



A study by Sampark

Presence of women MLAs of the State Legislature of Maharashtra on their Facebook pages: Observations

March 2021

While the Social Media is (not unfairly) accused of spreading rumours, abetting communal divides and rancour, as well as of propaganda for putting a particular party in power, it is our responsibility as citizens to assess how our elected representatives use these fora.

A study of the Social Media of the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of Maharashtra was undertaken with this express purpose.

A scrutiny of the Facebook posts of women MLAs during the Covid-affected year 2020.

Summary

1. Social Media, a win – win situation

Politicians find social media beneficial for building a connect with their constituencies, inspiring their followers, widening their circles of influence, building their public image, etc. Similarly, the general public also benefits from social media by connecting with these political figures who otherwise remain largely inaccessible.

2. Two objectives of the Study

- a. Managing the content of their Social Media has become inevitable for politicians and has found its way in their daily office works. They lend so much importance to this element in their work, that many politicians have outsourced the management of their social media to private professionals or media management companies.
- b. While the Social Media is (not unfairly) blamed for spreading rumours, abetting communal divides and rancour, and propaganda for putting a particular party in power, it is our responsibility as citizens to assess how our elected representatives use these fora.

3. Scope of the Study

To understand the priorities, work and interest areas of the 24 women MLAs in Maharashtra's State Legislature through their Facebook posts during the Covid-affected year 2020. However, we have not personally verified the events and works described in these Facebook posts.

4. Conclusion

- The three women MLAs who have received more than 1 lakh likes and followers are Dr. Bharati Lavekar, Shweta Mahale and Praniti Shinde.
- Dr. Bharati Lavekar, MLA, Versova constituency has topped the rank with page likes and followers exceeding 3 lakhs.
- Maximum posts are about special days celebrations, birth and death anniversaries, at 71%
- Posts related to employment/livelihoods are least in number at 0.072%
- Percentages of posts on other topics
 - Events in the constituency 6.62%, Health (Covid) 5.06%, Party/Government policies, campaigns related 3.64%, Charitable work undertaken in the constituency 4.31%, Women's issues 1.59%, Agriculture 1.43%, Education 1.29%, Children 0.51%, Own performance in assembly sessions 0.45% and Migration 0.22%

- Maximum posts related to the assembly sessions are by Sulabha Khodke, followed by Pratibha Dhanorkar.
- Maximum posts related to children are by Yashomati Thakur and those related to education are by Varsha Gaikwad, not surprisingly, since they are the Ministers of the respective portfolios.
- Although Saroj Ahire is the President of the Legislative Committee for Women and Child Welfare, there is hardly any content on her pages related to these issues, which is unexpected.
- Maximum posts related to women's issues are by Namita Mundada followed by Seema Hire. Maximum posts related to agriculture are by Namita Mundada followed by Meghana Sakore-Bordikar.
- Women MLAs seem to be more focussed upon broadcasting various events, programs, celebrations, campaigns, etc. The reality or situation in their constituencies does not necessarily get reflected through these posts. And the events posted by them barely have any content related to the issues of women, children, education or other health issues during Covid.
- One can certainly expect that as elected representatives their presence on Social Media needs to be more informed.

Presence of women MLAs of the State Legislature of Maharashtra on their Facebook pages: Observations

Introduction

Presence on social media has become imperative for personalities functioning in the public domain for it is the only means to reach out to a large populace. Moreover, political figures have to constantly be in touch with their constituencies, inspire their followers and counter the attacks of the opposition, in addition to widening their circle of influence, building their public image, and such. What better source to achieve this than the use of social media? And for the common person, politicians who are otherwise elusive, absent or visible only once in 5 years during elections, seem directly accessible albeit on computer or mobile screens. Although meeting them in person could be almost next to impossible, summoning them to attention seems to be easier on social media. Here, they can be lauded, criticised or even abused. Contents on pages of political leaders are scrutinized not only by their own followers but also by the opposition. Thus, the social media is a win-win situation for all concerned.

We, as Sampark study the proceedings of the State Legislature of Maharashtra, the Vidhan Sabha, provide relevant information to the MLAs to facilitate meaningful discussions in the assembly sessions on important issues of women, children, education and health. In our interactions with the MLAs, we realized that managing their social media has emerged as one of the important functions of their routine office work. These elected representatives often entrust this responsibility to private professionals or media companies. We felt that in order to get a better understanding of their priorities and their interests, as citizens it is important for us to learn about the kind of information that these representatives post on their social media. When social media is quite justifiably being accused of disseminating wrongful information, adding fuel to communal divides, pushing for putting a specific party in power, it is our responsibility as citizens to monitor how our elected representatives make use of this volatile but powerful tool. With this express purpose we decided to study the social media use of the elected representatives in Maharashtra. We started with the content posted on Facebook pages of women MLAs in the year 2020.

2020 was a year spent under the ominous shadow of Covid-19. The common people needed all possible support from the Government, the administration, the elected representatives. The contents on the Facebook pages of MLAs give a fair idea about the extent to which this need of the common people was met. Due to the limited scope of our study, we have not been able to verify on the ground, about the authenticity of the events and works mentioned in the Facebook posts.

There were 24 women MLAs in the State Assembly formed after the elections in 2019. They cover 16 districts and represent around 67 lakhs voters.

Following is the constituency and party-wise list of these MLAs.

BJP

1. Manda Mhatre- Belapur
2. Manisha Chaudhry – Dahisar
3. Vidya Thakur – Goregaon
4. Bharati Lovekar- Versova
5. Madhuri Misal – Parvati
6. Mukta Tilak – Kasba Peth
7. Devayani Farande – Central Nashik
8. Seema Hire - Nashik West
9. Shweta Mahale – Chikhali
10. Meghana Bordikar – Jintur
11. Namita Mundada – Kej
12. Monika Rajale – Shevgaon

Cong

13. Varsha Gaikwad – Dharavi
14. Praniti Shinde – Central Solapur
15. Pratibha Dhanorkar – Varora
16. Sulabha Khodke – Amravati
17. Yashomati Thakur – Tivasa

NCP

18. Saroj Ahire – Deolali
19. Sumantai Patil – Tasgaon-Kavthemahankal *
20. Aditi Tatkare- Shriwardhan

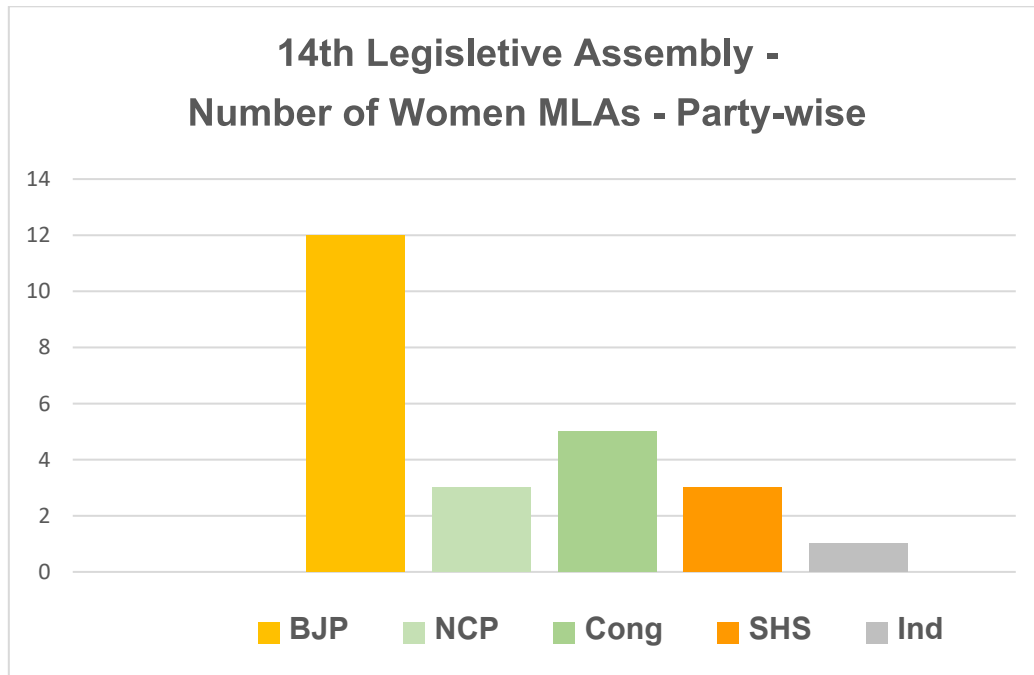
Shiv Sena

21. Yamini Jadhav – Byculla

- 22.Lata Sonawane – Chopda
- 23.Geeta Jain – Meera-Bhayandar

Independent

- 24.Manjula Gavit – Sakri
- BJP – 12, Congress – 5, NCP and Shiv Sena – 3 each, Independent – 1



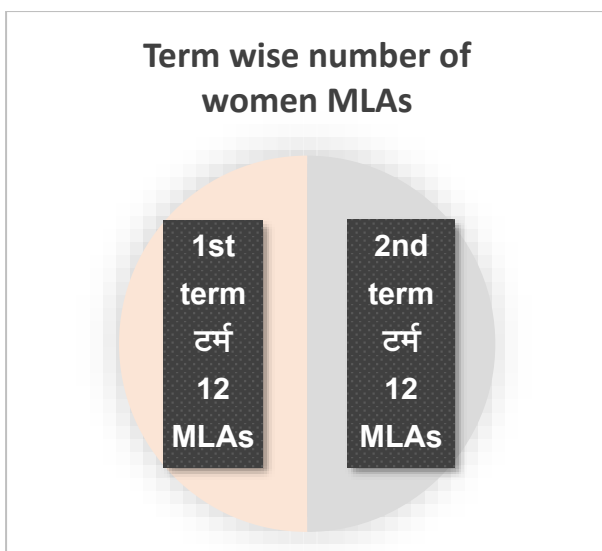
All these 24 women have presence on their own Facebook pages.

Half of them are first-time MLAs. These are:

Sulabha Khodke, Yamini Jadhav, Shweta Mahale, Latabai Sonawane, Saroj Ahire, Meghana Sakore-Bordikar, Namita Mundada, Mukta Tilak, Aditi Tatkare, Pratibha Dhanorkar, Geeta Jain, Manjula Gavit

The others have been re-elected as MLAs for the second time. These are:

Manda Mhatre, Manisha Chaudhary, Varsha Gaikwad, Vidya Thakur, Devayani Farande, Seema Hire, Madhuri Misal, Monika Rajale, Praniti Shinde, Sumantai Patil, Yashomati Thakur, Dr. Bharati Lovekar



The three women MLAs who have received more than 1 lakh likes and followers are Dr. Bharati Lavekar, Shweta Mahale and Praniti Shinde.

Dr. Bharati Lavekar, MLA from the Versova constituency has topped the rank with page likes and followers exceeding 3 lakhs. She is also the one with maximum number of posts.

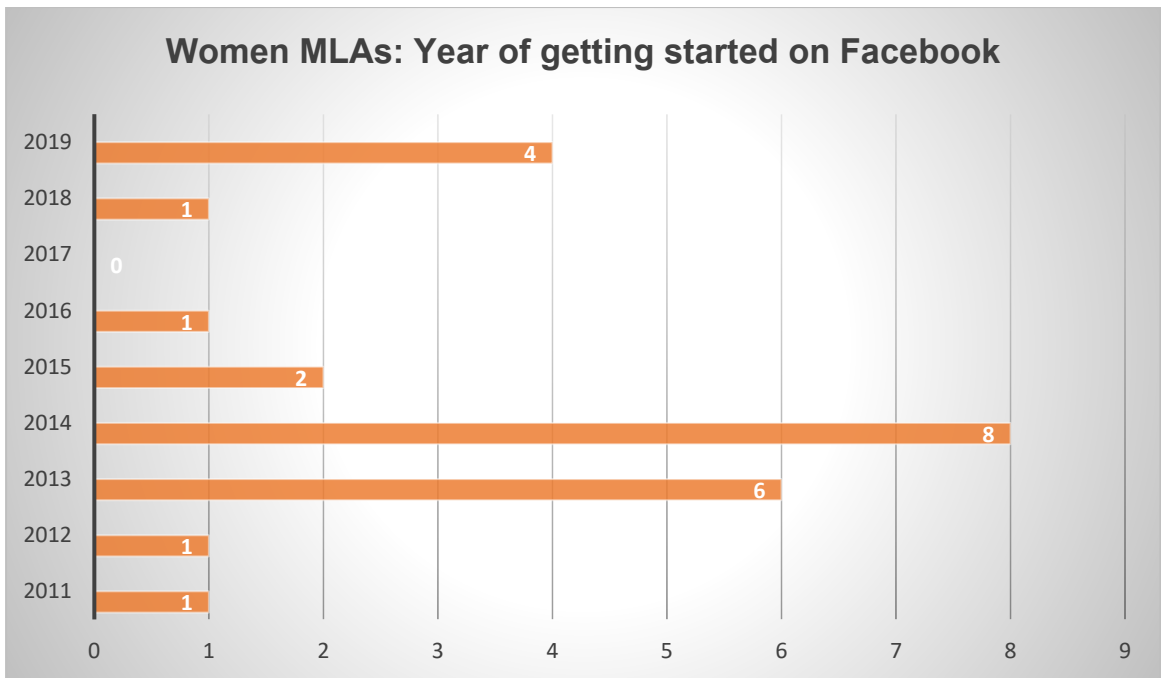
Year of getting started on Facebook

2014 was a year that saw great upheaval in Indian politics. The strategy of using social media by political parties, appointing professionals to manage social media, trained teams for posting content on the social media, was all seen for the first time in India during the 2014 national elections. It has now well been accepted as the new normal.

Eight out of the 24 women MLAs, namely, Yashomati Thakur, Sulabha Khodke, Manda Mhatre, Dr. Bharati Lovekar, Vidya Thakur, Devayani Farande, Mukta Tilak and Shweta Mahale entered the Facebook domain in 2014.

However, prior to that, Seema Hire (2011), Manisha Chaudhari (2012), and Varsha Gaikwad, Praniti Shinde, Madhuri Misal and Meghana Bordikar (all in 2013) had already opened their own Facebook pages.

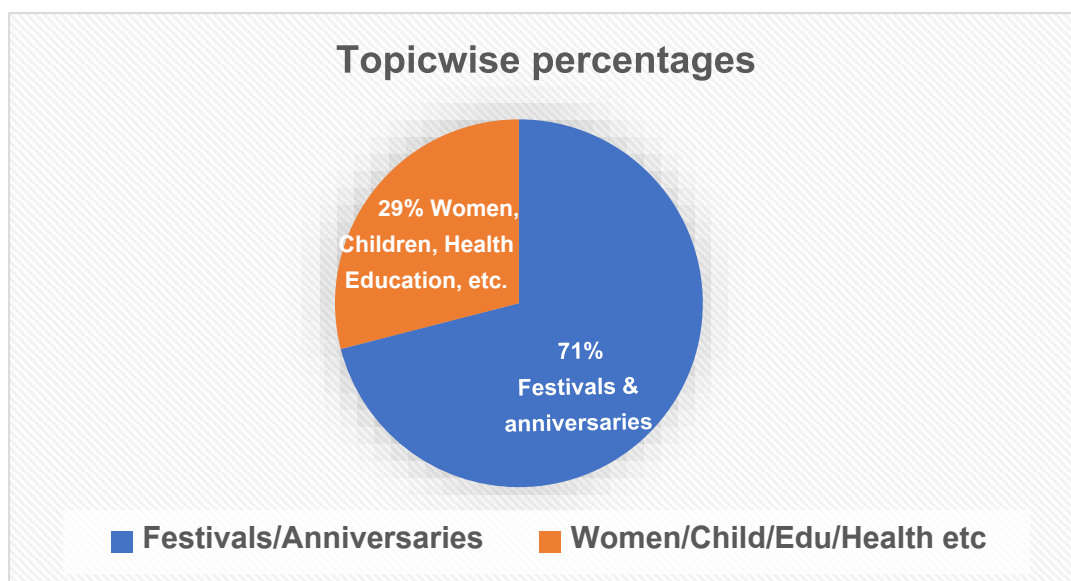
2019 was the election year. The MLAs to open their account on Facebook in this year were Pratibha Dhanorkar, Manjula Gavit, Yamini Jadhav, Suman Patil.



A host of photos, videos always accompany the textual content of the Facebook pages of elected representatives.

The posts can be divided into three sections with respect to the topics in the content.

1. About their own work- These include visits to the constituency, meetings with people, openings, celebrations, formal meetings with officials, decisions made through their efforts, points presented in the Legislative Assembly sessions, etc. For better clarity, we further classified these posts under sub-headings like charity, Legislative Assembly deliberations, Health, Education, Agriculture, Livelihoods, Migrants and Migration, Women, Children.
2. Posts in support of party campaigns or leaders, supporting or criticising a policy.
3. Posts highlighting important days, anniversaries of political figures, days of national significance, cultural or religious festivals, etc.



The percentages of topic-wise classification of the FB posts of women MLAs is as follows:

Content topics and average percentages

Sr No.	Topic	Average percentage
1	Festivals, anniversaries, Special Days, Best wishes	71%
2	Events in the constituency	6.62%
3	Health (Covid)	5.06%
4	Government or Party policies : Support or Critique	3.64%
5	Charity	4.32%
6	Women	1.59%
7	Agriculture	1.43%
8	Education	1.29%
9	Children	0.51%
10	Own actions in the Legislative Assembly	0.45%
11	Migrants/Migration	0.22
12	Livelihoods	0.072%

Festivals and anniversaries

Posts related to festivals and anniversaries were found to exceed all other topics on the FB pages of all 24 women MLAs. 70% of all content falls under the classification of festivals and anniversaries. Which implies that the remaining 30% reflect posts related to actual work.

On the FB pages of Geeta Jain, Lata Sonawane and Manjula Gavit, more than 90% content is related to festivals and anivarsaris and celebratory occasions, while on Lata Sonawane's page they are at a minimum which is 31%. Latatai, not being very active, has minimum activity and posts on her page. On Dr. Bharati Lovekar's page these posts add up to 41% while the remaining 51% comprises of posts related to her own work in the constituency, Party's campaigns and support to Party leaders.

Charity

During this period, elected representatives did a lot of charity in terms of providing emergency relief to people. Such work appears with illustrations of photos and videos on the Facebook pages of all 24 women MLAs. This includes distribution of masks, sanitizers, food grains, essential commodities, etc. Food distribution is described as *Annadaan*. Yamini Jadhav implemented an activity called "Community Refrigerator" for the poor and impoverished sections in her constituency. Dr Bharati Lavekar distributed approximately 1 lakh sanitary pads to the women and young girls in her constituency, while Monika Rajale distributed PPE Kits to Doctors/Nurses/Police personnel. Praniti Shinde purchased an X-ray machine for a hospital using the MLA fund, while Manda Mhatre purchased 3 ambulances and Aditi Tatkare a cardiac ambulance from their MLA funds respectively. It has been recorded that Sumantai Patil donated her own salary to the Government for the treatment of Corona patients.

Performance in the Legislative Assembly

It is easy to learn about the questions asked or issues raised by the MLAs during the Legislative Assembly sessions by accessing their social media. We noted the posts shared on their FB pages related to their performance in the assembly sessions. These posts barely added up to half a percent of the total posts shared. The budget session was in force when Covid-19 struck. This session was suddenly adjourned on the 15th of March. During the same session, a resolution titled "Women empowerment and sustainable development" was tabled in the Legislative Assembly as well as the Legislative Council on the 5th of March. The MLAs discussed and expressed their views on the same. Shweta Mahale, Devayani Farande, Pratibha Dhanorkar, Sumantai Patil and Sulabha Khodke have mentioned about this resolution on their FB pages.

There were two more assembly sessions in the year 2020, lasted for a mere two days each and had omitted the Question Hour. Thus, there were hardly any posts on the MLA's pages about the deliberations in these sessions or the questions asked by them. Maximum posts about the deliberations in the assembly are found on the FB page of Sulabha Khodke, followed by Pratibha Dhanorkar's page. Sulabha Khodke has posted about the points that she made in the session regarding the empty posts in Amravati Civil Hospital and regarding her demand that Amravati should be granted a Medical College. Pratibha Dhanorkar has posted about the issues that she raised in the session, which were, violence against women, a stricter legislation to prevent child-marriages, resolution of the issue of un-aided schools, implementation of the *Abhay* (no fear) scheme by the transport ministry and providing electricity to farmers 24X7.

Praniti Shinde's page reflects issues like banning heavy vehicles' traffic from Solapur city, Home guards to be absorbed within the Government's cadre, problems of the power loom and textiles sector which she raised in the session, while Shweta Mahale's page reflects the issue that she raised of rehabilitation of the evictees of *Pantakli* Dam in her Chikhali constituency. Devayani Farande's page tells us how she raised her demand for Pune Municipal Corporation to receive its dues from YES Bank at the earliest, while Meghana Bordikar's page tells us how she raised the demands for increase in the number of buses for girls from the Manav Vikas Mission, Gymnasiums for women, Trauma care, solid waste management, *Yeldari* bridge, Jintur-Parbhani road, in the assembly session. Monika Rajale has shared on her FB page, the demand that she made in the assembly for allocation of funds towards Zilla Parishad Schools and development of Tribal settlements/hamlets.

Namita Mundada's page shows her demands for solving the case of rape on school-going girl in Ambejogai, the case of theft in Bhagwangad, as well as for hospitals for women and for mental health, resolving the long-pending issues in the building works department, and compensation to farmers affected by hailstorm. Manjula Gavit's page shows how she addressed the issues of teachers' appointments in tribal schools, questions related to the PESA Act as well as problems of 80 tribal villages. Madhuri Misal has shared on her page about her demand raised in the session for improved transport facilities in Pune city including development of the Sinhagad-Khadakvasla road. Yamini Jadhav's page talks about her demands to prioritize hiring of locals in jobs, fund allocation for repairs of BIT chawls, for basic infrastructure in Municipal

Hospitals and the injustice faced by substitution employees in the Institutions falling under the Directorate of Research and Education.

Health

2020 was the year affected by the Covid -19 outbreak. Thus, any other health issue besides Covid has seldom been mentioned. This category adds up to over 5% of the total posts.

The pandemic situation demanded help in the form of information related to the disease, about government regulations and systems, providing food and food-grains to those who lost their livelihoods due to the pandemic, providing masks, sanitizers to the poorer sections, providing facilities for those indulging in reverse migration to their villages on foot, etc. What is the actual picture?

All the pages have information about the care to be taken in Covid times. Out of the 24, Varsha Gaikwad and Yashomati Thakur being Ministers, their pages also talk about various regulations issued by the Government.

The page of Yashomati Thakur, Minister of Women and Child Development, mentions the distribution of automatic sanitizer dispenser in her constituency, implementation of campaigns like “My family my responsibility”, “I am my own protector”, directing the administration to make Remdesivir injections available at a reasonable price, demand to fill the empty posts in the Health Department, awarding insurance policies worth 50 Lakhs to Covid-warriors - ASHA workers.

The page of Education Minister Varsha Gaikwad talks about her surveying the Municipal Hospitals in the constituency, admitting Covid patients in hospitals, and having issued various instructions to the Municipal administration. Mukta Tilak has posted the daily updated status of Covid with numbers and geographical distribution through maps of her constituency. Devayani Farande’s page mentions felicitating the volunteers of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh who arranged for the disposal of unclaimed dead bodies.

Women and Child

Report of a study conducted by Sampark in 2019 shows that despite the fact that women and children form a large part of the total population, problems related to them are seldom discussed within the policy-making body of the State. The Facebook pages of women MLAs toed the same line. Posts related to women are just over 1 percent while those related to children are less than 1 percent. The maximum number of posts related to children are, unsurprisingly, by Yashomati Thakur, being the Minister

for Women and Child Development. But on the FB page of Saroj Ahire, the President of the Legislative Committee for Women and Child Welfare, there is hardly any content related to these issues, which is unexpected. Yashomati Thakur's page mentions about her instructions to issue a caste-certificate to orphan children at the time of their release from Children's Homes to facilitate their access to Government schemes. It also mentions the *Ek Ghaas Mayecha* campaign that she implemented for poor and homeless children in her constituency, during the pandemic.

Maximum posts on women's issues are by Namita Mundada followed by posts from Seema Hire. The rest of the women MLAs have indeed made a mention about women and children by virtue of celebration of days like the birth anniversary of Savitribai Phule, or Children's Day or Anti Child Labour Day. Besides this, there is condemnation of the Hathras case, statements to stop violence against women during Covid times, a meeting with the local Police Officials, *Haldi-kumkum* functions, and felicitation of a select few women from the constituency on account of the *Navratri* festival, mentioned on their Facebook pages.

There is a mention of Yashomati Thakur having celebrated the International Anti- Women's Violence Day, as well as having announced a relief of Rs.5000/- for sex workers by the government. The practice of celebrating new births and felicitating new mothers in the constituency by Dr. Bharati Lovekar has also been mentioned on her Facebook page. Her page also shows her active participation in the cleanliness drive that she conducted in her constituency.

Manda Mhatre has demanded installation of CC TVs in all Municipal Schools as a precautionary measure after a case of molestation of school girls in a Municipal school. There is mention of Yamini Jadhav having organized a workshop to train women in gas stove repair as well as of Geeta Jain having organized a women's cricket match in their respective constituencies. Seema Hire demanded that Banks should be directed to refrain from insisting on repayment of loans from women's self-help groups during the Covid period.

Praniti Shinde's FB page reflects her demand of starting a *Beedi* factory by women, a meeting with Home Minister Anil Deshmukh regarding the Shakti Bill for women, as well as organizing a viewing of the episode of *Kaun Banega Karodpati* in which Nandini Madanwale from Solapur had participated, for the residents in her constituency.

Education

The content on Education mostly comprises of best wishes for students appearing for the SSC exams and congratulatory messages for students having passed the HSC exams. The maximum posts related to Education are found on the FB page of Education Minister Varsha Gaikwad followed by the FB page of Sulabha Khodke. Sulabhatai has demanded to arrange for ST buses to bring back students studying in other cities than their homes during the Covid period. Seema Hire has demanded that private educational institutions should not bother students for payment of fees during the Covid period.

Agriculture

Untimely rainfall during the Covid period exacerbated the emergency caused due to the pandemic. On the FB pages of all the women MLAs in rural area, one can find mention of having visited the affected areas, having facilitated the Panchanamas and efforts taken to ensure that farmers are compensated. Maximum posts related to Agriculture are by Namita Mundada, followed by Meghana Sakore- Bordikar. There is a mention of protests staged by the BJP MLAs against the State Government on behalf of the farmers, as well as by the Congress MLAs against the Central Government.

One can sense Meghana Sakore-Bordikar's concern about farmers, her perceptivity in grasping problems, and her strong rapport with rural women, from the posts on her FB page. She has presented the problems of marigold producers. There is also a mention about a protest staged for compensating soybean producers.

There is a mention of Yashomati Thakur, Sulabha Khodke and Pratibha Dhanorkar having participated in the Farmers' Tractor Rally against the Central government, their visits to families of farmers who committed suicides, their participation in the signature campaign against the Black Act for farmers.

Namita Mundada's page reflects the protest staged against the State government for granting price rise to milk producers, inauguration of the sugarcane harvest season, and demand for floating a tender for transformer repairs to support the farmers in her constituency who had to frequently face the problem of pump transformer breakdown, letter to Rehabilitation Minister Vijay Vaddettivar to demand relief fund for the displaced farmers of Manjra project, demand for subsidies to farmers for horticulture, onion storage structures and farm reservoirs. Manjula Gavit has mentioned about her efforts to facilitate compensation from the government to heirs of victims of natural disasters.

There is a mention on Sulabha Khodke's page about having facilitated access to loans for 1 lakh 32 thousand affected farmers in her constituency.

Livelihoods and Migration

Hordes of people were rendered jobless in the year 2020. And many of them who reverse migrated from the cities to villages survived with the help of the MNREGA and the EGS programmes. References to the issue of livelihood were found on the FB pages of Praniti Shinde, Pratibha Dhanorkar and Sulabha Khodke.

It has been mentioned on their FB pages that Praniti Shinde and Sulabha Khodke were instrumental in making available a relief fund of Rs.3000/- per month from the government to the registered labourers in their constituencies. Pratibhatai has demanded to initiate works in the Forest areas under the MNREGA scheme for creation of livelihoods.

Several of them have gone on record with the mention of having facilitated the return journey of the migrants from their constituencies back to their villages. Meghana Bordikar wrote a letter to the Women and Child Development department seeking help for women and children accompanying the male migrant labourers walking back home. Manisha Chaudhary distributed food to the migrants traveling back home by railway.

Varsha Gaikwad helped those reverse migrants traveling from Dharavi to their home states of Rajasthan, Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana. Vidya Thakur provided 1800 reverse migrants from Uttar Pradesh in her constituency with masks and sanitizers and facilitated their travel back home in the *Shramik* Railway.

Manjula Gavit helped the labourers from Sakri who were stranded in Pune for two months, to return back to Sakri. Yamini Jadhav facilitated the travel back home of 1,700 labourers from her constituency to Jaunpur by putting them on the *Shramik* Railway. Praniti Shinde helped the labourers from Kerala to return back to their State.

BJP Protests

The BJP staged several protests during the Covid period. Accusing the State Government of failure in handling the Covid situation, they staged the *Mera Angan, Mera Ranangan* campaign. The BJP women MLAs' FB pages clearly reflect their participation in these and other protests staged by the BJP like "Open the Temples", "CM, pay the rent", protest against increased electricity bills, protest against the arrest of Arnab Goswami, and such others. They have shared all the speeches by the Prime Minister. There are posts about having celebrated the Prime Minister's birthday as

well as of having participated in the Thali beating, lamp lighting campaigns at his behest. The Modi government completed the first year of its second term which also finds a mention on their FB pages. All the women MLAs have recorded their support to the Maratha reservation movement. Commemoration of the Congress's Establishment day as well as of Rahul Gandhi's birthday found their place on the FB pages of a couple of Congress women MLAs.

Conclusion

This small study elicited the fact that women MLAs are more focused upon celebration of various events such as festivals and anniversaries besides giving publicity to campaigns carried out by them. This does not bring forth much about the ground reality or problems in their constituencies. Moreover, the celebrations described on their FB pages seldom mention issues of women and children, education, other health issues during the Covid period, etc. One can strongly expect that as elected representatives their presence on Social Media needs to be more informed.

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