent that many educated young women entered in to the local politics and decision making bodies. At the same time, the instrumental effectiveness of reservation based political freedom is not strong enough to encourage young women to contest in unreserved seats. In place like Malappuram, where Muslims accounts for the major share of the population, a large number of Muslim candidates either contested as independent or affiliated to parties like IUML/INL compared to other
secular parties like CPI(M)/CPI or INC. In such a unique social climate and party
dynamics, the existing political freedom need not encourage a Muslim woman to contest
for secular parties. The improvement in constitutive political freedom with a sharp
increase in women’s presence from thirty three per cent to fifty per cent can eventually
lead to a corresponding improvement in its instrumental aspect and may change the
situation in the coming years. As it was observed in the survey conducted later, there are
instances to suggest that reservation gradually transform them into very effective local
leaders. The unique cultural combination, the Muslim majority, remains a problem in
making any further generalisation. Whether the existing degree of political freedom
through reservation is lasting and meaningful in the long-term is an open question.