National Seminar on
Women in Panchayat Raj
held on 27-29th April 1995 at Bangalore

Women in Panchayat Raj :

Perspectives from Different States

Uma Resource Centre
Institute of Social Studies Trust
No.42, Sree Shyla, 15th Cross,
4th Temple Street, Malleswaram
BANGALORE 560 003

Rs 250/-

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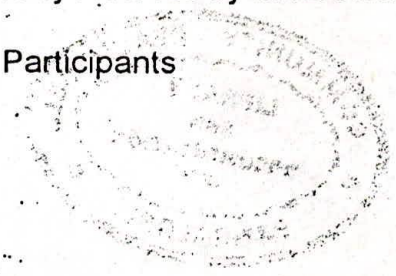

WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN DIFFERENT STATES:

A STUDY IN CONTRAST

Introduction

This report presents research studies on the situation of women Panchayat members, carried out in eight states, under the aegis of the UMA project. They were carried out over a period of about four months and were presented at a national seminar organised by ISST in April 1995 at Bangalore. While ISST has been engaged in studying the situation in Karnataka, groups in seven states were approached to undertake field based studies on a representative sample of women members. Most of the groups approached combine considerable field experience with a deep understanding of gender issues and as such the studies reflect not only the brief time span over which they have been conducted but also the rich insights gathered over several years of effort in the field.

State	Organisation	Represented By
Himachal Pradesh	SUTRA	Subash Mendapurkar
Maharashtra	Stree Aadhar Kendra	Neelam Gorhe
Orissa	Institute for Socio-Economic Development	Balaji Pandey, Kamala Mohapatra
West Bengal	Development Dialogue	Abhijit Dasgupta Ruma Banerjee
Tamil Nadu	Pondicherry Science Forum	Sudha Sundararaman

Individual/Groups

Rajasthan-Informal Network of Activists, Kavita Srivastav.
Kerala-Radha, Institute of Management in Government.

Contrasts and Commonalities Across States

By end 1994, Panchayat elections had been held in 17 states. A few states had held their elections before the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. However, seats had been reserved for women, a reasonable number (30%) in Orissa and Maharashtra,

token reservation for women in Himachal Pradesh (one out of a five member Gram Panchayat, two out of ten). The fact remained that thousands of women had been elected to the Panchayats. There were, however, fascinating variations between states. Not only in the social contexts but in the political scenarios faced by women representatives. We knew for instance, that in backward, tradition-bound Rajasthan, women had come out in large numbers to vote, to canvass for other women, to contest in elections. Most of the activists in one NGO (SWRC in Tilonia) had quit their regular jobs to contest in the elections. But, in equally tradition-bound Himachal Pradesh, with sparsely populated villages scattered over a predominantly hilly terrain, 'consensus' was the operative word. A contest between two women candidates brought dishonour to the village, claimed the men whose favourite pastime seemed to be choosing acceptable women candidates for their Panchayats. In West Bengal, where there is a close relationship between party and Panchayat, how were the women (for whom 30% of the seats had been reserved in the May 1993 Panchayat polls) faring? Was the leftist pre-occupation with class inequalities subsuming those based on gender? Kerala, the most advanced state in the country when you look at standard indicators for women's development; Kerala, with its history of matrilinearity and matrilocality and a people obsessed with politics, provided valuable insights into the possible future for women representatives. What next, after women representatives become articulate and aware as they are in Kerala? And harking back to the past, we looked at Tamil Nadu which is still dodging holding the Panchayat elections. Did women remember the Panchayats at all, did they see themselves participating actively in them? At ISST, we have been studying the doyen of women's reservation - Karnataka - for the past few years and juxtaposed our learning here with what we heard about other states. Maharashtra was an entirely different cup of tea with its history of a vibrant women's movement and progressive thinking. Orissa, again, is backward; the condition of women there is nothing to write home about. And yet it was the first state to hold elections that brought about 28,068 women in the Panchayats in 1992. At the time of printing this report, panchayats in Orissa have been dissolved by the new state legislature under the flimsiest of pretexts.[1]

From this varied "panchayatscape" in different parts of the country, UMA sought to consolidate a body of knowledge and opinion which would be the springboard for further action to strengthen women representatives. The twin objectives of the Resource Centre of networking and providing a forum for interaction between different groups were also fulfilled.

Approaches to Studying Elected Women Representatives

While a set of guidelines was suggested to the groups, the details of approach and methodology were left to each group. It would have been ideal if a larger number of states could have been covered. That was not possible in the time available. Fortunately, however,

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1. "Orissa to Dissolve All Panchayats Bodies", *Deccan Herald* (Bangalore), 31 July, 1995

the eight chosen gave a fairly good regional representation. Different approaches to the study have highlighted a gamut of experiences. For example, the Rajasthan paper is mainly about the elections to the Panchayats from the woman's point of view. People's narratives have been taken into account, case studies of candidates were documented by local workers who had intimate knowledge of the candidates, their families and all the nuances of the contest. The area of study covers eleven districts. Interviews have also been conducted of three mass-based organisations, one literacy network, six voluntary agencies and one government programme in these districts. The Tamil Nadu study acts as a control experiment, highlighting awareness levels about Panchayats in the absence of elections and presents effective ways of eliciting free and frank opinions from women about development issues. The study is based on a series of workshops conducted in three districts of Tamil Nadu, focussed group interviews as well as through the use of questionnaires.

The Maharashtra study of a state with a vibrant women's movement, suggests strategies and tactics to overcome the obstacles to women's participation. It also highlights the problems that arise when there are constant countervailing pressures to resist disparities and injustice based on gender. The Himachal paper is an indepth study not only about the practical problems faced by elected women representatives, but also presents a critique of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act. The Karnataka study emphasises the crucial role played by supportive networks for the elected women representatives. It has attempted a preliminary analysis of the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act looking for errors of omission and commission that exacerbate the difficulties of elected women representatives. It is hoped that this will lead to a debate on the gender sensitivity of the various state acts. While experts are busy examining the various state acts from other angles - legal, elected representative - bureaucracy relationship, devolution of power to local bodies and so on, little attention has been focussed this far on giving the Acts a feminist perspective. This is a critical exercise if meaningful participation of women members is to be ensured and if the Panchayat bodies are to set trends towards value-based politics.

The Kerala study is more in the nature of a backgrounder and has been presented along with the results of a field study in and around Trivandrum by the UMA Research Team. The discussions at the seminar on the Kerala study led to a serious debate on the extent to which women could actually become "practitioners" of political power and decision-making. The standard development indicators (literacy, education, sex ratio, job access etc.) are far more favourable to women in Kerala than in the rest of the country. Women had considerable socio-cultural power in Kerala until a few decades ago because of the unique system of matrilinearity and matrilocality which operated, however, under peculiar and regressive caste-based traditions. But the system did succeed in placing Kerala women in a relative position of advantage in comparison with other Indian women. The practices of matrilinearity and matrilocality declined from the middle of the century due to various legislations as well as due to pressures of modern living, a shift from joint to nuclear families and so on. Power was vested in Kerala women in a different guise, as political power, when the District Council Act reserved 20% of the seats for women. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments

ensure women's access to political power. In general, women in Kerala are more aware, articulate and literate than women in other parts of the country. Yet they continue to be dominated and deprived in the political sphere. These aspects have been discussed in Section I of the UMA Occasional Paper Series No.5 What next, when women representatives become articulate and aware?

The West Bengal and Orissa papers are also supported by field based studies conducted by partnering NGOs. The Orissa survey covered elected women representatives from five districts - Cuttack (coastal Orissa), Phulbani (southern Tribal), Angul (central Orissa), Bolangir (western Orissa) and Keonjhar (northern Orissa). In West Bengal, three districts were chosen - Dinajpur, Bhirbum and Murshidabad - and the experiences of fifty women members recorded.

Issues for Debate and Agendas for Action

This section presents the issues debated during the three days of the national seminar and the agendas for action suggested by the participants . The occasional papers which describe the research papers from the different states as well as the rich discussions on them are presented with this report.

Perceptions of Women's Participation: Give them a small wedge and they will push open the door...

If the expectation is that women will play the role of responsible, well-informed, principled and articulate public figures, it is asking for too much too soon. In the first place, hardly any politician in the country - male or female - would answer to this description. All the studies reveal that many women are proxy candidates, they are not able to make their presence felt at meetings, that they are ill informed about procedures and functions of the Panchayats. With the odds stacked against them, this is hardly surprising. What is surprising is the fact that any form of facilitation be it short term (as in the trainings given by SUTRA, Stree Aadhar Kendra, ISST and other programmes including government sponsored programmes) or long term (as in the case of Mahila Samakhya, the WDP or the NLM) women undergo a remarkable and rapid transformation and make spirited attempts to assert themselves. This has been reiterated in several of the papers. Give them a small wedge and they will push open the door. They can be little doubt that participation in politics has added a new dimension to their lives showing them a way out of isolation and powerlessness.

The processes unleashed by the 73rd and 74th Amendments have given the much needed legitimacy in the public mind, to women as politicians. This is brought home with great clarity in the description of the Rajasthan election processes when women came out in public in

large numbers as voters, supporters and candidates.[2,3] In Himachal the political roles of women elicit disapproval from the community which prefers 'consensus' while choosing women representatives and from family where young men protest at their mother's participation.[4] This countervailing pressure is itself a recognition that women in politics have come to stay. The study in Karnataka also reveals how the fact of women members going to meetings is being slowly accepted by the communities.[5] It is critical that a whole new set of yardsticks for women's participation be developed. Such yardsticks must be based on a just and humane approach that takes into account the hurdles against her effective participation. The debate on the issue of women's participation must be informed by a set of yardsticks developed through a humane and just approach that takes into account the hurdles against her effective participation.

Enabling women's effective participation by providing facilities

In the course of her work as people's representative, a woman has to incur expenses which she can ill-afford. These are emphasised in the Himachal paper - forgoing her daily wage to attend meetings, incurring expenditure on trips to meet officials and so on. In the Maharashtra study, a possible solution is offered. Once a month on an appointed day, a Gram Kacheri at which all officials are present in the villages enables women to put up their cases. Many of the papers describe how women members are not being paid sitting fees.

A set of demands including regular and compulsory payment of sitting fees, holding of Gram Kacheri in every village at regular intervals, transport and childcare facilities for women members, and related issues need to be taken up for immediate action.

The Gram Sabha and Women Representatives

This is a clause in the Panchayat Acts which is observed more by the breach. Acts do little to enforce the holding of well attended Gram Sabhas. Efforts are described in the Himachal study to persuade women to attend the Gram Sabha in numbers. The Orissa paper describes how the Orissa Act stipulates that the quorum for the Gram Sabha should be a tenth of all voters but an adjourned meeting does not require any quorum. What is even more farcical is that the written submission of a third of the members is required to convene the Gram Sabha. Facilitation programmes for women members should emphasise the need for women to attend the Gram Sabha in large numbers.

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2. *UMA Occasional Paper No. 2: Rajasthan, Bangalore,* ISST, 1995.
3. *UMA PRACHAR,* July, 1995.
4. *UMA Occasional Paper Series No.4 : Himachal Pradesh,* ISST, Bangalore, 1995.
5. *UMA Occasional Paper No. 1: Karnataka,* ISST, Bangalore, 1995.

Documentation And Dissemination Of Information, Role Of The Media

Recording and quantitating psychological and sociological changes have always been difficult propositions. Documenting the experiences of women representatives provides an exciting challenge in this direction. These experiences should be widely disseminated to ensure national attention. The Rajasthan study has used people's narratives as documentation. This group of activists have been regularly providing the Press with accounts of people's struggles.

While articles and features on Panchayat Raj abound in the national and local media (particularly newspapers) the issue of women's participation has not received sufficient media attention. This can become a rewarding agenda for action for activist, research and media groups. The Karnataka paper touches upon the need for alternatives to current media forms and pre-occupations which take little or no cognisance of events from the perspective of the poor and the disadvantages. Agendas for action can include the mapping of commonalities and variations in the experiences of women representatives across the states. The experiences of elected women representatives are powerful tools for strengthening them. They should also be provided access to information on the Act, rules, government and executive orders on Panchayat functioning.

The Role Of Political Parties In Panchayat Raj

There can be no doubt that the Panchayat Raj Institutions are and should be political bodies. Women are poorly represented in party hierarchies and the resistance of party structures to women has been well studied.[6, 7]

Ostensibly, elections to the Gram Panchayat in some states are partyless as in Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka. However, parties are a covert and powerful force making the claim for partyless elections somewhat farcical. **Measures should be taken for declaring elections to Panchayat Raj Institutions at all levels as party based and at least a third of all party positions should be reserved for women.**

This will also help build up resistance to corrupt party politics by village communities since such a measure will bring politics to every doorstep.

In Karnataka, the Taluk and Zilla elections were finally held only when the Assembly elections brought a different party to power in the state. However in Maharashtra, the prospects for a liberal and open-minded approach to gender issues have dimmed with the advent of the Shiv Sena - BJP dominated government.

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6. Susheela Kaushik, *Women and Panchayat Raj,* New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1993

7. Hazel D'Lima, *Women in Local Government: A Study of Maharashtra,* New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1983

Again, in Kerala and West Bengal, dominated by the left parties, little space is available for women. In these states, the party is omnipresent, its diktats being transmitted down a fairly rigid framework to the village level. This framework constricts the freedom of the Panchayats which are then far more likely to be implementors of government schemes than viable institutions of local self governance. However, if gender issues are adopted as a party plank, there is the possibility that they will then permeate most levels of policy and action.

The studies reveal women's aversion to dirty politics which disrupts harmony in the villages (Himachal Pradesh). They also reiterate a warning about the ease with which women can be co- opted into a criminalised political set-up. **The Maharashtra paper presents a promising agenda for action in its description of how a two warring party factions were persuaded to take up a common platform through the formation of a women's sanghatana.**

The Caste Factor In Politics

The caste factor makes its presence felt through the traditional 'jati' or caste Panchayats. In one sense, the commonality in nomenclature between these traditional bodies and the brand new institutions of self governance has given rise to considerable confusion in public perception. For instance, one women adhyaksha in Karnataka when asked what she would do if there was a problem in her village, said she would go to the (caste) Panchayat. In one incident in Rajasthan, a young man was hanged by the 'jati' Panchayat for getting involved with an 'upper caste' woman. Incidents like this one abound. **Public awareness needs to be created about the lack of legitimacy of the caste Panchayats and stringent action should be taken against those that take law into their own hands.** Events like this one also underscore the need for legitimately elected Nyaya Panchayats. Failing this, the social justice committee of the Panchayat must be strengthened. Most State Acts have the proviso of at least one woman member in this committee. Not only should women be part of all standing committees, all women members should serve, in addition, in the social justice committee if it is to have any relevance at all.

On the positive side, the very fact of a large number of women entering politics point to the possibilities of breaking down these age-old barriers. Women from all castes have perforce to work on the Panchayats although some of them may live in segregated colonies outside the main village (UMA Occasional Paper Series No.1: Karnataka). The Rajasthan Panchayat elections saw cases of SC women canvassing for votes in "upper caste" houses. However, in Orissa which has a high tribal population, "upper caste" women seem to be preferred as candidates.

On Training Programmes For Women Members

In a sense, the political legitimacy that women representatives have acquired is underscored by the plethora of training programmes for them. The need for programmes designed from

the woman's point of view in which she plays the pivotal role is emphasised in the Karnataka paper which describes initiatives taken by government and the voluntary sector. One innovative methodology favourable in terms of both reach and resources is the GRAMSAT programme. For the scale of training required, this is an idea worth pursuing. While some felt that the arena of training should be shifted from the national institutes, others felt that it would be better to form coalitions with these institutions since they have the resources and the reach. NGOs doing gender related work have a major contribution to make here. Another important agenda for action is to develop checklists and indicators for the gender efficacy of training programmes.

Looking At Panchayat Acts With Gender Lenses On

At the Legal Literacy session in the UMA MELA, a pithy comment was made "If the brinjal is itself worm-infested, any dish cooked with it is bound to be rotten"! Similarly if the Panchayat Acts are themselves gender-blind, there can be little hope for the meaningful participation of women. The Karnataka paper attempts a preliminary analysis along these lines, in terms of nomenclature and language, ensuring that women are sufficiently represented in any quorum for any procedure mentioned in the Act, that they are represented in all standing committees. The Himachal paper also presents a critique of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act. Debates on the weaknesses of the State acts, both general and gender-specific should be generated. Basic studies with a gender perspective of not only the Acts but also rules, government orders and all follow-up legislation on Panchayat Raj need to be taken up. The functioning and appointments to related bodies like the State Election Commission and the Finance Commission should be investigated, understood and publicised.

Linking Elected Women Representatives To Support Systems Of Women's Collectives

The experiences from various states have highlighted the strengthening role that is played by women's collectives. They also sound warnings about vested interests trying to cut off this source of support as in the case of the antagonism between the Mahila Mandals and the Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh and the deliberate exclusion of women from the collectives in electoral politics by village powerbrokers. However, women's sanghatanas (Maharashtra), NGOs and activist groups (Rajasthan), Mahila Samakhya Sanghas and the National Literacy Mission (Karnataka) have played positive roles vis-a-vis the elected women representatives. Providing information links between elected women representatives and the women's movement and to women at large is an important area of work. The importance of building up networks at district, state and national level cannot be emphasised enough. Groups that are successful at district and state levels feel powerless at the national level in the absence of such support.

It was also felt that there were too many committees at the village level that drew attention and energy away from the Panchayats. The possibility of women entering such bodies including the male dominated 'jati' Panchayats needs to be investigated.

Socio-Political Change: Markers And Milestones

The study of women representatives in the various states provide fascinating glimpses into a process of socio-political change unleashed by women's new political roles. Locating these changes in the context of women's empowerment leads to valuable insights as to directions for future action. From this point of view, the case of Kerala would appear the most challenging. The elected women representatives in Kerala are literate, aware and articulate. A sizeable number have independent economic means.[8] Political awareness is generally high among people, caste and class disparities impinge far less in day-to-day transactions than in other states. And yet a political role for a woman is not respected as legitimate activity. Women are still dominated, subjected to verbal abuse, character assassination and various other tactics to inhibit their pubic roles. While we set about assuming, somewhat naively, that literacy and awareness are the magic ingredients, the case of Kerala must give us pause. There are more hurdles to cross. Himachal and Rajasthan are both societies shackled by patriarchal traditions. And yet one wants women candidates only through consensus while in the other electoral processes have given women's lives a whole new dimension. The re-emergence of fundamentalist forces in Maharashtra can turn the clock back by several decades in a state with a vibrant history of women's struggles. In West Bengal, the Panchayat Raj bodies have since 1978 developed along lines that leave the newly elected women representatives little space for action.

On the flip side, women are now in a position of strength not only because of their newly acquired political legitimacy but also because of the growing strength and reach of the women's movement.

Old battlelines have blurred and new ones have been drawn, earlier goals have been reached while new lodestars appear on the horizon to spur women forward. The struggle goes on.

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8. *UMA Occasional Paper No. 5: Kerala,* ISST, Bangalore, 1995

This is a text of the Keynote Address delivered by Dr. Vina Mazumdar

Locating women's political parties in Panchayats in the context of the Indian women's movement, Vina Mazumdar said in her keynote address...

I will speak a few words, just to refresh people's memories, because I find, institutional memory is becoming a thing of the past, particularly within the ranks of the bureaucracy today. And that institutional memory sometimes even extends to the memory of their constitutional obligations. Now we do not want the same thing to happen to our movement. We must not lose our own memory. Because some 10 years back Upendra Bakshi warned us at some meeting that if you do not learn how to deal with the memory of politics, the politics of memory will defeat you ultimately. So we have to deal with the politics of memory by trying to preserve our own memory. So I would just take you back to a bit of history, what is at the back of this idea, which many people find very fantastic- of 1/3rd reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj bodies. Those of you who have had time to look at the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, will remember that there was a history at the time of Independence- there was a debate as to whether there should be reservation for women in all the elected bodies, State Assemblies and Parliament. And it was the women's movement of that time which turned it down. We fought for equality and we do not want reservation. This was an issue on which the Committee itself was very exercised, because a lot of political workers down the line from different states had spoken to the Committee about the obstacles, the resistances they faced in getting into the representative system. And many of them did plead for some system of reservation. Within the Committee there was a tremendous diversity of opinion, but the majority stood by the original principle of the women's movement...that is, no reservations. We fought for equality and equality is what we want. In rural areas, there was already an existing system in most states. There was a provision for at least one seat being reserved, so if no woman was elected then somebody used to be nominated. In a few states, there were two reserved seats; but when we consulted all the experts on Panchayati Raj at that point of time (people who had worked on community development programmes, as well as on Panchayati Raj), they all said unanimously that rural society has not understood that Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to women.

So the Committee decided to make an original recommendation saying that the provision for one of the seats reserved for women in Panchayat to be filled by nomination was mere tokenism. Instead, we should consider creation of statutory women's Panchayats with an integral connection with the Gram Panchayats, so that they are not considered threats to the Gram Panchayat system. The elected President or Secretary of the Statutory Panchayats, women's Panchayat should come and sit on the general Panchayat and in that way we could at least ensure

that something about the voice of women in rural areas would be heard. Because these women would be genuine representatives of the women's groups in the rural areas. Well, that was a recommendation which was promptly shelved.

The second point in the last 20 years history when this issue came up again for discussion was when the National Perspective Plan for Women was taken up by the Department of Women and Child Development and several national women's organisations found many sections of it somewhat dubious and it asked for a national debate. One such debate was organised by the organisations themselves in 1988. The NPP had advocated down the line 30% reservation, and, the magic formula has stayed in people's memory. One-third reservation for women in all elected bodies, from Gram Panchayats and Municipalities, right upto Parliament is still talked about. In the debate organised by the women's organisations the reservation formula at the Parliament and the State Assemblies level was outright rejected. I want to keep before you its continuity. There is something within the Indian women's movement which keeps them constantly turning down special privileges and reservations. But the same group said "we want reservation at the Panchayat level, because this is where the existing system is just not functional". This is what is important. I will come to basic reasons a little later.

That is where we left it in 1988 - outright rejection of reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies but recommendation of elected officials to the local bodies. In the original draft of the NPP, and in its initial years, these seats were to have been filled by nomination. This was completely rejected by the organisations and they demand that "we want reservations in Panchayats, but to be filled only by election and not by nomination". And from there we come to the 73rd Amendment. The gap is not very long, just about 2 years. What I want to do now, is to try and explain to the non participants or non members of the women's movement, those "irrational choices" made by women rejecting reservation in some bodies but wanting it. It is something nobody really understands. I want to interpret this. I am trying to highlight for you the changing context of Indian politics within which this dialogue and debate has been going on. The Committee on the Status of Women in India advocated election of women to the Panchayats, and not nomination of women to these reserved seats. The existing reserved seats in Panchayats, to be filled by the elected office bearers of the women's Panchayat, would be characteristic of that time, for the most important thing was that there was no women's movement. When the report was being written we did not find the evidence of any movement in the country. Thee was a very strong belief in the members of the Committee that the Indian state still accepts the Constitutional mandate.

Even if we were being naive, we did believe very strongly that whatever we were analysing, finding out and placing before the nation would get a hearing and would get some remedial action. Thus, it was under this basic understanding of the

political situation that what the Committee sought was to break through one of the major problems of invisibility and marginalisation of a large number of women, and amongst that majority are the rural women who form the outright majority. This was the first objective.

The second aim was to reach the message of Constitutional rights to the rural society which had remained ignorant of women's rights. To that I have added my own observations, ignorant of children's rights.

The context changed rapidly within six months of the submission of the report. The emergency was declared which shook our erstwhile belief in the character of the Indian state. It was fortunately re-inforced by the elections of 1977, when we went into euphoria. But by the late 80s our faith was again shaken. The Muslim Women's Act had been passed 2 years earlier. There were other reasons why we could no longer think that the people running the government at the top were aware of what these Constitutional obligations were. So, it is in this changed context and our shaken faith in the credibility of the government that the other important change took place - the rebirth of the women's movement. We could now dream from a point of strength. In 1974, we were dreaming from a point of absolute weakness. The only point of strength was the scrap of paper called the "Constitution of the Indian Republic". We had nothing else, we could only quote Mahatma Gandhi at all occasions. But by 1988, we had a much greater strength - the women's movement was very much alive. Secondly, in rural women we had discovered strength, an enormous range of knowledge, and their capacity to generate popular will when they were organised. Their new perspectives on management of natural environment and their ability to resolve social tensions were well recorded. In addition, credit was given to women's studies and there was a deepened understanding of what they call the "structures of patriarchy". Thirdly, we definitely wanted to arrest the centralising trends of the Indian political system. These were the primary aims, given the context of the political situation in the late eighties, that the women's movement had to grapple with. In the present context, I think using some phrases coined by many other commentators and analysts would do - "India under siege", "the weakening of the Indian state", "the onslaught of the globalisation". Globalisation is not a new phenomena. Globalisation is something with which we have been familiar for the past 150 years. You can correct me if I am wrong. What globalisation did to women everyone knows. The present pattern of globalisation has certain new features. It is an unchecked, unregulated, uncontrolled kind of globalisation, in which no one was pushing and everybody is talking about it as if it is irreversible and irresistible. But we know very well that there have been these kinds of trends earlier. It is the absence of regulations, the absence of accountability of the bodies which seem to be pushing this irreversible and irresistible force and this is the dangerous element. The increased strength of fundamentalism of many issues (not just religious or cultural or ethnic fundamentalism, but also economic

fundamentalism), where no debate is permitted, and democratic fundamentalism, where again no debate is permitted, is what is dangerous. All these movements, by and large, have demonstrated a trend to be hostile. This is not just the case in India, but it is the same in different parts of the world. But the grassroot base of the women's movement has widened since the eighties. And the grassroot base seems to be generating much more energy. Some of us thought we had pioneered the movement. There are others who complain of fatigue, but the fatigue disappears the moment you get down to the grassroots. And this widening base also widens the possibility of strengthening women's participation, making it effective more than ever before. Why has everybody been getting worked up and agitated about women in Panchayati Raj? Let us not pull our punches. Let us be bold. The task of defending the Indian democracy has descended on the women's movement. It has acquired the task of strengthening Indian democracy and its foundations. It has taken on the task of defending the Indian Constitution as it is meant to be. And thirdly, it has the task of asserting effective accountability. In today's world accountability is a disappearing phenomenon. But we can't have that. If we want to have a democracy, accountability has to be enforced. And, who is going to enforce it? For 20 years we have been arguing about top-down development. Why do we keep thinking about political accountability? It does not work, it has never worked. The more centralised is the State, the more weaker is the State. That is why our national pride has taken such a beating - because the Indian state has not been able to defend its priorities before the global onslaught. I think changing from polemics to hard headed pragmatism and the job of enforcing accountability is really feasible at the grassroot level. So when we hear the case studies from the states, we will get some examples how, unlettered but active, rural women can enforce accountability. Thank you.

Concept of Women's Empowerment - A Framework

This is the text of Ms. Srilatha Batliwala's presentation at the ISST Seminar. Ms. Srilatha Batliwala is a Fellow at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

This is a framework - it is not my framework - that we evolved working through discussions all over South Asia, with women's groups and NGO's, working with a stated goal of women's empowerment with a large group of women's activists getting together and trying to define women's empowerment by understanding 'power' itself (power being the key operative phrase, see Diagram 1). To put it very simply it is clear that the source of power in society really comes from access, but more importantly control over resources of various kinds. In the traditional Marxist analysis we talk about land and labour and capital and we have modified this somewhat. In today's world the sources of power really come from the control of material resources which, of course, include land, labour, human resources, control of labour and intellectual resources which have in today's environment become a very important source of power; because, the control of information and access to knowledge accrues a tremendous amount of power. Now, based on differential level of access and control over resources and power it gives to two different segments of society, you have emerging a power structure. And of course, it is extremely important to stress that power is dynamic, it is not static. It is not monolithic, it is inter-relational. Now what is a key factor in understanding power structures is to understand how they sustain and perpetuate themselves, how they get the participation and the support of every member of the society and of every person within that structure and, how they get their acceptance and participation in it.

Initially when a new power structure is coming into position, the use of force or the stress of force plays a very important role in gaining the acceptance of particularly the lowest rung in that hierarchy. Thereafter, however, a much more potent weapon is generated and used which we call ideology. An ideology becomes a much more powerful instrument through which every member of the society is co-opted to participate and play their role in that power structure. Now we see this operating in the form of the various fundamentalist ideologies that are emerging (as Vina Mazumdar pointed out about the rise of economic fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism). We see this also operating in co-option of the oppressed caste and incidents of oppression through the use of ideology. We see this operating in the case of gender from gender discrimination to the ideology of patriarchy. Power structure also has institutions and sub-structures like the State through which they sustain their hold over the entire society. And some of the key institutions through which, for instance, the ideology is transferred, to ensure the subsequent genera-

tions acceptance of these existing power structure, is the family. Since the family is the primary unit of socialisation and patriarchal ideologies are transferred by the mother to the children, this goes very far in helping us understand the phenomenon of women being women's worst enemies. And women themselves are being co-opted into their oppression through the ideology of their oppression which is being perpetuated by religion, education, media and various other economic, political and legal structures.

Now if this is an understanding of power, it is by no means a comprehensive one because this was really developed to simplify issues rather than mystify them. Now if this is power, what is empowerment and even more specifically what is women's empowerment?

To put it very simply, if we want to simplify it, then it feels as if the goal of women's empowerment or what women's empowerment is really all about, is first and foremost, to challenge and transform the ideology of patriarchy, which women and men have internalised, which the whole society operates on, one of its dominant ideological strain. Another will be to enable women or any of the disadvantaged powerless groups to gain access and control over material and knowledge resources. And the reason why we did not include human resources here is because there is still a debate going on whether we want women's empowerment to simply result in women gaining the same kind of power over men's labour, for instance, and reproducing an exploitative and egalitarian relationship. So suffice to say it involves training, access and control over those material and knowledge resources which have hitherto been denied to them.

Finally, the longest task, in a sense, is to transform the very institutions and structures of gender subordination which perpetuate gender subordination and inequality. This could be paraphrased to read, transform information and structures which perpetuate various forms of subordination and inequality based on ethnicity, race, caste, class and religion. Now if these are the goals of empowerment, let us run through quickly what are some of the processes that it entails. It is clear that empowerment cannot be sustained unless it becomes a collective process. So mobilisation of women and of oppressed people into collectives, which can then become a political force, is a very important characteristic of the empowerment process. Empowerment processes are generally, though not always, externally induced for the simple reason that there is a trigger required to set the process in motion and since one of its key aspects is challenging the dominant ideology which has been internalised, you require, very often a trigger from outside. Now the trigger can be something as unintentional as a total literacy campaign, it can be the reservation in Panchayat Raj or devolution of powers to Panchayat Raj. It must enable the people involved in that process to access a whole range of new ideas, knowledge and information and new ways of analysing their existing realities. The

process of empowerment would enable women to re-examine their lives, recognise the sources and structures of power of their own subordination and initiate action to challenge the existing ideologies as well as structures and institutions. Empowerment is not a linear process. There are backward and forward gains and setbacks. It tends to go in a spiral where greater levels of consciousness lead to more concerted actions, and greater gains, in terms of resources impacting on institutions and structures. Very importantly, empowerment must as a process aim to generate new notions and new understandings of power, and of the use of power, so that one does not end up replicating old models and old abuses of power. And importantly, it must lead to a kind of globalising consciousness and awareness where local issues and their linkages with global issues become clearer to people. This is very important perhaps for NGO's because we tend to delimit knowledge inputs to very utilitarian and very localised ones, because the assumption is that, this is very useful to people. They assume that they do not want to know about a war in Iraq or in Rwanda. But in fact, that means a kind of control of knowledge, of information and of analysis, which then an elite group arrogates to itself. Very importantly, as Vina Mazumdar has been stressing for the last two days, empowerment is a political process fundamentally, and, it seeks to transform struggles into a political force by organising people and emerging as a mass movement.

Now, what are some of the transformations that we see in the process of empowerment and its key characteristics (See Diagram 2 on "Transformations in gender constructions through empowerment"). You move from positions of silence to gaining a voice. This is the language in which women themselves often express it. When you say what has this process done to you, they say, "we know now we have a voice, we shall raise it".

The transformations that come about are many - from uneducated, unquestioning individuals, to becoming questioning individuals, who value their own knowledge and learn; from accepting the gender division of labour to questioning the gender division of labour, through individual and collective struggles; from having restricted mobility and the right to move about only if escorted by men, to gaining much greater autonomy and fierce mobility, for example, attending meetings, going to the district offices without the escort of men; from being socialisation agents who perpetuate the dominant ideology in the way they raise their sons and daughters, to becoming agents of change in the manner in which their children are socialised; from being economically oppressed and exploited, to being at least organised; from being politically passive to active in the political process; from having limited worldview and circumscribed understanding of issues, to a global view and understanding of issues.

I said that the process of empowerment is not a linear process. This was a model which a group of Filipinos tried to develop, to explain how the proccess goes. (See Diagram 3: "Empowerment: The Proccess")

You move from the individual or the family unit (in which women too are participating in collectives and groups, to an expanding sense of identity within the locality, village or neighbourhood. From there the local collectives and groups federate and organise at larger levels, maybe at district or province level and that is when they start becoming a real mass movement, with political repurcussions at larger levels, and thereafter, to the national level and then into impacting at the international level. Now at the same time that women are attempting this movement outward, there is a counter force that is operating that is pushing them back - pushing them back to the individual and household clearly indicated in all the incidents that came up in the state case studies - "sit at home", "don't go to the meeting", "why are you bothered about these issues" etc. The attempt to push them back to village level collectives so that they are not a threat is a very natural part of the process and has to be resisted.

As regards the experiences of the women in the Panchayat (See Diagram 4: "Breaking Barriers"),the women are moving out of the family and the household into the Gram Panchayat and in some cases the Zilla Panchayats. This could perhaps lead to a larger number of women becoming part of state and national legislatures. And then they will represent their own issues and become a part of the global and international decision-making process. And the counter-force will try to restrict them and push them back.

In the case of the Panchayat Raj Institutions themselves what is the empowering potential that they offer if we take this as the working framework of empowerment? What do the PRI's represent in this process? Now in the first model you saw that the political structures are one of the important ways in which a given dominant ideology perpetuates itself. So obviously women gaining access in large numbers to political structures and becoming a part of political decision making process is a key step towards empowerment. And perhaps that is the most important potential that Panchayat Raj Institutions provide by giving women access to political structures and political powers. I am using the word access and not control because right now it is access.

Now to transform access to greater levels of control within the system is one of the key challenges. Secondly, this process is providing a possibility for women to gain access to new material and knowledge resources. If Gram Panchayats have decision making power over certain development resources in the region then for the first time there is a possibility for women to play a role in the way the resources are allocated.

They also gain the possibility of getting information, getting an understanding of a whole new range of issues, even though there is this counter force which is trying to prevent them from doing so, which has come out very clearly in the state case-studies, for instance, in the case of accounts.

It also provides an entry into a non-traditional space, in the sense of legitimising women's entry into non-traditional spaces. And it has also helped to break this private-public dichotomy. It is also redefining what is private and what is public. It has created a possibility where an issue of alcoholism related wife beating becomes public issue not a private one.

Finally, it has created a possibility for erosion of traditional gender roles and caste-class roles and hierarchy through the facility of reservation. Now based on the presentation of the last two days these are the key barriers that all of you have identified, to women's participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions. The gender division of labour in households continued to restrict the time women can give and also places an additional burden on them. One could almost postulate that the burden on women is becoming a quadruple burden from what used to be a triple burden. If these women who are now overburdened fail, you will be proving that women are not capable of being able political participants. But there is no shift or easing of any of the other burdens they carry. And incidentally we need to address this not only at the household level, we also need to look at it by saying even basic services are not being provided. So when you look at the time allocations for fuel gathering, water fetching, getting fodder, cooking and child care, these are the areas the policy has completely failed to address. We have to think beyond this simplistic reallocation of duties and the policies should provide these basic needs to people.

We have seen the economic status of women and the opportunity cost of their participation is the key factor. Subash Mendapurkar has brought this up by telling us how much it costs to be a member, to be Pradhan and the vulnerability of women in this context. Their isolation is obvious especially in situations where it finally works out that there are one or two women members among 10 or 12 Panchayat members, thus hindering their participation. Their low levels of mobility are mainly because their economic limitations, their lack of requisite information and skills (if at all) and because of the lack of access to information and skills which they need. Neelam Gorhe talked about "negotiating skills" and the need to make them more effective. Then there is a whole problem of internalised self image, lack of self esteem, confidence, internalised stereotype which works from within as a barrier.

Most important perhaps is the lack of support systems which further isolate women and further reduce her self image, restrict her mobility and so on. So these seem to be the key barriers to women's empowerment that have emerged from your case studies. Where does this leave us in terms of the issues that have emerged?

ISSUES

1. Subhash Mendapurkar raised the fundamental issue of what is self governance and these institutions are to be seen as political or developmental bodies.

2. Are there linkages between these institutions and other bodies, movements and existing associations in the district, for instance, what is the relationship between a Mahila Mandal and a Gram Panchayat?

3. The whole question of resources and whether or not development issues really comes under the control of the PRIs.

4. The caste, community and gender politics that operates

5. The role of political parties

6. The whole question of co-option - co-option of oppressed group representatives into the dominant group agenda. The co-option of women into the patriarchal agendas.

7. The limitations of the Act itself which many of you have critiqued in your papers, which need to be addressed in terms of legal strategies

8. A whole range of technical and administrative issues - functioning of the secretaries, finances and so on

9. Question of Gram Sabha and the question that arises in the context of the Gram Sabha being a key filler in ensuring the democratic nature of these institutions.

10. Finally, the role of NGO's vis-a-vis these institutions - the questionable pattern of the role, possibilities, the limits, what we should be doing and what we should not be doing.

11. Perhaps closely connected to this is the whole question of training. It is pertinent to see what is being seen as the training need and what is the perspective within which training is being done. Is it necessary at all, is there a need for more guidance and information or is this training messing with their minds (especially those kinds of training where you are trying to reconstruct personalities and so on). The content and methodology of training is very important.

I have worked out in detail the steps or the sequence in the empowerment process. This is a whole framework worked out from experiences. It is not a theoretical framework developed by looking at some theories. But apart from this, we have also

tried to work out the contents of educational and transformational process- that is, training process, which need to be addressed when we say we are dealing with empowerment.

STEPS IN THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

* **Identify the poorest and most oppressed women** of a selected geo-political region, urban or rural.

* Train activists/change agents to be aware of the structures and sources of power and the role of gender; and equip them with the skills to **mobilize, learn from and raise the consciousness of such women.**

* The change agents **help women create a separate 'time and space' for themselves as disempowered women,** rather than as beneficiaries or recipients of welfare or development programs; these forums should enable women to evolve from an aggregate of individuals into a cohesive collective.

* **Facilitate women to collectively question their situation and develop critical thinking;** look at themselves and their environment in new ways; develop a positive self-image and recognise their strengths, including existing knowledge and skills; and explode sexist myths and misconceptions.

* **Women gain access to new kinds of information and knowledge,** as well as a critical understanding of the structures of power;

* **Formation of strong collectives** through which individual and collective problems are identified and prioritised;

* **Learning to function effectively as a collective,** including collective decision-making, action, critical reflection, accountability;

* **Confronting oppressive attitudes and practices** within and outside the home and family, changing attitudes and practices within themselves, their families and communities - including socialisation of their own sons and daughters;

* **Collective actions/struggles for change,** developing new strategies and methods, including forming strategic alliances with other groups of exploited and oppressed people;

* **Acquire empowering skills** - Eg: vocational, managerial, literacy and numeracy, basic data collection skills for conducting their own surveys, etc. - which build the autonomy and power of poor women.

* **Access resources and public schemes/services** independently, demanding accountability, and lobby for changes in laws, schemes and programs which are inaccessible or inappropriate;

* **Negotiate with public institutions and systems** (banks, government departments, etc.) independently;

* **Set-up and collectively manage alternative services and programs** whenever necessary;

* **Build federations of women's collectives at local, regional, national and global levels,** through which poor women can continue to challenge power structures and further empower themselves for the well-being of society as a whole.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTENT OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Societal Analysis: analysis of institutions through which dominant ideologies are transmitted and reinforced **including** the family, religion, and media; existing social hierarchy and inequalities by caste, class, religion, region (urban and rural), country and world; social, economic and political structures which perpetuate exploitation and oppression.

Gender Analysis: patriarchy, the role of institutions (especially family) and power structures in social construction of gender; how gender is mediated through class, caste, religion, region, etc.; postition and situation of women within these; role of socialisation in perpetuating gender discrimination; feminism and the origin, history and impact of women's movements locally, nationally, and globally.

Political Awareness/Education: systems of governance, political structures, their role and functions, the role of the poor in political processes, past and current political movements, their ideologies and strategies; analysis of various ideologies and movements from a gender perspective; women's participation in political structures/movements (e.g., women's role in liberation struggles).

Legal Literacy: human rights, women's rights, rights of the child, democracy/democratic rights; awareness of legal rights and laws affecting women - including laws regulating marriage, divorce, inheritance, rape, sexual harassment, violence against women, dowry, land and forest laws, labor laws, etc.; rights, duties, and functioning of judiciary and police, how to seek legal redress, legal aid facilities, etc.

Health, Reproductive Rights and Sexuality: structural analysis of ill-health, causes of women's low health status, 'common diseases' (cause, treatment and

prevention), 'immunisation', women-specific health problems, child health, nutrition awareness; reproduction, contraception, analysis of family planning programs from a gender perspective; reproductive health problems and reproductive rights of women; women's sexuality, sexual relations, and control over their bodies.

Economic Issues: awareness of economic environment, systems, and structures; women's existing skills, occupations and economic situation; needed changes including women's credit and savings schemes, avenues for self-employment, vocational training and skill-upgrading, alternate markets, marketing skills, bargaining and negotiation, economic struggles (for minimum wages, higher prices).

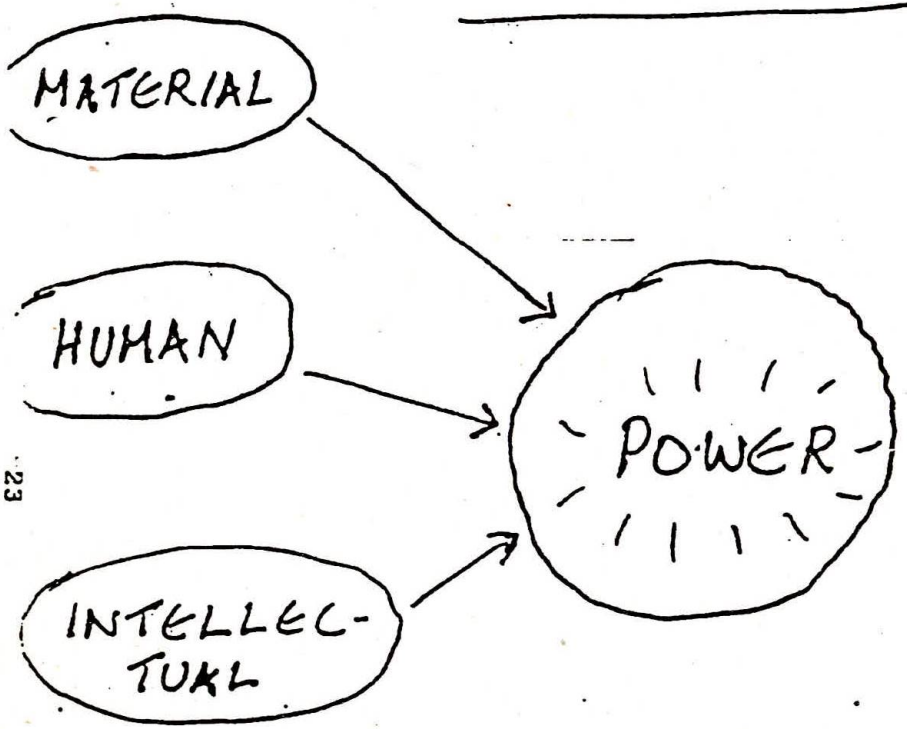
Environmental Education: natural resources and eco-systems, water cycle, deforestation and its impact, soil degradation (including salination), air and water pollution and their health hazards; environmental regeneration strategies including social forestry, alternative energy sources and technologies (smokeless stoves, bio-gas, etc.), water and soil management, alternative agricultural techniques, etc.

Development Education: prevailing concepts of development, critiques of these, existing development resources, how they are distributed, where they are available, how to access them, how to lobby for more appropriate programs.

Adult Literacy and Non-Formal Education for Girls: literacy, numeracy, and post-literacy for women and men, non-formal schools for girls who cannot attend formal school.

UNDERSTANDING

POWER



ACCESS & CONTROL
OVER RESOURCES

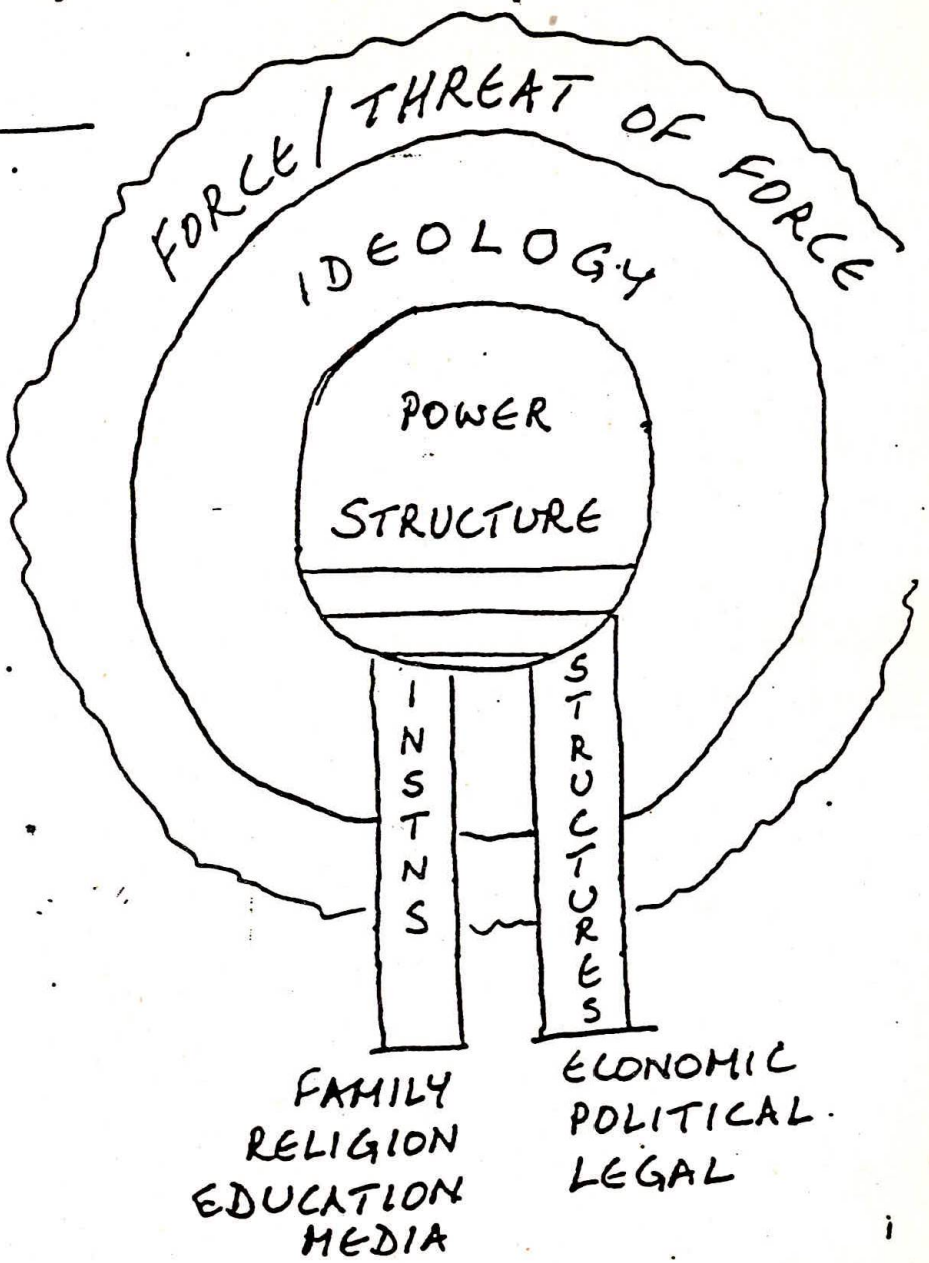
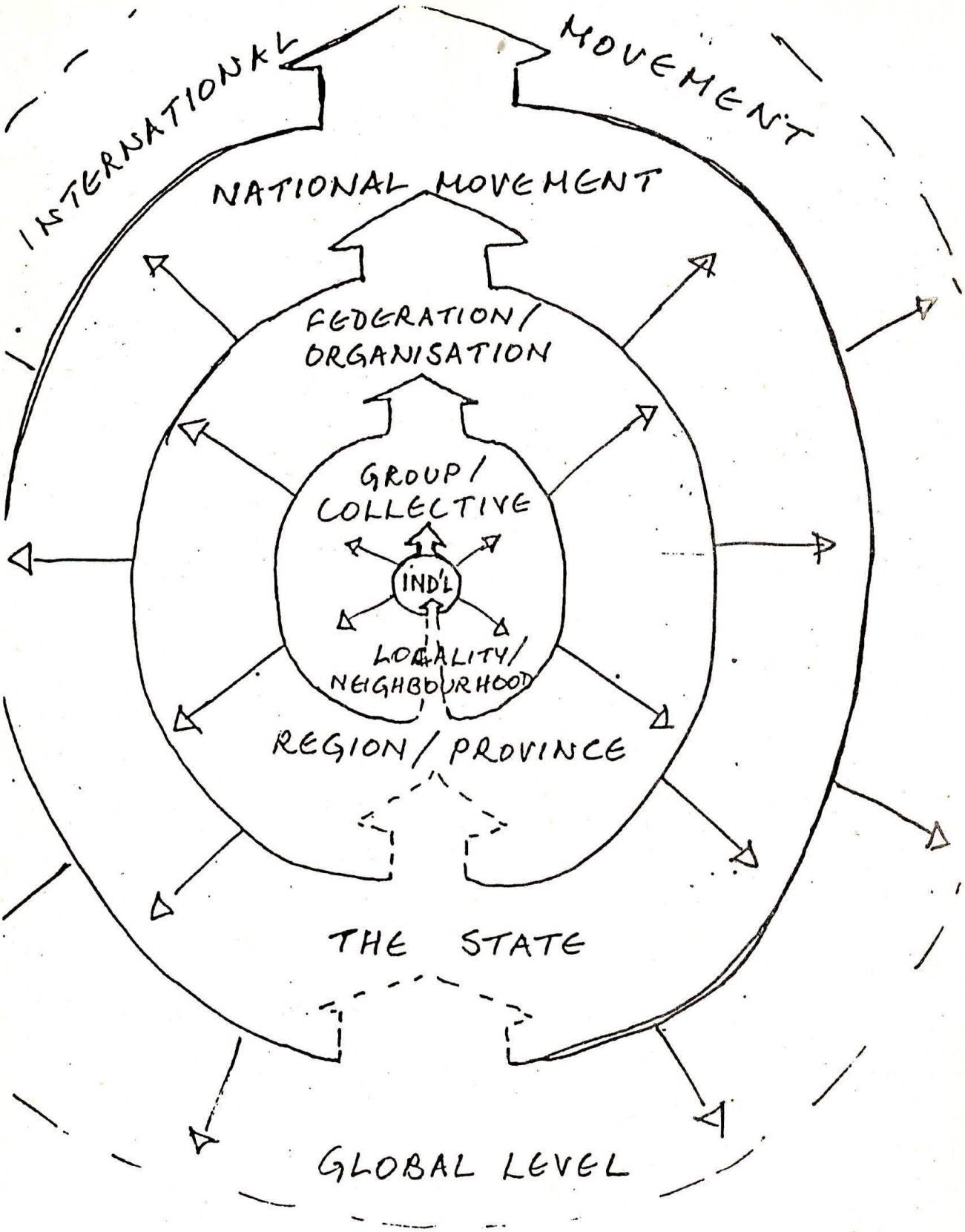


DIAGRAM- 1

TRANSFORMATIONS IN GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

SILENCE	GAINING A "VOICE"
UNQUESTIONING "UNEDUCATED"	QUESTIONING "LEARNED"
ACCEPTING GENDER DIVISION of LABOUR	CHANGING GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR
RESTRICTED MOBILITY (WITH MEN ONLY)	FREE MOBILITY (WITHOUT MEN)
SOCIALIZATION AGENTS OF ♀ & ♂ INTO TRADITIONAL ROLES	AGENTS OF CHANGE IN SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN & RE-SOCIALIZATION OF MEN
ECONOMICALLY OPPRESSED/EXPLOITED	ORGANIZED
POLITICALLY PASSIVE	ACTIVE IN POLITICAL PROCESSES
LIMITED WORLD VIEW OF ISSUES	GLOBAL VIEW OF ISSUES

DIAGRAM-2



EMPOWERMENT: THE PROCESS

BREAKING BARRIERS

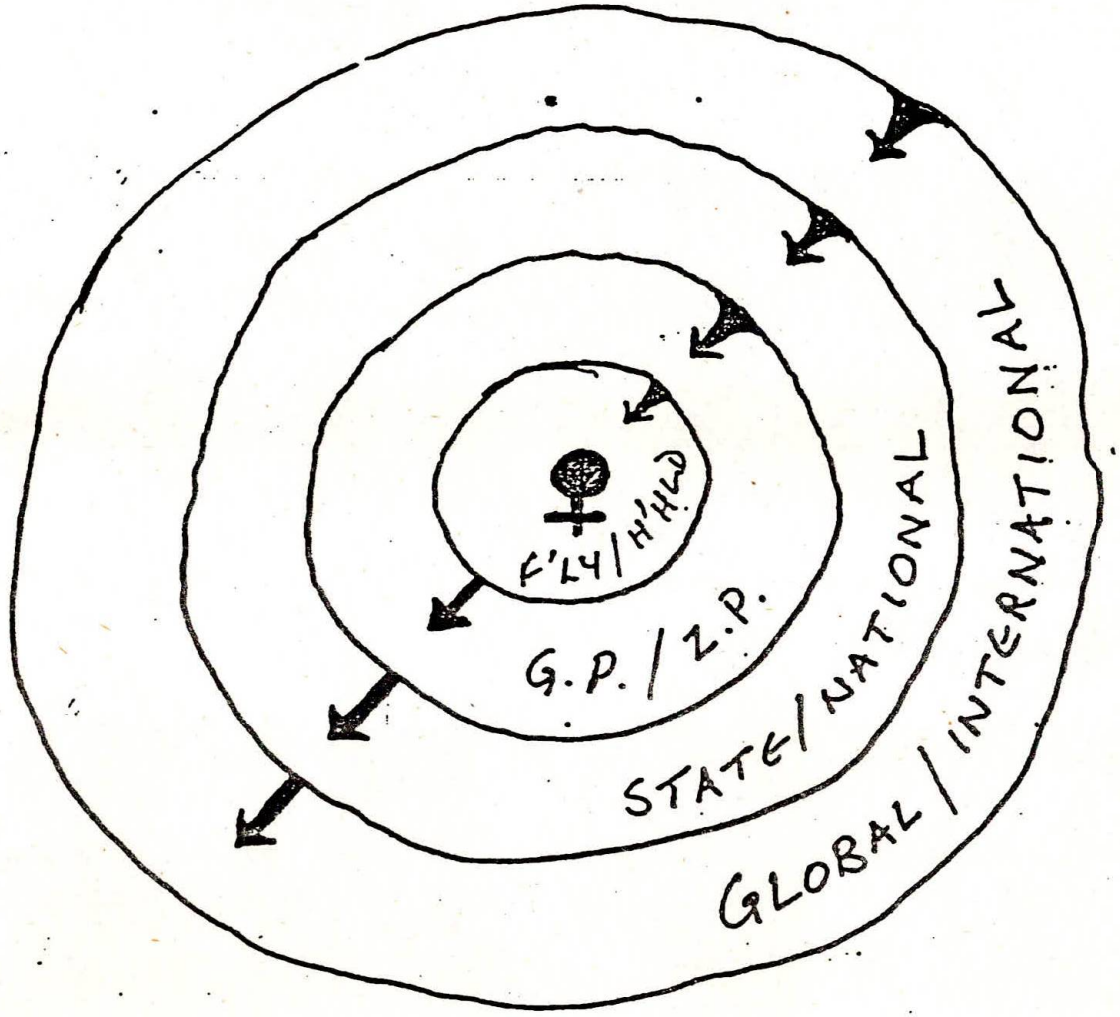


DIAGRAM - 4

GOALS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:

- CHALLENGE PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

- TRANSFORM INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURES OF GENDER SUBORDINATION AND INEQUALITY

- ENABLE WOMEN TO GAIN ACCESS AND CONTROL OVER MATERIAL AND KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES

SOME IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

* The empowerment process must mobilize women into collectives, breaking individual isolation and creating a united forum through which women can challenge their subordination - raising women's consciousness of the ideology which legitimizes male domination and understand how it perpetuates their oppression.

* empowerment is externally induced by forces working with an altered consciousness - external change agents

* enable women to access a new body of ideas, knowledge, and information, which changes their consciousness and self-image and encourages action...a dynamic educational process.

* impacts at many levels by enabling women re-examine their lives critically, recognize the structures and sources of power and subordination, discover their strengths, alter their self-image, access new kinds of information and knowledge, acquire new skills, and initiate action aimed at challenging existing ideology and gaining greater control over resources of various kinds.

* empowerment is a spiral, changing consciousness, identifying areas/issues for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing action and

outcomes, which leads in turn to higher levels of consciousness and well-honed and executed strategies.

* generate new notions of power, and experiment with new ways of exercising power.

* lead women - and the 'new men' - to address global concerns and issues - the environment, war and militarism, human rights, violence and conflicts between ethnic groups, races, religions, etc.

* becomes a political force i.e., an organized mass movement which challenges and transforms existing power structures. The process of empowerment should ultimately lead to the formation of mass organizations of poor women, at regional, national, and international levels.

* maintains a supra-political stance to prevent the co-option and dilution of the empowerment process by pervasive patriarchal forces.

LOSSES:

* CANNOT CONTROL WOMEN'S LABOUR, INCOME, SEXUALITY, REPRODUCTION AND MOBILITY
* CANNOT ABDICATE RESPONSIBILITY FOR HOUSEWORK AND CHILD CARE (CHANGES IN GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR)
* CANNOT VIOLATE/ABUSE WOMEN WITH IMPUNITY
* ERADICATION OF BIGAMY, POLYGAMY AND OTHER ANTI-WOMEN PRACTICES
* NO GREATER RIGHTS TO INHERITANCE, FAMILY ASSETS, ETC.

GAINS:

* STRENGTH AND REINFORCEMENT FROM THE OTHER HALF OF THE HUMAN RACE IN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRUGGLES
* WOMEN AS EQUAL PARTNERS - NOT SUBORDINATES
* SHARING OF WORK AND RESPONSIBILITIES
* RELEASE FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN OF OPPRESSOR'S ROLE
* LIBERATION FROM GENDER STEREOTYPING
* NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR LIVING AND WORKING

UMA Resource Centre

Occasional Paper Series No.1

Challenge and Opportunity:
A Study of Women Panchayat Representatives in Karnataka

Prepared by

UMA Resource Centre

UMA Resource Centre

Institute of Social Studies Trust

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Section 1
Challenge and Opportunity:
A Study of Women Panchayat Representatives in Karnataka

1. *Introduction*

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have created political space for women by providing that a third of the seats in local bodies all over the country be reserved for them. This presents women with unprecedented opportunities for political participation and decision-making. It also provides a unique opportunity to those committed to the empowerment of women to record and study a fascinating process of social change that is inevitable in the new circumstances mentioned here.

Political participation is conceptualised as "public membership of citizens 'sharing' justice and orienting their action toward a "public or a common good". As an activity it is associated with maintaining relationships in the community, fostering co-operation among individuals and groups and encouraging the settlement of disputes through public communication (1). This activity must be carried out in a democratic framework. Democratic participation necessitates confidence in one's ability, a feeling of self esteem and efficacy. These traits develop further through participation (2). Collective and meaningful political activity is guided by the exercise of informed choice by the majority of citizens to achieve the common weal. It also argues for inclusive and non- confrontationist political processes based on consensus and understanding. It is this vision of politics that needs to be reiterated time and again in the present vitiated and corrupt political atmosphere in the country. It is hoped that the inclusion of a large number of women in political decision making processes will herald a return to an era of "clean" politics.

The participation of women in large numbers in political processes is a major step towards inclusive politics, an attempt to draw the marginalised and disadvantaged into decision-making processes, guided by the need to make optimal use of human resources for the common good. A vibrant society and body politic must be guided by the principle of developing human potential to the fullest extent possible, by creating systems that are accountable to the people who constantly demand accountability from public representatives. Studies on women's empowerment

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* Numbers in parentheses indicate references listed on page 47.

** All paragraphs in italics are highlights of the discussion that followed the presentation of the paper.

show that a strong indicator of women's rising consciousness expresses itself in direct political forms, such as standing for (local body) elections, demanding accountability from elected representatives and government officials (3).

Debate and action on women and politics need to be guided by the principle of a mutually beneficial relationship between the two. In other words, just as the participation of women is good for political processes, so too is participation beneficial to women. However, in the absence of appropriate political role models, the dangers of co-optation of women, as first time politicians, into a corrupt system need to be borne in mind. Trends to such co- optation need to be identified and resisted.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments represent a bold step in the right direction. The picture, however, is not altogether a rosy one. Despite the provisions mandated by the Constitutional Amendments, the principles of local self governance have been considerably distorted in the formulation of the Karnataka Panchayat Act 1993 both in content as well as in process. Characterised by overemphasis on the role of bureaucrats, by a blurring of functions between the three tiers - Gram, Taluk and Zilla Panchayats, and several other lacunae, the Act does not exactly inspire confidence as to the State government's intentions. These aspects have been commented on in several excellent articles (4,5,6). Since 1990, Panchayat Raj in Karnataka would appear to be the plaything of politicians and political parties in the State. However, with the advent of the Janata Dal government in the state and their professed commitment to Panchayat Raj, changes for the better are in the offing. The long delayed Panchayat elections have been conducted smoothly in the state (Tables 1 and 2 show the results of the Zilla and Taluk polls). Gram Panchayat elections on a non-party basis were conducted in December 1993. Tables 3a and 3b give the outcome of the Gram Panchayat polls. Further, since the same party is in a majority, in the state legislature as well as in the Panchayat bodies, there can be no conflict of interests that would vitiate Panchayat Raj processes in the state. The state government has further demonstrated its commitment by appointing a high level expert committee to examine controversial portions of the Act and suggest measures to make it fully reflective of genuine local self governance. The report of the Committee is awaited. The State Finance Commission has been set up. The Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Sri.M.P.Prakash, has in a recent interview to a national daily (Times of India, 15.4.1995) admitted that the taxation scope of the new local bodies is very limited and said that the government should see that more funds should be devolved to them. The 1995 ordinance to the Karnataka Panchayat Raj has removed certain anomalies in the reservation for SC and ST sections. An earlier stipulation of a minimum of 15% for SC and 3% for ST irrespective of their population in a particular area, had led to about 1072 Gram Panchayat seats remaining vacant. The ordinance also stipulates reservation for

backward classes in two categories A and B. Within each category a third of the seats is reserved for women.

All three tiers of local governance are now in place. However the Gram Panchayats that were elected in December 1993 will finish their term about 15 months before the Taluk and Zilla Panchayats to which elections have taken place as late as March 1995. The Gram Panchayats have not had the opportunity to function efficiently in the absence of the two upper tiers. It would be desirable if the term of the Gram Panchayats is extended to synchronise with the term of the Taluk and Zilla Panchayat. If not, there is a danger that, in effect, the five year term of the Karnataka Panchayats will be truncated to a three and a half year term.

Professor Gulati: I don't know why we should worry about the lack of synchronisation between the term of the Gram Panchayats and the Taluk and Zilla Panchayats. The Gram Panchayats should be autonomous and whatever provisions that make them so should be strengthened. After all, what happens if one level is superseded?

Table 1: Zilla Panchayat seats reserved for Women

Total No. of Zilla Panchayats-20

Category	SC	ST	BC(a)	BC(b)	GEN	Total
Total seats	165	47	243	63	401	919
Women	63	22	89	19	142	335
Adhyakshini*	2	-	2	-	3	7
Upadhyakshini+	2	-	2	-	3	7

* SC - Kolar, Gulbarga
BC(a) - Dakshina Kannada & Kodagu
GEN - Shimoga, Bellary, Chickmagalur

\+ SC - Mysore, Bangalore Rural
BC(a) - Hassan, Bidar
GEN - Tumkur, Uttara Kannada, Raichur

Table 2: Taluk Panchayat seats reserved for women

No. of Taluk Panchayats - 175

Category	SC	ST	BC(a)	BC(b)	GEN	Total
Total seats	601	169	894	223	1453	3340
Women	261	104	389	52	537	1343
Adhyakshini	11	3	15	4	26	59
Upadhyakshini+	11	3	15	4	26	59

Table 3a: Gram Panchayat seats of elected candidates

No. of Gram Panchayats - 5640

Category	SC	ST	BC	GEN
Men	10318	1585	15771	16679
Women	7221	5293	10504	11055

Table 3b: No. of Gram Panchayat seats as on 18/11/1994

	Total	Filled	Vacant
Total	80627	78426	2201
Men	45322	44353	969
Women	35305	34073	1232

1.1 Women in Karnataka: A Brief Overview

Karnataka gets its name from *'Karunadu'* meaning lofty land - much of Karnataka is a high plateau. It is situated on the western edge of the Deccan Plateau and is bordered by Maharashtra and Goa in the north, Andhra Pradesh in the east and Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the south. The west of Karnataka opens out into the Arabian Sea. The two important river systems of this state are the Krishna and its tributaries in the north, and the Cauvery and its tributaries in the south.

A glance into the rich historical past of Karnataka would throw light on the status of women then and the reasons for their status now.

The Mauryas - Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' makes no mention of women.

The Satavahanas - A very patriarchal society.

The Kadambas - Though women did not enjoy total freedom, they were not exploited.

The Gangas - Sati was widely practised and the birth of a son was important.

The Chalukyas - Women were given access to education, but prostitution was practised and courtesans were honoured for their accomplishments.

The Rashtrakutas- Women were granted the right to inherit property of the husband.

The Chalukyas - Queens not only ruled independently but also fought battles independently. Courtesans flourished in their professions.

The Kalachuris - They brought with them the system of child marriage, popularised Sati and totally ignored women's education.

Socio-religious reform movements

Basavanna was the only socio-religious reformer who taught equality between men and women.

The Vijayanagar Kings -

Perpetrated the social malpractices of their predecessors.

Kittur Rani Chennamma

spoke for the women in her times.

The Wodeyars - Women led a rather protected life, though prostitution flourished.

The Dewans - Expanded female education but the public were not motivated enough.

Through all the rulers and a few Queens one can see that the history of women in Karnataka has been an eventful one.

In 1923, women were granted the right to vote in Municipal Elections but women's participation in social life was taboo. This continued right up till Independence where very few women took up jobs such as teaching and nursing but did not pursue it as a career. There are profiles of women who have made remarkable progress not only in social, economical and political life but in the field of Art and Literature as well. Yet these women do not represent the general status of majority of the women. A few socio-economic indicators have been chosen to assess the actual status of the common women.

Sex Ratio: The sex ratio of the state is 961 - better than the All India ratio of 929. Two districts have positive sex ratios of 1051 (Dakshina Kannada) and 1013 (Hassan) - 1991 census.

Literacy: Despite the introduction of the Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1961, the literacy rates are alarmingly low. The female literacy rate is 44.37% and male literacy rate is 67.25% (1991 census). Among women, the urban literacy rate is 65.74% and the rural literacy rate is 34.76%.

Education: Dropout rates are high among girls and grow higher up the education ladder.

Work Participation: There has been a marginal increase in female work participation both in urban and rural Karnataka, since the 1981 census. Tumkur has the highest proportion of workers. Among female workers, 49.06% are agricultural labourers, 26.01% cultivators, 21.92% are engaged in other work and 3.01% in household industry.

Marriage: A very important institution, it is arranged both in rural and urban areas with a few exceptions. Lot of bargain takes place at the time of marriage. Dowry is almost a must in most parts of the state. Child marriage is punishable under law with the female marriage age fixed at 18, but in practice, child marriages are customary in practice in several districts.

Prostitution is not legalised, but the *devadasi* system which initiates young girls into prostitution is still in vogue in Belgaum, Raichur and Bijapur districts. The Karnataka Government has taken measures to rehabilitate *devadasis* through the Women and Child Development Department and there are a few indications to show a marginal decrease in young girls being initiated into this cult.

1.2 Political Participation of Women in Karnataka

The democratic form of Government ignored reservation for women in the Legislative Assembly and in the council. Very few women took an active part in the political

life and won elections. If and when cabinet berths were offered to women they were granted only the 'soft' departments. Though the State has conducted elections and constituted the Government, no woman member has ever headed the Government.

In 1983, for the first time in the world, Karnataka's Janata Dal Government led by Ramakrishna Hegde with Abdul Nazir Sahab as Panchayat Raj Minister, took a revolutionary step when it provided 25% reservation for women in local self governance. This reservation extended to rural illiterates, SC's, ST's and *devadasis* as well. The farsightedness of the Karnataka Government set a trend which has now compelled the Union Government to enact the 73rd and 74th Amendments.

The 1993 Karnataka Panchayat Act allows 33% reservation for women in all the three tiers of local self governance and women are now in the thick of politics - at the grassroot level at least (36,983 seats reserved for women). However, as the paper indicates, reservation is only the first step. A lot more needs to be done to empower women in this new arena.

1.3 About this Study...

This study is based on observations and interactions with women members of the Karnataka Gram Panchayats, during the period 1994 to early 1995. Elections to the Gram Panchayats in Karnataka took place in December 1993. The paper is in three sections. Section 1 attempts to understand the nature and extent of participation by women members of the Gram Panchayats, their perceptions of participation and the problems faced by them. Observations are based on a field study conducted in December 1994, January-February 1995 in a few Panchayats of 2 districts - Bijapur in the north and Tumkur in the south.

Section 2 briefly outlines some of the provisions in the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act that are inimical to the true and meaningful participation of women in local bodies.

Section 3 presents a brief description of the initiatives taken by the state government and the voluntary sector to strengthen the participation of women.

Section 2

FIELD STUDY IN BIJAPUR AND TUMKUR DISTRICTS

In this section, the results of a field study, undertaken with the objectives stated below, are presented.

Objectives:

1. To study the political awareness, perceptions and participation of elected women representatives in selected areas of two districts, Bijapur and Tumkur.

2. To understand some aspects of the condition and position of these elected women representatives.

2.1 Design of the Survey

Two districts have been selected for our study - Bijapur in the north of Karnataka and Tumkur in the south. Bijapur is one of the most backward and neglected areas of the State while Tumkur, because of its proximity to the State capital, is relatively advanced in terms of development parameters. Tumkur district also differed substantially from Bijapur in the fact that it has been a thrust area for the work of the National Literacy Mission in the past few years.

Within each district, two taluks were selected. Of the two, one was near district headquarters while the second one was some distance away from district headquarters. In each taluk, two Gram Panchayats were chosen, one with a male adhyaksha and one with a female adhyaksha. All the women members of each of these Panchayats were interviewed.

This selection was made with a view to identify possible influences on the elected women representatives of proximity to district headquarters and the nature of leadership.

After a study of these eight Panchayats, it was decided to investigate the role of a powerful change agent in women's lives, like the Mahila Samakhya Programme, on the level of awareness and participation in the political processes.

Fortunately, for us, the Mahila Samakhya in Bijapur has a record of vibrant action. They have taken keen interest in the Panchayat Raj processes and a large number of Sangha women (about sixty) have been elected members of Gram Panchayats. Of these women, ten were interviewed for the purpose of the present study. Each of these women belonged to a different Gram Panchayat, since it has been the

practice that each village sangha fields candidates for one seat in their respective Gram Panchayats.

2.2 *Description of Sample Studied*

In the first round, 23 elected women representatives of Gram Panchayats from Bijapur and 23 from Tumkur district were interviewed. In the second round, 10 Mahila Samakhya Sangha women who have been elected to 10 different Gram Panchayats were interviewed. The practice has been to field one woman candidate from each sangha for the respective panchayat.

The following table gives information on age, literacy, caste and occupation of the respondents.

Table 4

Parameter studied	Bijapur Total:23	Tumkur Total:23	Bijapur Mahila Samakhya Total:10
AGE			
25-34	7	11	2
35-44	5	7	2
45-54	6	4	2
55-64	5	1	4
CASTE			
Scheduled Caste	46	10	
Scheduled Tribe	8	6	
Other Backward Community	3	4	
General	8	7	
LITERACY			
Illiterate	17	13	3
Literate	6	10	7**

**** Going to Mahila Samakhya run night schools**

OCCUPATION

Own Cultivation	7	13	5
Agri. Labourer	7	2	5
Household work	8	7	
Artisan	0	0	
Service industry	0	1	
Others	1	0	

2.2.i Caste and Class

Most of the 46+10 respondents are poor, some abjectly so. Hardly any of them have domestic animals, some have small land holdings which are barely cultivable. Respondents belonging to the SC, ST and OBC classes, live in separate "Harijan" colonies situated at some distance from the main village. Discrimination is overt, these people are not allowed to "trespass" into the village or to quench their thirst from the main village well. However, surprisingly, all the respondents maintained, in response to our queries, that no discrimination is practised at the meetings with respect to seating, sending of notices and so on. While we have observed from earlier interactions with groups of women representatives that generally women members mingle freely with each other irrespective of caste considerations, such factors have in some cases prevented SC women from contesting for positions reserved for them. What is interesting is that the SC, ST and backward class members, who are physically segregated from the rest of the village, sit side by side with the so called "upper caste" members in the meeting. Further, what we discerned from our respondents is an acceptance of their segregation in day-to-day living. In some places, the Sangha women of the Mahila Samakhya programme, who are almost always from among the SCs or STs, have been encouraged to use the common water source in the village. They have done so successfully in some cases and broken through the stranglehold of caste/class stereotypes. Working in the Panchayats provides the opportunity and space for women to work against various forms of class and caste discrimination.

Vina Mazumdar: On the point mentioned about caste and class barriers decreasing because of women participating in Panchayats. It will not happen automatically, some intervention is needed.

2.2.ii Age and Literacy levels

Within our sample, there is a greater trend towards a lower age group (25-45 yrs, 18 out of 23) in Tumkur than in Bijapur district (12 out of 23). This is borne out

by the statistics for the district. (Table 5 - Age of Gram Panchayat members in Tumkur district)

Table 5: Age of Gram Panchayat members in Tumkur District

Data for 1693 trained women out of 2093 women representatives in Tumkur district

Age	Total	Women
21-25	336	267
26-30	986	555
31-35	791	422
36-45	725	283
46-50	242	84
51 and above	321	82

This trend is heartening in that it possibly indicates an increasing acceptance in rural societies of women, in the younger age group with child bearing and domestic responsibilities, breaking out of stereotyped female life roles. The older women in village societies have traditionally been accepted in the "senior citizen" or advisory role to the community by virtue of age and experience. Further, we have found in other interactions with bodies like the Panchayat Parishat Mahila Vibhaga and State level local body politicians that the emergence of younger women leaders is favoured because of their presumed abilities and the energy they can bring to being people's representatives. Interestingly, however, among the 10 respondents from Mahila Samakhya, 4 are in the 55-64 age group and 6 in 25-54 age group. This tendency towards a higher age group among these respondents could be because they are selected by the Sanghas. There is also an expressed preference in these and several other circles for women who are literate being elected as Panchayat representatives. However, whether applying literacy as a criterion, will actually serve the purpose of listening to the voices of the marginalised remains doubtful. For example, one respondent in Tumkur (Vasantha Muralidhar of Hebbur Gram Panchayat) has a BA degree and is the Adhyaksha of her Panchayat. The other women members of the Panchayat had several complaints about her attitude and general reluctance to involve herself in the actual work of her Panchayat. Further she refused to attend training programmes and also directed people who came to her with problems to the BDO's office. The concerns here are that the larger number of poor women who are illiterate will go unrepresented and the Panchayats will be dominated by the upper caste women who have a better chance to achieve literacy. In Bijapur district, women's literacy levels are very low in comparison to Tumkur district. Further the women in Tumkur have been exposed to the district wide drive of the National Literacy Mission. In general, we found the respondents in Tumkur far more aware

and articulate than in Bijapur. However, the most articulate and aware were the respondents who were members of Mahila Samakhya Sanghas.

In our sample we found that 6 out of 23 were literate among the Bijapur (general) respondents while 10 out of 23 were literate in the Tumkur sample. In the third group (Mahila Samakhya Sangha respondents), 7 out of 10 were literate and were going to the night schools run by Mahila Samakhya. Interestingly, however, among the illiterate women who formed over 60% (30 out of 43) of the total number of women studied, we found a greater receptivity to training and learning. Tara Bai Gajakush of Mulsavelgi Gram Panchayat in Sindgi Taluk in Bijapur when asked who would be a better administrator, the man or the woman reacted - "If you give us training, then we are definitely going to be better than the 'menfolk'". The lack of exposure to learning is an impediment to understanding the system of effective functioning and the illiterate respondents expressed their concern about this fact.

In one Panchayat in Bijapur Lakshmi Bai of Beraladinni Gram Panchayat in Bagewadi Taluk who received a book on "Rights and Duties of Elected Women Representatives in Gram Panchayats" at a training programme, used it to prove a point at the Gram Panchayat meeting. She, like other women, in her Gram Panchayat had not received the sitting fees. She took the booklet to the Gram Panchayat and demanded the fees she was entitled to. She immediately got the fees with retrospective effect. We came across one Panchayat where members pooled their sitting fees to go on a picnic at some later date. However, the women members were not told why they had not been given the sitting fees, nor were they aware about the plan for the picnic.

In one case, we also found an elected woman representative who was illiterate relying heavily on her son who had studied upto PUC (Tulaja Bai Kapali, Adhyaksha of Honnutige Gram Panchayat in Bijapur). So much so that he attends Panchayat meetings with her and sometimes instead of her! He is just about 18 years of age and could not possibly be knowledgeable about the workings of the Panchayat but clearly rules the roost. According to the mother, he refuses to help his father, who is an agricultural labourer, because of his education.

The importance of literacy and exposure to other facets of life for the elected women representatives cannot be overemphasised. Not only does representation on the Panchayat Raj Institutions provide women with an immediate impetus to acquire literacy skills, it also provides a channel for the energy and enthusiasm of neo-literates to use and improve their skills.

Again it has been proved often enough that certain kinds of knowledge and information imparted while acquiring literacy skills can be powerful tools for empowerment. The story of Sitamma - *"Sitamma Kathe"* and the anti-arrack

struggle in Nellore is now almost a legend. During the survey, we tried to probe the awareness of the respondents about various movements for social change, especially those initiated by women. As expected, awareness was extremely low. This is not surprising since there has been no conscious or concerted effort to understand, document and disseminate these struggles to the larger public by mass media and other vehicles of information dissemination in the country. Further, media coverage of women's issues are marked by a lack of objectivity and by perspectives that are unsympathetic to the hardships faced by women (7). One of the respondents had started an anti-arrack movement in her village. Neelamma, a member in the Mallasandra Gram Panchayat in Tumkur took courage and collected two hundred women to fight the arrack menace in her village. She found the source of entry of the arrack into the village. She stopped the jeep that brought the arrack and helped people who depend on this for a living, take up other occupations. It was a big victory. But eight months later, to her dismay, the menace has made a comeback. With renewed vigour, she has now submitted a petition to the DC to put an end to it.

It is extremely important that information about mobilisation and organisation by women for social change like SEWA, Chipko and the Nellore anti-arrack movement be publicised and made available to elected women representatives. Awareness of such action, taken up by women, will enhance the courage and confidence of elected women representatives and serve as powerful tools of empowerment. Such information will also provide women with knowledge about the ways and means to achieve social change. The value and power of collective action by women can be emphatically conveyed to them through such empowering information.

2.3 *How do these women perceive themselves and each other in the context of being Panchayat representatives?*

All the respondents have attended nearly all the meetings of their respective Panchayats. Other factors like age, caste, literacy levels and distance of their homes from the meeting venue seem to have no bearing on this parameter within the sample. This goes to indicate the seriousness with which women have taken on their new roles. When asked if they speak at the meetings, nearly all the women replied in the affirmative. However, when asked to elaborate, many of them could not do so.

Subash Mendapurkar: The Himachal Pradesh Act states that the Gram Panchayat meeting is a public meeting. So we sent Mahila Mandal women to sit in the meeting; at first people objected till they realised that they could not do so since there was provision in the Act for the public to attend. Even if the women just sat like pieces of furniture, it is an empowering experience for the women and it also becomes a control mechanism on the way decisions are made at the meeting, and on the kind of decisions made.

When asked who takes the decisions at meetings, many of the women replied without hesitation that the Adhyaksha should take the decision. This seems to betray a lack of participatory and consensual processes at the meetings. However, tell-tale evidence to the contrary came from the responses to other questions. Several of the respondents, when asked, what the qualities of a good adhyaksha are, said "He must listen to everybody, take everybody's views ..." It would appear that while the women representatives are aware that they must take part in the meetings by attending and speaking, many of them are hesitant to do so. This diffidence stems from a lack of knowledge and experience, the atmosphere at the meeting and often the attitude of the male members which does not give women space for participation. However, levels of participation in meetings do show a clear positive trend as we go from the Bijapur (general) to Tumkur to Bijapur (Mahila Samakhya) respondents.

With the more disadvantaged among our respondents, their inability to see themselves in a different light after they are elected to the Panchayats was obvious. They seemed to accept the unsympathetic evaluation of the community about themselves and their performance or rather non-performance. It was evident that they had never "dared to dream" as one of our researchers put it. They wanted next to nothing for themselves, how would they be expected to have a vision for their village, for other women? Some of the respondents did not even consider walking four kilometers for one pot of water a problem. They have not had the energy to do anything but accept the back-breaking hardships of their lives.

When asked what they would do for women as Panchayat members, several respondents listed toilets for women as a priority. What came through in most of the interactions was the concern of the elected women representatives for meeting the basic needs and living conditions in the village. The other priority area was to improve the economic status of women by giving them some kind of vocational training.

2.3.i Exposure to Media and Information

Respondents in this study have had little exposure to mass media. Few of them listen to the radio and only a minuscule number possess television sets. A very small number read newspapers. They are almost totally reliant on whatever garbled information is available in the neighbourhood. This is a direct consequence of being sidelined by stereotypes where women's education and access to information are not priorities. Again, it must also be borne in mind that the press and audio-visual media toe the highly centralised Government line. They hardly ever reflect the true picture of the country particularly of the rural areas. Development issues are regarded as soft issues; people's problems and struggles are largely ignored by these agencies which are hardly able to act as any kind of vehicle for social change.

The mass media and audio-visual technology can be exploited for the purpose of creating awareness about Panchayat Raj. This should however be initiated by people's groups and not as Government slanted programmes. This can be taken as an agenda for grassroot NGO's working for women and Panchayat Raj. Activists can play a substantial role in providing information on development issues. A recent Delhi-based initiative for the creation of a development communication network that includes activists, development researchers and media persons called CHARKA is an encouraging step in this direction.

2.3.ii Gender Relations and Family Dynamics

Many of the respondents ascribe a prominent role to the men in their families (18 out of 46) or village patriarch (25 out of 46) who told them about reservations, helped them file their nominations and in a few cases conducted Panchayat business in their stead. Only 3 elected women representatives, who are literate, filed the nominations on their own. Of the 10 Mahila Samakhya respondents 6 were helped by their Sanghas and 4 by village and family elders.

Despite the dependency created by these factors, none of the respondents have problems attending the meetings, none cited family problems or responsibilities coming in the way of their attending meetings. It would appear that the constitutional provision of reservation has given legitimacy and created some kind of acceptance of women's participation in politics at the micro level of family and immediate community. One positive trend is that all the respondents said that they had been sent notices well in advance and that the Panchayat meetings were held at a convenient time. However, political participation cannot be defined as attending meetings which bare fact hardly makes any demands on women's time or effort. Attempts were made to probe further by asking the respondents if women came to them with problems.

In a few cases, and those among the most articulate respondents (Bijapur, MS), it was reported that village women do come with problems which they sort out by themselves or through the intervention of the *Gowdaru* or village headman. The latter continues to function as a rural power centre. When asked whom they would approach in case of a problem in the village, many women mentioned the village headman. There is a strong need to break this traditional stranglehold of power if space is to be created for the Panchayats to function as representatives and leaders of the community. The major problem in the last one year of the existence of the Gram Panchayats has been the resistance to decentralisation and the political upheavals in the state. The delineation of the role, responsibilities and funding of the Gram Panchayats has been erratic to say the least. Confusion and a lack of transparency have been the order of the day.

2.3.iii Finances of the Panchayat, Relationship with Officials

Most respondents were vague about the finances of the Panchayats. In one Panchayat (Jail Darga, Bijapur), different answers were received to the question on the amount of money received by the Panchayat. While the Adhyaksha gave a figure of Rs.69,000, two elected women representatives claimed figures of Rs.1,30,000 and nil, while a journalist in the village reported the figure of Rs.25,000/-. The exaggerated role played by the officials like the BDO, the Panchayat Secretaries and village accountants, particularly in the handling of finances, is a matter of grave concern. Many respondents are not aware that they can demand complete transparency and accountability in financial matters. What is encouraging though in terms of awareness levels, is that several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the Secretaries of their Panchayats. In many cases, the women expressed their reservations at the role played by the Secretary. In one case (Gangamma of Kulili Gram Panchayat in Bijapur), the respondent said that the secretary was old and inefficient and they had "chased" him out! It is clear that the lack of transparency about finances and powers of the Panchayat leads to the Secretary assuming a larger than necessary role.

Again, the situation in the state has been an unnatural one with the Gram Panchayats having had to function for about 15 months without the Taluk and Zilla Panchayats. It remains to be seen if the situation will improve with the recently concluded Taluk Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat polls. The present study also shows that elected women representatives in Tumkur district had interacted far more with the BDO and Tahsildar than those in Bijapur. Respondents in Tumkur rated government officials in their areas as approachable. In contrast, some respondents in Bijapur were not even aware that such people could be contacted for information and assistance. In one case, respondents reported that the BDO of Tiptur in Tumkur district has played a positive role in encouraging Gram Panchayat activities.

2.3.iv Centrally Sponsored Schemes

There is some knowledge among respondents about the myriad government sponsored schemes. However, in reply to a question as to whether they preferred the Panchayat funds being disbursed within the scheme structure or whether they would like untied grants, many respondents preferred the former. On further probing, we found that they were extremely wary that untied funds would be cornered by a powerful village elite. Their answer was based on a realistic estimate of the situation prevailing in the village.

Respondents seemed completely unaware that the centralised scheme structure, as is prevalent today, is equally bad if not worse and susceptible to leakage of finances

and corruption of the officials concerned. This is a reality that is not faced squarely by most of the training programmes that we are aware of. Government schemes are touted as the near-ultimate solution and the idea conveyed is that it is the 'sacred' duty of Panchayats to implement these schemes! The scheme structure which is over-centralised, over- bureaucratised and inefficient is hardly ever questioned. Strong initiatives are needed to counter this kind of systematic disinformation and misinformation and to create space for genuine local level planning.

2.3.v The Gram Sabha

This problem could be sorted out to some extent and village priorities accurately assessed if the Gram Sabhas are strong. Although Gram Sabhas have been conducted in some Panchayats, they seem to have been poorly attended and have hardly been reflective of village problems and priorities. Respondents claimed to have attended one, two and sometimes even three Gram Sabha meetings. On further probing, many respondents did not seem to know the difference between a Gram Sabha and a Gram Panchayat meeting. Only a few were able to accurately describe the Gram Sabha proceedings. There is a strong need to strengthen the Gram Sabha functioning perhaps through mandatory provisions for quorum and procedures. The Karnataka Act '93 does not specify the need for a quorum. Thus a small and non-representative group of people can be deemed to constitute a Gram Sabha. **There should be a quorum and this should be defined as acceptable only if 50% of the participants are women.**

Subash Mendapurkar: There are systematic efforts across the country to underplay the role of the Gram Sabhas in the amended Acts; also an overpowering role has been assigned to the bureaucracy. These are points that can be taken up for discussion. We have seen that taking part in the Gram Sabhas is very empowering for women. There is 10% quorum for the first meeting but no quorum for an adjourned meeting. However, whichever way you look at it, women are not heard and the Gram Sabha is not effective in controlling the Gram Panchayat and demanding accountability from it.

Tripathi: There is a 10% quorum in Orissa. In Parliament, MPs don't want the word "quorum" mentioned when important national issues like women and children are taken up for discussion because an embarrassingly small number of them are present. In the Gram Sabha, the action plan is generally passed in the second meeting where no quorum is required, the Sarpanch and his "henchmen" get everything passed.

A very good point raised in this paper is that within every quorum a minimum number for women should be specified.

2.4 *Leadership of the Panchayat*

Hardly any variations were noted in the responses between the elected women representatives in Panchayats with a male adhyaksha and those with a female adhyaksha. It would appear that such differences would surface only when the Panchayats become more active and more involved in social action. The Panchayats have this far not been involved in any innovative or controversial activities or those that call for resolutions of conflicting interests.

2.4.i Influence of External Enabling Mechanisms

What comes through in this study, is the clear influence of external enabling mechanisms like the NLM and change agents like the Mahila Samakhya Programme. The NLM in Tumkur has provided a backdrop of knowledge, community acceptance and positive interventions for women representatives - the NLM has played a stellar role in the training programmes for women representatives of Gram Panchayats in Tumkur district. The Mahila Samakhya programme has enabled a heartening number of women from among the poorest sections of rural society to participate meaningfully in political processes. These women, are for the most part, articulate and strong as representatives of their communities. Further the 'Sanghas' provide just the kind of supporting network that is needed to give the elected women representatives confidence and strength. Our study in Bijapur also reveals the important role played by the Mahila Samakhya programme when we see the contrast between respondents who have not been touched by the programme and those who have been part of it within the same district. Clearly enabling mechanisms to strengthen the participation of elected women representatives lie in these directions.

The Mahila Samakhya programme in Karnataka has been conspicuously successful in enhancing the awareness and self esteem of women. The processes of the programme have contributed significantly to the empowerment of poor women. This is particularly true in Bijapur district where the programme worked closely from the early stages in 1989 with the women representatives of the Bijapur Zilla Parishad. This, in turn, led to the grooming of Mahila Samakhya Sangha members as potential representatives when the Gram Panchayat elections were held in December 1993. About 60 Sangha women won the elections, ten of whom have been interviewed for the present study. Not only are these women articulate and aware of their rights and responsibilities towards the community, they are also aware of the strength of collective action.

Srilatha Batliwala: When the Mahila Samakhya programme was started in 1989, the Mandal Panchayats (with 25% reservation for women) were in existence. The Sangha women saw the Mandals as a source of power and it was a very real goal for them to capture power in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. The nature of the Sangha women's participation

is not just one of enhanced awareness because of greater confidence. Their entire perspective is different. They feel that women's agenda is a political agenda and that political activity is very much a part of the empowerment programme. Discussions in the Sanghas centred around the relationship of the Sangha with the elected women representative, whether she would get co-opted by the system, what was her accountability to the Sangha that supported her and so on.

The effects of the NLM initiatives in Tumkur district have not been as direct. What is of interest is that the NLM personnel were closely involved with government sponsored initiatives during 1994- 1995 for Panchayat Raj training. It was the first district to undertake large scale training programmes for elected women representatives conducted by the district officials, the NLM personnel and a Bangalore based NGO, SEARCH. Proximity to the State capital has also led to greater awareness among people.

However, the latest trends from Tumkur are discouraging. For totally extraneous reasons, the NLM programme has been wound up and the personnel who had acquired considerable skills in working with elected women representatives have been posted to other departments. This is a matter of grave concern. Even more distressing is the fact that a programme which had involved women in a big way has been given up.

The present study thus clearly indicates the crucial role played by collective programmes for empowerment of the disadvantaged groups. Several grassroot groups are working towards the creation of such enabling environments in their field of work.

Balaji Pandey: A very strong point has been made in the paper about the need for support groups for women representatives like the Mahila Samakhya Sanghas. We must provide a good base for the elected women representatives. They will have a mutually reinforcing relationship.

The participation of elected women representatives can then be further strengthened through information based programmes about procedures, finances, and other elements of local governance. A positive role by the media, the emergence of alternative media forms for wider and meaningful dissemination and more involvement in local governance of grassroot groups are all desirable if genuine local governance is to take place.

The study has also brought out the fact that regardless of the situation prevalent today, the awareness and participation of women in governance can grow leading to positive changes in caste, class and family relationships.

Suman Kolhar (Ex-Upadhyaksha, Bijapur Zilla Parishad): I am a first time politician. In fact, I used to be allergic to politics. At dinner time, if the menfolk talked politics, I used to get impatient and wish that they would , finish their dinner and hurry up. When the elections came, they could not find enough women candidates. The party came to my father-in-law and suggested that I contest. I won by 3000 votes and was also elected Upadhyaksha of the Zilla Parishad. I think I can say with a clear conscience that I worked well for 5 years. I had no training. But if we have someone to guide us (Margadarshan) we need less time.

Recently we had an Ambedkar Jayanthi celebration in Bijapur and elected women representatives were invited and honoured. One Lambani lady received from the Minister a portrait of Dr.Ambedkar and a certificate and all kinds of things. Her hands were so full she did not know how to get down from the stage. She handed the portrait to the Minister saying "Here, hold it"... while she got down. She managed the situation quite well!

In another case, one member of the Gram Panchayat was the servant of another member. The master wanted to put up a petition for extra land to the Panchayat and he kept telling the other man to take care of it. The servant told him, "Look, here I may be your servant, you pay me to look after your cattle and so on. I will do that work. But anything to do with the Panchayat, you can talk to me at the Panchayat office".

Section 3

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN THE KARNATAKA PANCHAYAT RAJ ACT 1993

The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act has been the subject of much controversy since its passage in 1993. The main criticism levelled against the Act is that it is in contravention to the spirit of the Constitutional 73rd Amendment. (4,5,6)

For the purpose of this study however, we concentrate on clauses in the Act that are inimical to the meaningful participation of women. The gender blindness of the Act stems from both acts of omission as well as of commission. Discrimination can, to a large extent, be identified only when this Act, applied in the field is not potent enough to break patriarchal structures and customs. However it has not been possible to do the exhaustive empirical study needed to establish such data. What is attempted here is the identification of such Sections of the Panchayat Raj Act which could be legally considered as discriminatory. The entire effort is based on the underlying principle of whether or not it is *ultra vires* to Article 14 of the Constitution of India.

Article 14 in part III of the Constitution which deals with fundamental rights reads "Equality before law:- The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or equal protection of the laws within the territory of India".

The guiding principle of the Article is that all persons similarly circumstanced shall be treated alike both in privileges conferred and liabilities imposed. Equality before the law means that among equals the law should be equal and should be equally administered. Equal treatment of non-equals is considered as bad as unequal treatment of equals.

Every socio-economic parameter studied indicates the poorer status of women with respect to men in Indian society. The reservation of a third of the seats in the local bodies, under the Constitutional 73rd and 74th Amendments, seeks to rectify this imbalance by giving women a greater voice in the decision-making processes. There have been several demands for increasing the reservation to 50% which would more truly reflect the proportion of women in the population.

A few clauses in the Act that are overtly discriminatory against women are listed here.

Chapter III Clause 5.7 states that when two thirds of the total number of members of any Gram Panchayat have been elected, the Gram Panchayat shall be deemed to

have been duly constituted under the Act. It is necessary to modify this clause to state that of this 2/3, a third shall be women members.

Chapter III, Clause 8 refers to the appointment of an Administrator or Administrative Committee on failure to elect members of the Gram Panchayat. There is no provision for reservation for women members in this Administrative Committee.

Chapter III, clause 22 which deals with what Acts will be termed as corrupt practices should include in sub-clauses (iii) and (iv) that appeal to refrain from voting for somebody on the basis of sex and attempts to promote hatred on the basis of sex be termed as corrupt practices. At present, religion, race, caste, community or language are listed and there is no mention of discrimination on the basis of sex.

Clause 34 should include promotion of hatred on the basis of sex as an offence extending to imprisonment or fine. Since such a provision is not provided under clause 34, it is discriminating to the extent that if the aforementioned promotion is indulged in which is highly likely in a patriarchal and conservative rural society, women have no recourse to action.

Clauses 49, 52 and 53 which deal with the number of members required for a different course of action. These are all discriminating in as much as they make no mention of the requisite number of women within the deemed quorum. As per the present Act, a woman Adhyaksha can easily be disqualified and removed from office by two third the number of members who could all be men. It is essential that the quorum required for any important course of action should have as far as possible, the same composition and proportion as the Gram Panchayat at its full strength. This may not always be possible in some cases where there is only one member belonging to Scheduled Tribes in the Panchayat.

The above provisos deal with the functioning of the Gram Panchayat. Similar changes are suggested for the relevant clauses pertaining to the Taluk and Zilla Panchayats.

In the present Act, it is mandatory to have at least one woman member in only one of the three standing committee i.e the Social Justice Committee. Similar mandatory inclusion of women is necessary in the Production and Amenities Committees. Mention may be made here of one case in Mysore district where chairpersons of all standing committees were women who functioned very efficiently (personal communication).

While the Act mandates the holding of at least one Gram Sabha every six months, no mention is made of what constitutes a Gram Sabha. In actual practice, village meetings attended by about twenty people are passed off as Gram Sabhas. If the Gram Sabha is mandated by the Act which is legally binding, why can a quorum

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not be specified for a Gram Sabha? Further this quorum should have at least 50% of its members as women.

What must be borne in mind, is that women who constitute close to 50% of the population, are discriminated against, in every possible way, in a predominantly patriarchal system. It is imperative that in visualising the political system, we do not reduce the possibility of women's participation in any way. Therefore, it is important that the 33.3% reservation for women be made practically effective by ensuring that no major decision is taken without their active participation. It is with this purpose in view that we have emphasised the changes mentioned above. The question is not really of legal empowerment alone but in ensuring that the spirit of Article 14 is not violated, that principles of ethics and social justice are respected.

Section 4

TRAINING INITIATIVES IN KARNATAKA

Several initiatives have been taken up for strengthening the participation of women representatives, through training and facilitation programmes, by the State government as well as by voluntary agencies. Elections to the Gram Panchayats were held in December 1993. Since that time government initiatives for training have come mainly from the Department of Women and Child Development of the State Government.

At the outset, an ambitious and well-designed state wide programme to reach all the 35,305 women from 5640 Gram Panchayats was drawn up by the department and SEARCH, a Bangalore based NGO support organisation. This proposal did not get the support it deserved and was whittled down to smaller programmes run at the district level. Programmes are under way in six of the 19 districts.

One of the most active, enthusiastic and efficient programmes has been conducted in Tumkur district where the district authorities, the National Literacy Mission Volunteers and SEARCH conducted training programmes for 1693 women and 1708 men. The district authorities have also done extensive work to create a computerised data bank on information about elected women representatives and to prepare written material for the programmes.

What has been distressing though is the lack of interest, until recently, on the part of the Ministry of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj. As at the National level, the attitude prevalent seems to be "You want to help elected women representatives, get the Women and Child Ministry to do it". There is hardly any attempt to view elected women representatives (and more so, the most disadvantaged of them who are in the Gram Panchayats) as necessary to the success of the Panchayat Raj experiment in the country. Nor is there sufficient appreciation or sympathy for the main intent behind the reservation for women under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. While individual bureaucrats are certainly supportive, these concerns do not seem to have percolated into general thinking at Ministry levels. Time and again, it has been reiterated by those committed to local governance that Women and Panchayats, in a mutually beneficial partnership, can play a vital role in improving the present vitiated and warped political scene in the country.

At the national level, 'training' for Panchayat representatives have been limited to three big institutions - National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA) and the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy of Administration (LBSAA). Similarly, the Ministry of Rural Development and

Panchayat Raj, Government of Karnataka, has recently taken a decision that training for all Zilla Panchayat representatives will be taken up by the Institute of Social and Economic change (ISEC) and for the Taluk Panchayat level by the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD). No effort is being made to reach the Gram Panchayats at the present by the RDPR Ministry, since the numbers are very large. Training programmes at these big Institutions, (which have incidentally been in this field of activity for several years) are tailored to the needs of participants who have prior knowledge and experience in the subjects under consideration. Further, they tend to be more subject oriented and less people oriented. Almost inevitably, they are groping in the dark when it comes to gender issues and gender sensitive handling of themes.

Unhappily there seems to be a distinct polarisation on gender issues with no one quite knowing how to bridge the divide.

Srilatha Batliwala: There are a large number of trainers with a good understanding of gender concerns particularly in Karnataka. However they are scattered in NGO's across the State. Further, it is often difficult to find a common meeting point and methodology. The result is that their expertise remains lost to large scale State sponsored training efforts. The Government does not seem able to provide a common platform for this pool of expertise; whether this is by accident or intent, it is hard to tell. The other problem is the poor availability of appropriate resource and training material. Many NGO's are now working to produce such material.

Time is also a constraint for the Ministry, which with all laudable intentions, wants to 'train' at the earliest, the elected Taluk and Zilla Panchayat representatives so that the Panchayats can start functioning as soon as possible. What is disturbing is that most of the funds available for facilitation programmes are concentrated in the efforts of the big Institutions. A matter of concern is that this will become one more Government effort, into which large amounts of resources and public money are pumped in, which passes women by. Unless some serious soul-searching is done about these programmes, it is hard to see any but minimal returns for women. Further, these programmes being Government sponsored and funded they are unlikely to question the sometimes negative role played by 'Sarkar' with respect to the Panchayats.

What are the solutions? It is imperative that the training becomes more broad based and involves expertise which has been built up in the voluntary sector. Special efforts are needed on the part of both Government and the voluntary sector, to conduct the programmes in a gender sensitive way, to make them more vibrant and innovative if they are to serve any meaningful purpose.

Vina Mazumdar: About indicators for training, who will do training and so on..., certainly not people like us who have opted out of the political system. The best is to ask dynamic elected women representatives to train others and we should watch and document. The question is will they have the time to do it?

4.1 *The GRAMSAT Programme*

In February 1995, the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Karnataka, tried an innovative experiment to conduct programmes for elected women representatives through a one-way video, two-way audio channel provided by satellite technology. Known as GRAMSAT, this programme was beamed from Bangalore to training centres in 19 districts where groups of women representatives had assembled along with resource persons for four days.

An expert panel at Bangalore responded to queries and doubts expressed by the participants. The department had taken special efforts to make the expert panels as representative as possible. Voluntary agencies, activists, experts on women's issues and senior bureaucrats made up the panels on different days. The video programme itself was an excellent mix of information, role plays, stories and games which illustrated the different important aspects of Panchayat Raj. Several NGO workers and media persons with experience in dealing with gender issues were involved in the programme. About 600 women representatives all over the state were involved in the programme. The experiment has also demonstrated how technology can be used to good effect and for larger reach using less by way of resources. It can serve as an excellent support programme for training efforts.

4.2 *Training by the voluntary sector*

Several voluntary agencies have been involved in Panchayat Raj training in the past fifteen months. Only a few are mentioned here and have been picked mainly to illustrate the different kinds of approaches to training. Organisations like SEARCH have played a major role in Government sponsored initiatives. Some organisations like Concerned for Working Children (CWC) and VISTHAR have taken up Panchayat Raj training at grassroots level for the groups they are working with. At CWC's project in Basrur, Dakshina Kannada, women were assisted in standing for Panchayat elections. The Mahila Samakhya programme which is run in 5 districts (Mysore, Raichur, Bijapur, Bidar and Gulbarga), encourages 'Sangha' women to learn about Panchayat processes and to stand for elections. In the five districts, a total of 135 'Sangha' women have been elected to the Panchayats. Hengasara Hakkina Sangha (HHS), a legal forum for women in Karnataka has been working on the gender implications of the Karnataka Act and has included Panchayat Raj awareness for women as part of their programmes for legal literacy.

ISST, Bangalore has been conducting programmes for elected Gram Panchayat women representatives in 8 Gram Panchayat clusters - two each in the four districts of Mysore, Kolar, Gulbarga and Uttara Kannada. An average of 2-3 camps for each area have been conducted in the past year. Table.6 gives some details about the participants. Of the 130 odd women, only seven were members of the earlier Mandal Panchayats. The majority are first time entrants into politics. As such, training has had to adapt itself and be effective for people with no experience in politics whatsoever.

Table 6: Particulars of UMA Trainees

1. Age

1.	20-30	23
2.	30-40	65
3.	40-50	30
4.	50-60	17
5.	60 & Above	1

2. Education

1.	Illiterate	47
2.	Literate	2
3.	Standard (1-4)	32
4.	Standard (5-7)	21
5.	Standard (8-10)	23
6.	PUC	2
7.	Graduates	9

3. Occupation

1.	Own Land	44
2.	Agricultural labour	14
3.	Housewife	67
4.	Artisan	1
5.	Service industry	2
6.	Others	8
7.	Not working/Old	-

4. *Reservation*

1.	Scheduled Caste	36
2.	Scheduled Tribe	14
3.	Other Backward Com.	52
4.	General	30
5.	Christians	3
6.	Muslims	1

5. *Whether Member Of Mandal Panchayat*

1.	Yes	7
2.	No	128

In a sense, the experience of ISST in undertaking these programmes helped us understand the problems and pitfalls inherent in this exercise at a general level. On the positive side, National interest has been focussed on elected women representatives, making the training efforts for them a legitimate and respected activity. Inherent problems all over the country have been the dearth of appropriate resource and training material and of experienced resource persons. Little material exists that has a gender sensitive and women focussed approach to knowledge and information. Similarly, most training professionals have had little opportunity to understand problems faced by women and to develop gender sensitive mindsets. As such, training programmes, in general, have presented both challenges and opportunities to create innovative material and to upgrade training skills. Interactions with the women representatives have been a continuous and rewarding learning process. Factors that would strengthen the participation of women representatives are several and wide ranging. Whatever the content, any group interaction or programme for women helps them build up confidence.

What is heartening is the eagerness of women to attend both Panchayat meetings as well as training programmes. Many trainees in the ISST group keep in touch with each other after the programmes. Participants, who are also members of a credit group of MYRADA (an NGO in Mysore), have a feeling of unity and are also willing to understand and sort out the problems of other women. Women respond most to methodologies like role plays, experience sharing and mock meetings. In one camp, Kenchamma, an Upadhyaksha of H.D.Kote Taluk in Mysore, shared her problem with the group. A 'coolie' by profession, she became the butt of cruel jokes when she tried to carry on with her work after being elected Upadhyaksha. How was she going to eat, to support her family if she did not work; this was the only

work she knew, she told the group. This story was repeated in several camps and moved the participants greatly identifying as they did with Kenchamma's problems. This simple story became a powerful way to illustrate the dichotomy in the life of a poor woman who becomes a Panchayat member. Thus there is a need to keep constantly innovating and looking for information and methodologies that appeal to the trainees.

Vasanth Nachane: The Dr. PV Mandik Trust is doing training in the Konkan region. There is no need to spend too much money on training. Local social workers well versed in the local language, folklore etc. can come forward as resource persons. Local people can be trained. We spent only about Rs.1000/- per camp. Participants brought their own food. Money for travel was not provided if it was a 2-day camp, one meal was provided by the local people.

Another interesting initiative at ISST was the organising of a MELA for about 200 elected women Gram Panchayat representatives. Not only did this provide a common forum for representatives from different districts, it was an opportunity to discuss issues like political participation, health, environment and legal literacy. These subjects were handled by resource persons known for their gender sensitive handling of issues. The entire exercise turned out to be a valuable learning experience for both the organisers as well as the participants. (8,9)

From UMA documentation of GRAMSAT programme in Tumkur and Kolar districts: Programmes like the GRAMSAT and the UMA Mela captured events in the language and idiom of the women representatives of the Gram Panchayats. The women express complicated concepts simply, pithily, in everyday language. They take their positions as Gram Panchayat representatives quite seriously. Watching a woman member being dragged out of the meeting by her husband in the GRAMSAT video, participants were indignant and wondered why the other women had not protested. They feel their lack of literacy skills keenly. However the resource person emphasised that they had very valuable knowledge although they were illiterate. As one woman representative succinctly put it, "If we are aware of issues, we will remember the song on the Panchayat that our friend sang; a literate woman may have to refer to her book". Their spirit and enthusiasm are infectious, stories abound demonstrating the courage of women members who boycotted an engineer who had swindled Panchayat funds of an illiterate woman Adhyakshini who remained unmoved by her problems and got the Secretary to read every document to her and many more. The hurdles are also many. One woman talked about how articulate women members are ignored by the Adhyaksha who treats the husbands of the illiterate women members to booze so that they get the wives to support him in the Panchayat. Another participant posed the following problem to the group. The Adhyaksha of her Panchayat had built his house on Panchayat land. She wanted to know what could be done. The answer came from another member - to call a meeting of the Social Justice Committee.

Some women who were not satisfied with the performance of the Secretaries of their Panchayats suggested that they be given training.

An area of concern, is that, it is all too easy to let programmes for women representatives dwindle into information based and packed events that take little or no cognisance of the problems and fears of elected women representatives.

To guard against this eventuality, a system of checks and balances should be evolved through serious and systematic networking among voluntary agencies. Similarly, material produced as training and resource material should be constantly and rigorously evaluated through field interactions.

In an exhaustive study conducted by the Centre for Education and Documentation (CED), Bangalore, the availability of teaching and training material appropriate to the literacy and learning ability levels of disadvantaged groups has been studied (10). Drawing up a list of five categories, the authors demonstrate how hardly any material is available to upgrade the skills of illiterate and neo- literate women. Methodologies need to be evolved for the identification, preparation, testing and dissemination of good material. This can become an exciting agenda for the voluntary sector with the government supporting in terms of finance and infrastructure.

Section 5

Conclusion

As mentioned in Section 2, principles of natural justice are as much offended by the equal treatment of nonequals as by the non equal treatment of equals.

Women have become non equals, disadvantaged and dispossessed, in relation to men through centuries of domination in patriarchal societies, through systematic neglect of their abilities and potential. Reservation in political decision-making is but one step towards equal participation in social change and processes.

The present study does lead us to conclude that the participation of women at the present moment could be improved upon considerably. There are a host of contributory factors, many of which are beyond the control of the individual representative. The silver linings are also many.

Yardsticks to measure the participation of women must be evolved through a systematic and gender sensitive evaluation of the situation of rural women in this country. The study shows that women, irrespective of caste, class, literacy and domestic duties are enthusiastic about attending meetings and training programmes. By attending meetings and establishing an identity other than that of the domestic drudge, women representatives have already begun to change stereotyped images. Many of the respondents in this study, as well as those we spoke to in other interactions during the past two years, saw no problems in reconciling domestic and political duties. Most of them would like to stand for elections again (present and other studies); one lady even aims at becoming Prime Minister! (Not in present study).

Meeting procedures, the scope of the Panchayat, roles and responsibilities of members remain areas of mystery but this can be attributed in large measure to the confusion, lack of transparency and information about the entire Panchayat Raj set up. Systematic and sincere efforts to strengthen the participation of women can do much to improve the situation, as also the experience as members for a longer duration.

At another level, the Panchayat Raj Act and rules issued subsequently, need to be examined carefully to see in what ways they deter meaningful participation of women. For example, there is a proposal that the term of the Adhyaksha and Upadhyaksha should be restricted to twelve or twenty months of the five year term with rotation among the members. This would give very little scope for women Adhyakshas and Upadhyakshas to learn the ropes. As mentioned in Section II of this paper, detailed field studies should now be undertaken to examine if the

provisions of the Act help or hinder the participation of women representatives and changes should be made in this light.

New and innovative institutional support structures need to be created to strengthen women's participation. One of the problems that surfaced during the Gram Panchayat elections was violence and intimidation of women representatives. In some cases, they were prevented from filing their nominations for the posts of Adhyakshini and Upadhyakshini by powerful village elite and local politicians. In such cases, the affected woman representative, particularly if she belongs to the poorer sections, has little or no recourse to action. District level *kendras* where women representatives can file complaints about harassment and interference in the performance of their duties could be established. Needless to say, sufficient care must be taken to see that these *kendras* do not become just one more mindless and insensitive cell.

Radio is a medium that could be exploited to advantage to give information to women representatives in far flung parts of each district. District broadcasting stations could play a positive role in such efforts. A 15 minute "Panchayat Vani" slot could post information about the functioning of Panchayats, about training programmes and so on.

This study has also clearly brought out the need for nurturing support systems for women members like Sangha collectives, the literacy mission and other mass based groups.

In the areas of preparation of training and resource material and developing alternative media networks, exciting new agendas for action by NGO's have been created.

Several concurrent initiatives could play critical roles. For example, there is a move to launch a nation-wide campaign to raise the awareness of women voters in the country, initiated by the Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS) as its action component. The hope is that women will vote and lobby effectively for issues important to women. Such a campaign, if it succeeds, can provide support to women representatives who wish to contest from general seats in the next round of elections. Raising the awareness of women voters will also provide the necessary checks and balances for elected representatives.

Lack of gender sensitivity over decades of economic and development planning has led to women being economically handicapped. From this fact, arises a whole set of factors leading to discrimination against women. The Panchayat Raj experiment would have failed if it does not lead to economic betterment at the village level, equally of men and women, through sustained and equitable local level planning.

Apart from service to the community, women must derive, from their participation in political decision-making, opportunities to better their economic status.

Concerted and mass based efforts, as a social movement, to create vibrant grassroot Institutions, are needed in which women can be instruments of change towards a just and equitable society.

5.1 *Role of Party Politics*

Different approaches of Congress and Janata to Panchayat Raj Institutions have led to changes in implementation of the Panchayat Raj Act.

The Taluk and Zilla elections which were fought on party basis were far more orderly and smooth than the Gram Panchayat elections which are not party based in Karnataka. "People wanted the same party in power at State and local bodies so that things would get done" - Suman Kolhar.

5.2 *Caste/Class*

An incident from the UMA training camp in Uttara Kannada - An SC woman Adhyaksha who was poor and illiterate, was unable to understand what was going on during the sessions at the camp. The other women, some who were members of her own Panchayat, took special pains to help her understand what was going on and to answer her queries. In fact their attitude to her was extremely encouraging and protective.

5.3 *Indirect but Important Issue*

Data on women representatives is very poor, also delayed, sometimes near enough to the end of the terms as elected women representatives and is usually not gender disaggregated. Sources are usually the Ministry of RDPR and the Election Commission. Unless district authorities send in data fast it becomes dated and irrelevant.

For women representatives the data collected should be such as to ensure meaningful interventions to strengthen their participation.

5.4 *Movements for Social Change*

Most women (respondents) had not heard about any such processes. The question is whether such women are deliberately being kept out of the Panchayat Raj Institutions, whether there are hardly any such movements in Karnataka or whether information and media coverage of such issues is so minimal that hardly anyone gets to hear about them. Probably a mixture of all three factors.

5.5 Giving a Feminist perspective to the Panchayat Raj Act

Women's groups and groups working for women in Panchayats should get together with legal experts to give the Act a feminist perspective. Empirical studies are needed to see what can be put into the Act that will weaken and ultimately break down patriarchal structures and positions that hinder the true participation of elected women representatives.

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Prepared by

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About the Document

This document is a part of a larger study on Panchayat Raj elections carried out in the State of Rajasthan in 1995. It has resulted in the creation of several documents. The study of women's participation in Panchayat Raj was carried out with ISST support. A large number of people got involved in the study- we owe our thanks to them.

Source:

The primary source for almost all documentation were the candidates themselves. However, those who wrote out the information or transmitted it orally to us are as follows :

Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, Jaipur	Jawahar (Bharatpur) Mehmood Khan (Alwar) Harikishan Yadav (Alwar) Om Pal (Alwar) Roshan (Alwar) Dharma Veer Mewati (Alwar)
Urmul Trust, Bikaner	Guman Singh Suman Kanwar Tulsi Ram Kapil Gaur Dilip Bidawaat Mukhram Patwal (Hanumangarh) Mahaveer Singh Mahaveer (Surnana) Badargiri Sharvan Kumar Purna Ram
Vihan, Jaipur	Suraj Chaturvedi (Bharatpur) Hakim (Alwar)
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Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghathan (Bhim)	Shankar Singh Ladu Singh Rawat
Social Work and Research Centre (Tilonia)	Ratan Devi Norati Devi Chotu Lal Teja Ram Suraj Girdhari Subhash
Prayatna (Dudu) Prayas (Pratapgarh)	Laxmi Narayan Hemraj Kheradi Sudhir Katyar
Ankur (Jhadol) Prayatna (Udaipur)	Jagdish Pandya Chitra Dangi Mohan Dangi Gautam Rawat
Wagad Jan Jagriti Sansthan (Dungarpur)	Alok Dwivedi Satya Narain Ameta
Kisan Morcha (Alwar)	Dharma Veer Arya
Samanvaya Samiti (Devli)	Durga Dass Ravi Hemdari
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Section 1

INTRODUCTION

The Seventy third Amendment Act through its policy of reservation has legitimised the entry of women in mainstream politics throughout the country. The recent Panchayat Raj elections held in the State of Rajasthan in the months of January and February 1995 were of historical significance for this State. For the first time there was a widespread involvement of women in the electoral arena and politics.

In a state considered to be the most feudal and backward state of the country, according to the modern society's indicators of development,this was unique. On the basis of the demographic indicators of sex ratio and population growth, and indicators of poverty, literacy and per capita income, the state is the most backward in the country. Similarly feudal practices like the revival and glorification of *Sati* in 1987, mass nuptials of children on *akha teej* every year, and increasing incidence of female infanticide, the denial of *Chaupal*- the "public space" in the village for women, and ignoring the women in any public decision making, establish the social backwardness and deprivation of women in the Rajasthani society.

In this context what meaning could rural women and the society at large have given to these elections which made compulsory 38,791 seats of a total of 1,19,419 to be only filled by women, and especially by a large number of SC, ST and poor women? It is interesting to note that in the last state legislative elections held in December 1993, only 9 women MLAs were elected in a house of 200 representatives, indicating that the space for women was shrinking in politics.

It is our contention that reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions, and the recent election has legitimised the public domain - the male bastion of mainstream politics and governance for ordinary rural women in Rajasthan. The election has also acted as a catalytic agent on a mass scale for strengthening the process of the stepping out of rural women from their homes for public/community activity. In other words it has increased the visibility of women in the public realm.

It has been observed for the last ten years that there is less resistance from the women themselves and their families and communities towards them coming out of their homes for public activity. It is by and large rural women who have been responding to programmes of government including the Total Literacy Campaign. It is they who have been mobilising and protesting against issues relating to basic needs of food, water, work, housing, other community problems and physical atrocities against women. You have existence of more women's groups existing in the State than mixed groups or men's groups.

It is not within the scope of this paper to address the questions related to why women are responding more to these activities? Is there a general acceptance of family and society to women coming out of their homes? What is the nature of the struggles that women have to face with both themselves and the community today when they are intervening in the public space? It would not be befitting for us as researchers to generalise on the basis of a mere election. However, the manner in which the process of elections has acted as a catalytic agent is important to understand and forms a basis to plan ahead.

The instruments of participation in an election are culturally considered unacceptable for women in Rajasthan. Ideally an election consists of candidates and supporters not just stepping out of the house, but meeting and communicating with a cross section of people thus being under the gaze of the public, moving about in the company of *gair mard* (strange men), building public opinion, taking decisions and strategising for the elections, visiting government offices, joining parties (although we may disagree with the ideology and functioning of parties but parties are essential for the existence of the present system of democracy), addressing and being addressed on wider issues of society and development, entering a public contest and the power structure, becoming a decision maker and an information source.

How far did women challenge feudal and patriarchal norms and use the above stated tools in order to take on the new role from which they were kept out over the ages? Did women respond as a homogenous group or was it a differential response across caste and class and regions? What was the response of women's groups and voluntary agencies towards the election?

The process of entry has opened up several avenues. However, it has not been a bed of roses. Women were often proxies for the men in the election. Similarly, bold women were defeated. In the post election scenario the men have not yet been able to come to terms with the presence of women as their equals or superiors. Either women have surrendered to the men or the powerful, due to fear of not knowing what to do or out of sheer exasperation and isolation, or are fighting in an isolated way the forces of co-option at the village level.

Nevertheless, the process of entry, and the entry itself, will have a long term impact on the situation of women. Whether this will transform the public domain and in particular the Panchayat Raj Institutions, throw up alternative conceptions of power and authority in society needs to be addressed simultaneously with looking at how this process will have an impact on the self and social image of women along with gender relations in society. However, the following paper only looks at the latter in the limited experience of elections.

The paper is divided into seven parts. Section 2 gives a description of the socio-economic context and the situation of women and women's development in Rajasthan. Following which Section 3 gives a brief history of Panchayat Raj in the state of Rajasthan and looks at how far the state Panchayat Raj legislation will facilitate women and the functioning of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Section 4 consists of the observations of the macro data of the election, Mainly on how women have faired in relationship with parties. Section 5 is the field study, which captures the textures and experiences of the election. The depth of the experience has been constructed. Section 6 tries to look at the needs of these elected representatives, the support structures available to these women and the direction that will have to be taken in order to sustain the energy that has been unleashed in these elections. Section 7 has a list of tables.

Section 2

THE CONTEXT

2.i. Rajasthan: General Information

Rajasthan is the second largest state in the country accounting for more than 10.4 percent of the geographical area but with a relatively low population density. Its share in the country's population is only five percent. Most of its approximate 44 million people reside in rural areas making for a figure of over 33 million people in the 33,000 villages of the state. The state has over 25 percent Scheduled Castes (SC's) and Scheduled Tribes (ST's). The break up being 17.29 percent SC's and 8.84 percent ST's. The state is distinct from the rest of the country due to two aspects, regular drought and a history of feudalism.

Two thirds of Rajasthan lies in the arid and semi arid region where drought is a recurrent phenomenon. Most of the population is engaged largely in subsistence agriculture where the general productivity is low. In economic terms, Rajasthan has all the indicators of being a "backward" State.

Agriculture and livestock are the two predominant occupations in the state. The annual precipitation varies between 100 cm in the south-west to about 16 cm in Jaisalmer. Given the low, erratic and variable rainfall in many parts of the state, the dependency on livestock as a safety-net is very high. The state accounts for about 13.5 percent of the total livestock of the country. The state has well developed pockets of agriculture in Ganganagar and Chambal commands, and as a contrast in districts like Jaisalmer there may be little agricultural production for years at stretch. The occupation structure in the state is predominantly agriculture based. Nearly half of the cultivated holdings belong to the small and marginal farmers in the state.

Growth of population in the state has been among the highest in the country. Population growth rates for the state were, on an average, five percent higher than the national average during the last three decades. Consequently, the share of the state in India's population has increased from 4.4 percent in 1961 to 5.2 percent in 1991. In spite of the population growth however, the rural population in the state has declined from 84 percent in 1961 to 77 percent in 1991. The bulk of the growth in the rural population between 1971-91 has been in the arid western and northern Rajasthan.

The literacy rate in the state is very low as compared to the rest of the country. According to the 1991 census the overall rate is 39 percent, male 55 percent and female 21 percent. However, the literacy rate varies between 23 percent in Barmer

district to 52 percent in Ajmer district. The rural literacy rates vary between 19 percent in Barmer to 45 percent in Jhunjhunu.

The sex ratio for Rajasthan is far below the Indian average- it is 913 compared to 929 for the whole of India. The sex-ratio in the state has declined from 919 in 1981 to 913 in 1991- a trend that has been observed for the country as a whole.

The extent of poverty in Rajasthan varies depending on the criteria used for estimating it. From the maze of estimates of poverty in Rajasthan, one aspect that becomes clear is that there was a rapid fall in the rural poverty between 1970-1 to 1977-8. Since then, the poverty ratio in the state has either declined very marginally or the ratio has remained more or less constant. According to one study, an estimate of the head count ratio of poverty at the common poverty line of Rs 42.74 reveals that the southern Rajasthan comprising the districts of Banswara, Dungarpur, Sirohi and Udaipur continues to be the poorest region of the state. Over 58 percent of the estimated population in 1987-8 according to this calculation were below the poverty line. In the south-eastern region comprising Bundi, Chittor, Jhalawar and Kota about 33 percent, and in the western and the north-eastern region about 32 percent of the population in 1987-8 were below poverty line (Vidyasagar).

2.ii The Context of Women : Defining Rural Women's Spaces

Historically the state was almost entirely under the domination of the Rajput noble lineages, and this was officially dismantled at the time of Indian independence. Rajput rule gave communities in Rajasthan a social and economic structure distinct from other states as they were kin based and stratified according to their occupational distance from the royal Rajput lineages.

In the Rajput state the power over land and the people was intimately connected with the interests of the brotherhood, or in "... the shared male substance which allowed it to rule over the land " (Ziegler 1978,). Rules of the Rajput code of ethics *(dharma)* stressed above all, the solidarity of the brotherhood. In this context the women were seen, on the one hand, as subordinate to and dependents of the brotherhood and the rulers. At the same time they were venerated as status symbols of brotherhood and were therefore objects of male protection. The violation of women more so than of other dependents (servants for example) of a particular brotherhood was cause for great concern by its members as above all, it symbolised subordination of the brotherhood to the victimising group, Rajput or non-Rajput. Here we find that women's bodies became tools in the battles of honour and conquest between brotherhood and consequently the priorities of Rajput women became determined by the status concerns of patrilineal brotherhood. A further example of this feature could be seen in the custom of Jauhar. As depicted in Rajput folklore and oral history, in cases of military defeat at the hands of the conquering Rajput lineage,

women committed *Jauhar* (mass immolation), as a means to preserve the status of the defeated and "shamed" brotherhood.

The patriarchal and kin based feudal ethics of the Rajputs still strongly influences the way life is organised in most villages in Rajasthan including tribal regions. For most women this entails a structural subordination to their husbands and his kin, reflected in varying forms of seclusion and exclusion, for example, in the varying restrictions on mobility, prescriptions of attire, controlled access to food and decision making. Although the way of life of a Hindu woman and those of peasant, scheduled castes and tribal women is different in terms of the way labour may be valued in their societies. The latter group of women toil through the day in the fields and are burdened with the physical hardship of survival. This is one of the reasons for these communities to have bride price and not dowry. However in all these communities women do not have a control over property, they are all patrilineal, they do not have a control over their labour, fertility and sexuality.

It may be argued nevertheless that sexual mores of these communities is different from caste Hindu communities. Women and adolescent girls of adivasi groups have the choice to select their own marriage partners. Although in all the non-Brahmin, *baniya, vaishya* castes child marriage is the norm. (although the girl only goes to her in-laws house after puberty). Whatever be the community or age of marriage amongst SCs or STs or OBCs, *pheras* are permitted only once. Although cohabitation is permitted with another man (on leaving the husband or if husband has died or the two do not live together). This system is called *nata* (not re-marriage). This custom is prevalent in those communities where bride price practice exists rather than a dowry. A woman while still married can have a *nata* arrangement only after *jhagra* is paid by her new spouse. The status of a *nata* woman is inferior.

Women are largely defined in terms of their marital status and reproductive capacities. A survey conducted in 1988 in about 40 villages of Jaipur district (unpublished reports Jaipur district WDP, 1988) on how village women are described by their own communities revealed that a normal woman is one who has married once and has borne sons. Women who had either lost their husbands, had entered a *nata* arrangement, "abandoned" by their husbands, one of the wives of their husbands, infertile, whose womb only produced daughters, being much older than her husband or married to a very old husband did not fit into the category of "normal" woman according to the communities.

Sheer survival of women, due to the preference for a son instead of a daughter is revealed by the appalling statistics of sex ratio. As stated earlier the Rajasthan average shows 913 to a thousand males. But certain districts show a much lower average. Dholpur 796, Jaisalmer 811, Bharatpur 848, Sawai Madhopur 867 are just some illustrations. (Census reports 1991).

It will therefore not come as a surprise that out of the 27 districts in the country in which female literacy rate is less than 10 percent, 15 districts are from Rajasthan itself. The overall female literacy rate is 21 percent for the state of Rajasthan compared to 39 percent for India. The female literacy rate for the state varies between 8 percent in Barmer to about 34 percent in Ajmer district. The overall rural female literacy rate is 12 percent. It varies between 4 percent in Barmer to 22 percent in Jhunjhunu (Statistical Abstract, 1993). The literacy rate amongst ST women is 2 percent. There are more than 800 villages in the state where not a single person is literate and more than 5458 villages where there is no literate woman. This comprises for 14 percent of the villages in the state. (Shekhar. B. 1993)

Rural women in Rajasthan are known for leading a life full of hardship. Toiling through the day, organising day to day survival needs of fuel, food, water and fodder. With depleting natural resources of water, forests and commons, the burden on the women has increased. To give one instance in the heart of the desert, close to where the world's largest canal, the Indira Gandhi canal is located, drinking water is a serious problem. Women in the Lunkaransar tahsil of Bikaner district have been protesting for the last several years with the district government that they should also be supplied piped water from the canal. Even today in summer these women leave home in the morning and return only by evening with two pots of water (Urmul Trust reports).

According to the 1991 census, 27 percent of the women are considered as workers as compared to 49 percent of the men. While there is a 6 percent increase in the work participation rate of women since 1981, the rate for men has dropped by 2 percent. This increase is largely due to the urban female main workers category. Women participation rate of female marginal workers is much higher than the male workers. (majority of the women are working as cultivators, agriculture labourers or as live stock rearers), which reiterates the double burden borne by women in society in the form of domestic work and income generating work. A fairly large number of women are working in categories that are male dominated, showing the economic hardship and their flexibility to adapt to new fields.

Participation rates of rural women is higher than urban. Unlike in other states unemployment rates of women are not higher than that of men, perhaps due to better land - person ratio, high migration of male members to neighbouring states. Over one fifth of rural women in the prime working age 15 to 44 years are available for work even though they are not reported as working or as unemployed. Over 77 percent of women are engaged in domestic chores of which the most important is gathering fuel wood and water. Women are paid less than men for similar work. The average female earnings tend to be 60 to 70 percent than that of the men. (Kanta Ahuja and Ranjana Kumari 1990)

By and large women have had no place in the public decision making process. Only those who wear a *"pagari"* have a legitimacy of entering the public space. In most villages of Rajasthan, women are not even allowed to step on to the *"chaupal"*, the central space in the village where village meetings are held and where men mostly of upper caste sit and discuss politics. In several villages even today women cannot wear shoes and walk in front of the house of the *Thakur* (the Rajput chief).

Thus it should come as no surprise that far from being elected as panches, women do not sit in any decision making in the village or the *jati* samaj. Each *jati* is governed by a *jati* samaj which is constituted across villages. It is at this site where decisions regarding inheritance, marriage payments, *nata*, *jhagra*, adoption are taken and controlled by customary law. Their point of view is represented by the men of the household. Women also do not make independent decisions regarding voting. Generally the vote is a *jati*, community or a family vote. Thus there is no question of a woman's right to an independent vote.

Women's participation in the Gram Panchayats in the last thirty years has also been insignificant. The two nominated women members (usually the wife of the Sarpanch who lost)in almost every Panchayat never sat in the meetings and the Panchayat register would reach their house for signatures. The predominantly male government functionaries have become the new "patrons" of the democratic set-up, who dispense favours. The rural women hardly interact with these state functionaries and if they do, it is to seek favours and not for demanding their right.

What was the space that women did have in Rajasthani society? The above picture does not take into account the strengths and skills that women have in resource management, the survival strategy they display and their understanding are of an order that surprises most outsiders. This image can be sought in Rajasthan folk literature both in the oral and printed texts. Her image here is of one who is adept in composing songs, dialoguing in verse, is knowledgeable about soil, agriculture seasons etc. It is not that the tradition has been dead and there is nothing to draw from that source. Many rural women historically have found space to challenge oppressive forces although they are not visible in history.

There has been little documentation of women's protest. The story of the women of the *Bishnoi* community of Khejarla village (Jodhpur district) more than 250 years ago where they defied the orders of the Jodhpur Darbar to cut the trees in their village. When the *sipahis* insisted on cutting the trees, they clung to them and hundreds of women were killed in the process. It finally dawned on the Jodhpur darbar that the women's commitment towards preserving the flora and fauna was above their lives.

Similarly the *Bhakti* movement in Rajasthan (which is still a live tradition) have expressions through verse that assert women's rights and that they should lead a life of their own. While Meera is very well known, there have been other saints too, whose expressions are alive even today.

2.iii. Women's Mobilisation and State Policy for Women in the State

The above description has given a static image of rural society. However, today rural society is undergoing a change due to several interventions. And they may not be perceived through the above stated set of indicators. It is important to know whether rural women's lives (across caste and class) is undergoing a change? What is the nature of this change? Is it perceptible? Has it thrown up challenges to gender relations in Rajasthani society? While media, technology inputs, transport facilities have played an important role in opening up rural society,their have been other factors also.

Like in the rest of the country, so in Rajasthan, women have mobilised around a variety of issues from the mid-seventies. During the seventies (after International Women's Year) in this state, it was the urban middle class women who came on the streets and took up issues relating to rape and dowry. They protested against State and the community and tried to build a public opinion on these issues.

It is only in the eighties that we see rural women's expressions and fora and thus the stirrings and emergence of a movement at the village level in certain pockets of the state. While some Voluntary Agencies of central and southern Rajasthan were the pioneers in this case, but a significant leap to this process was given by the state sponsored Women's Development Programme (WDP).

It is important to add here that the Government till then looked at women as objects of welfare and compassion and only geared itself up during the period of meeting the sterilisation targets. The Sixth National Plan had included a chapter on Women and Development, although the main line chapters did not take cognisance of the factor of gender. The Sixth State Plan had no such shift in policy of women. However, in 1982 the state government attempted to formulate a policy frame for women's development on the basis of the National Plan. This policy outlined the need to look at women as equal partners with men in the family. While this would strengthen the institution of family, it would at the same time recognise that women have independent identities, needs, problems and inspirations. (Maitreyi Dass, World Bank Papers 1991).

The WDP had a Government - Voluntary Agency partnership, right from the time of its inception to its planning and implementation, it was a feminist programme for rural women built on the premise that state patronage and legitimacy was needed in the context of Rajasthan if women's empowerment had to be done with speed and

on a large scale. It was started in six districts in 1984. The objective was to bring about a shift in women's self image through collective processes and building communication fora for women at the grass root level. It was the first broad network of rural women across districts.

It was also in the eighties that two other significant events happened that helped mobilising rural women. The first was the expression of rural women's solidarity through the organising of a *Mahila Mela* in Tilonia village. In the eighties, two issues were of primacy to the women's question. The first being the stepping out of women from their homes in order to meet other women as an expression of women's solidarity (the creation of fora). The other was the articulation of women's issues, as till then their was hardly any knowledge as to what were the issues of rural women. The Tilonia Mela was unique in the opportunity that it gave to rural women to express a sense of solidarity. It also threw up a range of women's issues and strategies that needed to be adopted.

The second issue of the eighties was the revival and glorification of *Sati* that happened in Deorala (Rajasthan) in 1987. The challenge to the pro *Sati* discourse and the Rajputs who organised themselves to glorify *Sati* was done by women's groups (including rural women) from all over the state. Women came on to the streets and mobilised themselves on the issue of women's identity and women's dignity. This was the first time that women in such large numbers marched through the streets and forced a public debate on this issue.

By end eighties attempts to form a fora for women across the State was experimented with. It was called Rajasthani *Mahila Manch.* Limitations of working within one's own institutional structure was being felt and there was a desire for networking and building other support systems. However it did not manage to involve a large number of rural women. The leadership remained in the hands of urban middle class women. By this period Voluntary Agencies who were raising women's questions had also begun proliferating. It was by this time that the women's component had become an important criterion for funding, as well as that the women's question had become a explicit question in society. Interestingly all State programmes or policy had begun addressing women. The focus from women had also been extended to girls and girl's education.

Thus by the nineties it had become acceptable to all intervening agencies (State and NGOs) that women needed to be looked at. Infact they all want "women's groups" to implement their programmes. Be it family welfare, education, new agriculture technique, or fodder development. The symbol and language of all programmes whether Government, or NGO or a mass based organisation has become the same, which is not to say that the objectives and the meaning are the same. However, this has led to a paradoxical situation. Poor, lower caste rural women are prepared to come out of their homes today and the resistance from family and the community

is less than before. This is of intrinsic value looking at the situation of women historically. Today you can bring five thousand women to a meeting in Southern Rajasthan and the recently organised desert women's festival had about 1300 women from the backwaters of Western Rajasthan. Similarly in those districts where the TLC programme was successful it was due to the women who came out in thousands to the centres. However it was very clear that they were coming out with the hope that "their" issues would be taken up at some point.

What has caused this shift ? The reasons could be several, including that there has been an impact of all these programmes, that now makes it easier to bring women out and that the scenario of survival is getting grimmer due to increasing pressure of economic hardship and now the families also feel that if the women are in the front and demand collectively then something will be done by the machinery, or is it that working class women were always in the fore but were not visible to us.

However, there are very few groups who are really developing strategies that address poor women's own issues. For instance, the famous WDP programme has become a very different programme since the nineties. It has now become a Top - Down Government delivery programme rather than being rooted in the field and working on women's problems of increasing liquor shops in the state, or increasing privatisation and inaccessibility to health services or encroachment of community land etc. It has also not attempted to work creatively around other objectives like bringing women together around their knowledge and experiences of joy. Neither has it responded creatively in terms of support structures or begun addressing wider issues in society. Most of the informal fora for women created at the village level have fragmented. The village level worker, the *sathin* is unsure of her own position in the programme, she would instead like to become a permanent government worker. Thus her initiative at mobilising women on their issues has also dropped. Similarly most voluntary agencies are bringing women together around vertical programmes of the State. (Rajasthan is a unique state where several educational, health, child care services, natural resource management programmes of Government are being run though a Government - NGO partnership). But hardly any are carrying forward the energy generated. Neither is there an attempt at really rooting women's issues and women's groups on the ground or building support systems for supporting issues that village women raise at the grassroot level.

It can also be stated that the middle class leadership in Rajasthan also seems to have fragmented with a great deal of differences. While there are many more working class women and women from small towns in the leadership, however, meeting the next challenge of the movement, "beyond the stepping out of their homes" still needs to be worked upon. It will consist of building rural women's networks that function with their own initiative, taking up the women's question in every aspect of their lives, responding actively to what is happening around them, throwing up alternative concepts and methods of work, building a variety of support groups.

This is the context in which the women Panchayat Raj members will enter the scene in Rajasthan.

Section 3

PANCHAYAT RAJ IN RAJASTHAN

3.i Background of Panchayat Raj in Rajasthan

Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the only two states that adopted the framework recommended by the Balwant Rai Mehta Report on Panchayat Raj in 1959 itself, and adopted a three tier Panchayat Raj Institution in the state. Rajasthan was the first state to legislatively enact the recommendations, more so, on the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi to fulfill his desire for a *Gram Swarajya*.

The Rajasthan Panchayat Act however, was formulated as early as 1953. The Rajasthan state was an amalgamation of all the former princely states. Most of these former princely states had framed laws to establish statutory Panchayats. The states with the year in which they formed the legislation were: Bikaner 1928, Karauli 1939, Udaipur 1940, Bharatpur 1944, Jodhpur 1945, Sirohi 1947 and Jaipur 1948. After independence in order to effect a common law for administrative purposes the Rajasthan State Act was passed in 1953. The 1953 Act and later the 1959 Acts continued with various Amendments. The latest being the Amendments in 1992.

Many believed that Rajasthan was least prepared for democratic decentralisation as envisaged in the Balwant Rai report. The native *Maharajahs* and the *Jagirdars* had nurtured a strong feudal relationships, and often, the *Jagirdars* were more powerful than the Maharajahs. The subjects were therefore dependent upon the Jagirdar for even the rudimentary services. Also, having been outside the colonial rule, the native states were almost entirely out of the struggle for freedom, and hence, unorganised along political lines until independence. The Government of India Acts of 1909, 1919 and 1935 facilitating the emergence of the local and the provincial governments elsewhere in the country had entirely by-passed Rajasthan. Whereas, many of the native states had formed their own rules of Panchayat.

But, its various perceived ills appeared to have facilitated the excellent nurturing of the Panchayat Raj initially in the state. Its economic backwardness coupled with the absence of an organised political and economic organisation facilitated the development of Panchayat Raj in the state. The Rajasthan Act and its performance till 1965 was considered to be excellent but since then these institutions were systematically crushed.

The Congress party which did not have a strong grassroot political organisation felt threatened by the "king-makers" who emerged out of the non-partisan Panchayat Raj Institutions. The Panchayat leaders instead of depending on the state level

leaders for patronage and financial support, developed their own support bases, and obtained financial resources from the development programmes within the jurisdiction of the Panchayat Raj. Consequently, the Panchayat elections were frequently postponed after the defeat of the Congress party in 1967, and also they were subject to manipulation by the state level organisations and leaders. Although the tenure of a Panchayat was only three years, only five elections to the Gram Panchayats were held between 1960 and 1994. The first in 1960, the second in 1965, the third in 1978 the fourth in 1982 and the last one in 1988. The election of the Panchayat Samitis i.e. the Pradhan took place in 1961, 1965 and 1982. This shows the blatant violation to the law by the successive State Governments.

The arbitrary postponement of elections sapped the vitality of the Panchayat Institutions and the elected representatives lost touch with the people. It is often stated in the political circles that the one person who was really committed to Panchayat Raj in the State was the Ex Chief Minister Shiv Charan Mathur. He was a Zila Pramukh in his district before he entered the Vidhan Sabha. Twice when he was in power he held elections. Once in 1982 and the second time in 1988. He was also the inspiration behind the Sarpanches Sammelan from all over the country in 1986.

While, the politicians undermined the institution that they helped to create, the bureaucrats were unwilling to be a part of the Panchayat Raj Institutions. There was no cadre of the Panchayat Raj department, and the officials were often drawn from the line departments of the state. The bureaucrats were unwilling to accept that the uneducated grassroot leaders were capable of handling the development functions. This combined with the tussle between the IAS and the RAS for supremacy, cheered no doubt by the politicians from the sidelines, led to the withdrawal of the IAS officials from the block level.

One more reason for the withdrawal of the IAS officials was that the development paradigm of the state had shifted from overall rural development to a narrowly focussed agricultural development, relying upon modern techniques and methods. As an analyst had argued, the "modernisation imperative" of the state was not national welfare but national security. Consequently, less funds began to be diverted to the Panchayat Raj Institutions; suffocating them in the process. As mentioned above, the Panchayat Institutions relied on the meagre support of the State, rather than their own sources of income.

The problems of the Panchayat Raj in the state were analysed by committee after committee with no result. The Sadiq Ali committee was appointed in 1964, and Girdhari Lal Vyas chaired the high powered committee on Panchayat Raj in 1973. The latter's recommendation to strengthen Zila Parishads by devolving more powers, resources and personnel were not given any serious attention. The emergency in

1975 deflected attention from Panchayat Raj. During the Janata party rule in the post-emergency phase, a national level committee headed by Asoka Mehta was appointed. Before its recommendations could be acted upon the Janata Party fell from power. For long the Panchayat Raj Institutions were in a state of limbo until they were resurrected by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

3.ii. Critique of the State Panchayat Raj Act 1994 and Election Rules 1994

The Act governing the establishment and functioning of the Panchayats, modelled on the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, in the state of Rajasthan was passed by the State Assembly on April 10, 1994, and it came into force on April 23rd 1994. With this the previous two Acts that governed these Institutions, the Rajasthan Panchayat Act, 1953 and Rajasthan Panchayat Samiti and the Zila Parishad Act, 1959 were replaced by a single Act. The Act, as mentioned above was modelled on the 73rd Amendment, and infact, had endorsed it. It made no effort to go beyond the 73rd Amendment. In the places it has gone beyond it is not in any way to strengthen the Panchayat Raj Institutions, but the State Government, as in the case of the " two child norm" as a condition for election to these bodies.

It can be said quite openly that the State Government controls all the powers of the Panchayat Raj Institutions at present. That this Act was organised in haste and passed through the assembly as a mere formality to meet the deadline of the Constitution, is obvious as it does not specify the critical issues. The Act is a bare frame which stands as a facade for Panchayat Raj. However, the substance of Panchayat Raj is missing. Such an act seems to put all the debate on self governance, autonomy and the third stratum (which took place in the aftermath of the Seventy Third Amendment) on the back burner. The public once again has been taken for a ride. It was only the pressure from the Central Government, the withholding of the funds from them that forced the Government to hold elections.

What follows is a general critique of the Act. We have not looked at only those dimensions that may specifically affect women. We feel that it is important to understand certain salient features of the Act in order to know how the legislation empowers the Panchayat Raj Institutions and the elected representatives (women and men) in order to strengthen ordinary rural people's control and access over decision making in their lives. However, we also feel that a genderised legislation ought to emerge after the women begin participating and debating on it. The legislation ought not to have only a provision or two about women but its framework ought to emerge from a social relations perspective i.e. a combined gender, class and caste perspective.

3. ii. A. Establishment of a Panchayat

As in the past, so it is in this Act, the Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad bodies are established by the State Government (Section 9,10, 11). The precise size of a Panchayat is not stated although this Act does say that a population not exceeding 3,000 will have nine wards.

In the early years of the enactment, after 1953, the Panchayat size was large between 3,000 to 8,000 persons. But with formation of a three tier structure these Panchayats were reduced to 1500 - 2000 persons per Panchayat. However, this size underwent a change gradually and in 1992 the process of reconstituting the Panchayat was initiated. The minimum population of the Panchayat was stated as being 2000 (on the basis of the 1981 census), however there was no stated policy on the upper limit. But since there was this policy that a village will not be broken up, several villages with more than 8000 to 10,000 persons were also declared Panchayats. Interestingly a village with over 15,000 persons is usually declared a municipality. However when the reconstitution was taking place many of the municipalities reverted to being Panchayats as they felt that the Panchayats had more powers. Lunkaransar which has a population of more than 19,000 persons (1991 census) continues to be a Panchayat and one Panchayat has a population of over 26,000 persons. Obviously the reconstitution of the Panchayats is a political decision and there is no clear rule related to the size of a Gram Panchayat. It is dependent on the pressure that can be put on the MLA and others in the State Government that decides on a Panchayat size and being declared one.

Today we have total of 9,187 Panchayats as compared to 7,358 in 1992, 237 Panchayat Samitis and 31 Zila Parishads.

3. ii. B. Representation in the Panchayat Bodies

The Panchayats in the new Act, consists of only the ward members as members of the Panchayat. However, the membership to the Panchayat Samiti and the Zila Parishad has changed. Now the membership consists of only directly elected members. However, earlier their were four types of members in the Panchayat Samiti. 1) persons holding the office of the Sarpanch. 2) elected members from *gramdaan* villages and the MP and MLA who had full voting rights 3) co-opted members 4) associate members, who could be the president of the cooperative society. The Zila Parishad consisted of MPs, MLAs, the collector, co-opted members. Except for the collector they all had voting rights.

The new Act has removed the place that executive heads of the lower Panchayat Raj Institutions had in the higher Panchayat Raj Institutions (Section 13 and 14 of the Act). The Sarpanches who constituted the Panchayat Samiti (block) body in the last

Act have not been given a position in the Panchayat Samiti. Similarly the Pradhans have not been given a place in the Zila Parishad. On the contrary, the MLAs representing a Panchayat Samiti wholly or partially have retained their seat, and a right to vote for all motions but, the removal and the election of a Pradhan and Up-Pradhan (Section 13 (b)).

Similarly, under Sections 14 (b&c), all MLA's and MPs (Lok Sabha members elected from the area and the Rajya Sabha member registered from that area), continue to be members of the Zila Parishad with a right to vote on all matters except, the election and removal of the Zila Pramukh and the Up-Zila Pramukh.

Removing the representation of lower functionaries in the higher levels of Panchayat Raj, and imposing the representatives of the second and first tier of political hierarchy, has led to a speculation that the Act had paved the way for the control of the third tier. The public opinion was exercised by this attempt to muzzle the Panchayat Raj Institutions, even prior to its inception. It was also felt that this would only facilitate a top- down communication and not necessarily a bottom-up; thus defeating the very spirit of the democratic decentralisation envisaged in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

The Panchayat Raj minister and the Chief Minister however, argued that the Panchayat Samiti representative would now play the role of the Sarpanch in the Panchayat Samiti, and the Zila Parishad representative would play the role of the Pradhan. This was done in order to take away the excessive control that Sarpanches and Pradhan's exercised within the Panchayat Raj Institutions. On the contrary, by taking away the powers of the Sarpanch and the Pradhan in representing their constituency in the higher levels of the Panchayat Raj Institutions, the Act has weakened their power, and undermined the institutions they represent.

3. ii. C. The Functions and Powers of Panchayat Bodies

The Act does not clearly specify the functions, and the powers that the State Government would transfer to the Panchayat Raj Institutions. The Act however, for the first time provides executive powers to the Zila Parishad. Powers to execute tasks were earlier vested only with the Gram Panchayat and the Panchayat Samiti. According to Government documents the division of responsibility between the three layers of the Panchayat Raj is as follows:

Gram Panchayats will be the implementing agency.

Panchayat Samiti will be the supervisory agency.

Zila Parishad will perform the advisory role.

Both the Panchayat and the Panchayat Samiti were executive bodies in the earlier Act with the Panchayat Samiti being the most powerful of all the bodies. Maximum funds, through various schemes was received by it. The Panchayat Samiti had a wide range of activities and also had a big staff to perform them, but the financial flexibility attached to it was minimum. This time too only lip service has been given to the function and powers.

The functions and the powers of the Panchayat Raj Institutions at the village, Block and the Zila level are given in Sections 50, 51 and 52, and listed separately for each of them in Schedules I, II and III. These are long lists of functions each institution will perform but the precise powers of each of these are not mentioned. The subjects allocated to the Gram Panchayat are listed under 33 heads, and those of the Panchayat Samiti and the Zila Parishad under heads 30 and 19 respectively. These items, are by and large the same as given in the XI schedule of the Constitution, and very little thought has gone into defining the exact nature and scope of these activities across the three levels.

For instance the Act mentions that the PHC's will be established by the Zila Parishad. Will they control the transfer and postings of staff? This has not been made clear. There are major problems in the division of labour across the three levels. For instance, as part of Khadi and Village Industries work, Panchayats will organise seminars and exhibitions, but the identification of the skilled artisans will be done by the Zila Parishad. Similarly as part of Rural Housing, the identification of the homeless will be done by the Zila Parishad, a task which the Panchayats are capable of doing.

As another report had pointed out, fisheries is listed as item number five in the XI Schedule of the Constitution. It is also listed as item number five in the Schedule I of the Rajasthan Panchayat Act, and described as "Development of Fisheries in the Village(s)". Under Schedule II of the Act, item number seven is listed as "Promotion of Fisheries Development". How are these functions assigned to two different levels of Panchayat bodies different? And what would be the exact nature and scope of the Gram Panchayat in this context? (*Panchayat Raj Update*, November 1994). It appears that these lists were prepared without any thought, and more to complete a formality of listing the activities.

3. ii.D The Role of the Gram Sabha

In the 1994 Panchayat Raj Act of Rajasthan, the Gram Sabhas continue to have an advisory role to the Panchayats. It is also mandatory to convene two Gram Sabhas annually with a quorum of one- tenth of the members of the Panchayat. This provision was incorporated in the 1992 Amendment to the previous Panchayat Raj Act. However, this Amendment remained only on paper, as the administrators and

not the elected representatives were controlling the Panchayat Raj Institutions. However, the 1994 Act (Section 3) while retaining the necessity of convening the Gram Sabhas has negated the spirit of the 1992 Amendment. The 1992 Amendment had stated that if a Sarpanch would not convene two successive meetings (with the necessary quorum) then he would have to automatically vacate his post. The punitive dimension attached to the 1992 Act has been removed in the 1994 Act. Thus removing the responsibility from the Sarpanch to ensure and make people's participation possible. However, the Act goes on further to state in the next line "that no quorum shall be necessary for a meeting adjourned for want of a quorum" (Section 3.4). This latter point shows that still only lip service is being provided to the importance of the Gram Sabha. That the Panchayat needs the Gram Sabha as its base is still a far dream for Rajasthan.

Provision has also been made for the formation of a vigilance committee by the Gram Sabha to supervise the Panchayat works an report to it. It will consist of non elected members. However, no details have yet been given as to what the relationship of this committee will be to the Panchayat. Will they hand over all records to it? Interestingly as compared to the previous Act it has introduced a new clause that the minutes of the Gram Sabha meeting would be kept by the Gram Sevak under the supervision of the Vikas Adhikari or the nominee.

3. ii. E. Relaxation of the literacy norm as a criterion of eligibilty of Sarpanch and the powers of the Gram Sevak.

As compared to the previous Act (1953), this Act has relaxed the norm of literacy as a condition for becoming Sarpanch. It was stated that this was being done as a very large number of candidates were SC, ST, and women. It was felt that this would limit the number of people who would contest the election. This was looked upon as a very healthy support for the participation of the disadvantaged groups. Thus the Act further gave the responsibility to the Panchayat Secretary(Gram Sevak) to keep possession of the records and registers and be responsible for maintaining the accounts of the Panchayat (Section 78). This decision was taken so as not to burden a non literate/educated elected representative with maintaining and keeping records and accounts. Although they also state that the Sarpanch has the overall responsibility of maintenance.

Giving away the possession of records and the maintenance of accounts is to reduce the powers of the Sarpanch and also to make the process of work inefficient. The Gram Sevak may not hand over a record under some pretext. The state does not have a system of one Secretary to one Panchayat but a group of Panchayats have one Secretary. The Secretary does not spend more than three to four days in one Panchayat every month. So when the Panchayat or the Sarpanch may want the records the Gram Sevak may not be available.

3. ii. F. The Role of the Nyaya Panchayats

Till 1976 the Gram Panchayats carried out the role of Nyaya Panchayats and settled both the *fauzdari* and *diwani* cases. The chair person of the Nyaya Panchayat could impose a fine upto Rs. 250. There was no provision of appeal but revision could lie with the *munsif* court and a first class magistrate in criminal cases. In 1976, the judiciary was separated from the executive. As it was felt that the Nyaya Panchayats must be autonomous bodies and the Gram Panchayat must focus on work related to "development", Nyaya Panchayats were separated from the Gram Panchayat and one Nyaya Panchayat was set up for a cluster of five Panchayats.The members of the Nyaya Panchayat were usually nominated. They were either village elders or ex-government employees, educated people, not more than 4 to 5 members formed a Nyaya Panchayat. However no financial resources were given to them, no secretaries were allotted to them and they were made dependent on the Gram Panchayats. The latter refused to support them. For years, the secretaries were not paid. Later Nyaya Panchayats were removed altogether and Nyaya Sub -Committees were formed in the Gram Panchayat itself. These were also dissolved.

This Act too has made no mention of Nyaya Panchayats being set up at the Gram Panchayat level. It has been argued that there is a correlation between justice and development, and Panchayats should have the powers of the administration, judiciary and development. The Nyaya Panchayats have drawn adverse reports, and the Ashok Mehta Committee report gave an unfavourable opinion on them. However, it had been pointed out that with the emphasis on settling disputes at the Lok-Adalat, the Panchayats should have been given the powers of dispensing *nyaya* as well. The 1989 report of the Law commission made out a favourable case for the Nyaya Panchayats. However, in spite of the Prime Minister's assurance to bring *nyaya* within the fold of the Panchayats, it was left out of the 73rd Amendment. This we feel is a setback for women and the poor as the courts and the police are very oppressive and insensitive. This system is both time and money consuming and too distant from the village.

Although it is often argued that the formal system of justice is more sensitive, detached, fair outside the local realm of politics, people have a better chance of justice than in local Panchayats. In response, it is said that the chances of the rich and the powerful lobby pulling strings is as much in courts as at the village level. However, the Nyaya Panchayat can be one of the options for the people who are seeking justice. Why should they be completely negated?

3.ii. G. Finances of the Panchayat Bodies

The Panchayats at present receive a meagre grant of Rs. 4 per person annually while the Panchayat Samiti receives Rs. 0.25 per person from the State Government. The

Panchayat Samiti and the Gram Panchayats in the earlier Act had the powers to impose taxes like vehicle tax, education sub tax, commercial tax, toll tax, and were entitled to some share of the land revenue collected by the State. These taxes were also imposed on its people. However, they would never recover the money. Apart from this the Panchayat had/has the ownership of the village grazing land, the village residential land and the village forest to raise revenue. But today the village forest is nonexistent, the village grazing land has been encroached upon or converted for other use. Thus the Panchayats had no funds of their own. The agenda of all that they could do was vast but they were gradually reduced to becoming implementing bodies of the centre or the state sponsored schemes. The eighties saw the JRY fixation of the Panchayats which continues even today.

The new Act of 1994, Section 64-70, talk of funds to these Institutions and the powers of imposing taxes by these Institutions. Each body has to meet the cost of its administration, including salaries, allowances, provident fund etc. It also adds that the expenditure on establishment should not exceed thirty percent of the total expenses.

All the three Institutions have the power to impose taxes. The Panchayat has the maximum powers to impose taxes. There has not been much difference in the powers of taxation as compared to the earlier Act, except for the Zila Parishad who have the powers to impose taxes for the first time. They can also charge a rate for water from the sources that come under their jurisdiction and upto five percent stamp duty on sale of property and half a percent on the market fees referred to in the Markets Act. According to certain sources, if each Zila Parishad enforces stamp duty then it can earn Rs. 20 lakhs per annum.

The State Finance Commission was set up in mid 1994 according to Section 118 of the Act. It will lay down the principles of how much money State Government should allocate for the Panchayat Raj bodies. However, no recommendations have been made yet. In the past, several proposals had been made. For instance, Khara Committee gave suggestions to increase the grant to Rs. 20 per person.

3.ii.H. The Powers of the Bureaucracy

Although, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is placed at the disposal of the Zila Pramukh, under Section 35 (C); the Act weakens the powers of the Pramukh elsewhere. For instance, under Section 84 (3) the CEO is empowered not to implement any of the decision of the Zila Parishad, or its committees, which in his opinion is inconsistent with the provisions of the Act or any other law. He can refer it to the state government for necessary directions. This is true of the *Vikas Adhikari* vis-a-vis the Panchayat Samiti as well.

The Panchayat bodies do not have any say in the appointment and transfer of any officials in the Panchayat bodies, including the Class IV employees [Section 79 (3)].

The emergency powers of the *Vikas Adhikari* and the CEO (Section 85) will enable them to intervene at any level, and take control of any matter of the Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad if, in their opinion, it is necessary for the welfare of the larger public.

3.ii. I. The Powers of the State Government

Sections 92 to 107 in Chapter IV of the Act, deal with the powers that State government has over the Panchayat bodies. According to Section 92 (1), the State government shall be the chief superintending and controlling authority in respect of all matters concerning the administration of the Panchayat bodies, and may cancel any resolution or order passed by it. The government reserves the right to dissolve the Panchayats if it is not satisfied with their performance. Under Section 100 (e), the government can institute an enquiry on any matter against any member, chairperson, deputy chairperson of the Panchayat bodies. It also reserves the right to delegate the powers of enquiry to any authorised person. According to the provisions of section 38, the State can remove any member of the Panchayat bodies. According to Section 105 (2), no bye-laws made by a Panchayat Samiti or Zila Parishad shall take effect unless they are sanctioned by the State Government. In case of any dispute between two Panchayat bodies, and as well as a Panchayat body and the local authority, the state will act as the final arbiter [Section 107 (2)], and its decision shall be binding, and not questioned through legal recourse.

The goal of self governance and autonomy of these institutions that form the third stratum is completely negated. This Act does not specify the powers and thus the minimum that the Panchayat can do under its jurisdiction. However, the maximum that the State Government can do is clearly specified. It is clear from this that the legislators spent more time not in visualising the precise way in which each of these Institutions ought to evolve but more time in knowing and spelling out its powers over these bodies.

3.ii. J. District Planning Committee

This will form draft plans of development for the whole district. The Zila Pramukh has been made the chairperson of this body. At least four fifths of the members will be elected from amongst the elected members of the municipalities and the Panchayat Raj Institutions in proportion to the urban rural proportion (the rules for election have not been stated). The rest of the members will be nominated. They may be State Government representatives, MPs, MLAs, Voluntary Agency Representatives. The district committee functions will be dependent on the State

Government's orders. The Committee will plan the sharing of natural resources between urban and rural areas and infrastructural development.

III.ii.K. The Two Child Norm- Eligibility Conditions for Contesting Elections

In October 1992, the Rajasthan government promulgated an Ordinance, that one year after the implementation of this Act, any elected representative who would have an extra child (more than two or more children) in this period would be disqualified from being a Panchayat Raj representative. This ordinance was heralded by the population control lobby in the state, and the Family Planning Foundation of India claimed credit for the introduction of this ordinance. Although, this ordinance could not be implemented, as there were no elections; this rule found its way in a modified form; viz., removing the one year grace period, in to the 1994 Act. In other words, according to this Act, any one having an extra child (two or more) after April 1994 would be disqualified from standing for elections. (Section 19.1). This law was also passed for the Municipalities and urban local bodies.

While agencies like the Family Planning Foundation hailed Rajasthan as the progressive State and as the trend setter, others protested very severely against this provision. The Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Delhi, filed a case in the Jaipur High Court, for repeal of this provision. Several organisations including the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation asked the state to repeal this provision. The main arguments against this provision were that it militated against the democratic rights of the people; particularly the poor, women and the youth. It was argued that women who had no role in decision making on child bearing would become a victim of this legislation.

The experience of other states shows that most of the women who do get elected are of the reproductive age group (15 to 45 years) and they would be debarred. It was argued that there may be an increase in female foeticide and infanticide or even abandoning a woman under the pretext that she was carrying somebody else's child. The male youth also felt that this would bring back the older generation of people. They were very enthusiastic about the Panchayat Raj and saw a role for themselves. They felt that they would also be the victims of this legislation being in the child begetting age group.

Consequent to these protests, the state relaxed this provision for the urban local bodies elections in October 1994. It refused to negotiate this provision in the case of the Panchayat institutions. In mid December, a fortnight before the elections were announced in the BJP Party Sammelan on Panchayat Raj, the CM made a firm announcement that this law would remain and there was no going back on it. But just before the 1995 elections on the 29th of December, the Government brought in an ordinance and changed it. The argument of the CM was that, "on public

demand we are relaxing this law for this election, as it has not been disseminated enough and from November'95 it will become effective".

The political implications of enforcing this rule resulted in its withdrawal. The BJP felt that the Congress party may use this rule against it in the election. Also, it could not obviously have used double standards for urban local bodies and rural local bodies. Given, its desire to expand its constituency in the rural areas, it obviously did not want to provide the Congress a stick to beat it with. This seems to have weighed more in the repeal of the rule than any other factor.

3.ii.L. Reservation Rules

The 1994 Act (Section 15) announced proportionate reservation for the OBC's in the same manner as was made compulsory by the Seventy Third Amendment Act for the SCs and STs. However in the month of July it changed this law and gave the OBC's a reservation quota of a maximum of fifteen percent dependent on the reservation of the SCs and STs. The reasons for the change was that OBC population totals were not available in the census and therefore it created a new formula for their reservation. The constituencies would be selected by lottery. The reasons given for the relaxation should not be looked upon at face value. It was argued from the other side that the reservations on the basis of actual population could have been made possible on the basis of the voters list. All it needed was a cut off date for updating the voters list and then the population of the OBC's could have been totalled. After all the OBC caste list of fifty four castes had been made available, it was felt that the BJP had succumbed to the upper caste pressure and to the established political characters who were very angry with reservations and felt that they had no place to go.

However, no debate could take place in the monsoon session of the Assembly as the assembly adjourned sine - die in two days and the ordinance was ratified as were the six ordinances that were passed in seven and a half minutes.

3.ii.M. Parties and Panchayat Elections

The Act is silent on whether parties would openly participate in the Panchayat Raj or not. However, when the State elections rules were published in August 1994 it was decided that for the election of only the Pradhan and Zila Pramukh, the candidates could use party symbols. But once again prior to the election the State Congress Party, now with a new and popular leader, said that it would fight the election upto the Block level on a party basis. It also requested the State Government to bring about a change in the rules about fighting all elections on the basis of Party symbols. The Janata Dal also urged this. The BJP was undecided about this and were dilly dallying till the end. It almost decided that even if their party would get involved they would not use symbols in the election. After much thought the

Government changed the rules and announced at the last minute just before the announcement of elections that parties could use their symbols for the Zila Parishad and the Block level elections, but not for the Gram Panchayat election.

3.ii.N Election Process

Yet another change brought about towards the end was that the election to all the four seats, ward member, *Sarpanch* (head of the Gram Panchayat) *Panchayat Samiti Sadasya* and the Zila Parishad *Sadasya*, would not take place together. The election would take place in two phases. In the first round the election for the Panchayat Samiti *Sadasya* and the Zila Parishad *Sadasya* would take place, on the basis of party symbols. In the second round, the election of ward members and the Sarpanches of the Gram Panchayat would take place. Thus instead of casting the four votes together with two polling parties in one booth, it was changed to one polling party per booth with the two ballot papers given in one go.

The process of reservation was a straight forward process. The rules of selecting a constituency area or ward as per the norm for reservation were quite clear and there were no problems. It was a transparent process. However, there were two problems in the method of reservations for two types of posts. One related to the selection of one third of the total constituency areas and wards for the executive posts of women Sarpanch, Pradhan and Zila Pramukh. Here, instead of a reservation formula following the same pattern of first lots be picked up for one third of the total SC constituency or Wards, then lots be picked up from one third of the total ST seats, then the OBC lots and then from the rest, the lots be picked up for the required number of general seats, the norm was changed. From the total, they selected at random by picking up lots for one third of the seats. This created confusion. In one block of Bikaner district out of the ten Sarpanch women seats all went to the SCs and only one seat got reserved for general women category. This manner of picking up lots for the reservation of women to the executive posts resulted in a case being lodged challenging this formula as unconstitutional. However, this was defeated in court. Similarly the OBC quota reservation was on the basis of lottery. In some places, those wards or constituency areas got selected where there was not a single OBC household and the candidate had to come from outside of that area and fight the election.

Section 4

PARTIES AND ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

Observations From Panchayat Samiti Macro Data

4. i The Rural Electorate in the State

For the Rajasthan State as a whole, approximately 66 percent out of a total rural population of about 341 lakhs were the electorates who were to decide the fate of the Ward Panchs, Sarpanchs, Panchayat Samiti members and the Zila Parishad members of the Panchayat Raj. The male voters constituted about 53 percent and the female voters constituted about 47 percent of the total electorates. The SC's constituted about 17 percent, and the ST's were about 14 percent of the total electorates. Table 1(a & b) (for all tables, please refer to Section 7) provides details of the electorates as a proportion of the rural population across the districts, and as well as the composition of male and female electorates.

It may be observed from the table that Pali district followed by Bikaner district had the highest proportion of rural population as electorates. In Pali district, approximately 77 percent of the rural population were eligible to vote in the Panchayat elections, and in Bikaner district about 74 percent of the rural population were eligible as voters. The least was in Banswara and Jaisalmer where only 60 percent of the rural population were eligible or listed as voters. In Ajmer, Banswara, Dungarpur, and Rajsamand districts, the male and female voters are almost equal in number.

It may be observed from the table that in Ganganagar district, roughly 36 percent of the electorates are composed of SC's. Ganganagar district has the highest concentration of SC population in the entire state. The agricultural prosperity of the district may explain the large number of SC population in the district. Interestingly, in Bikaner district neighbouring Ganganagar district, only 9 percent of the electorate is composed of SC's. In the Southern Rajasthan districts; viz., Udaipur, Dungarpur, and Banswara, over 50 percent of the electorates is composed of ST's. Banswara district has about 76 percent of the ST's in its electoral rolls.

4.ii Panchayat Samiti

The total seats in the Panchayat Samiti is 5,257, and 1,743 seats were reserved for women. Of the total seats reserved for women, about 56.45 percent were general seats, 17.78 percent were reserved for Scheduled Caste (SC) women, 14.75 for Scheduled Tribe (ST) women, and 11.02 percent was reserved for Other Backward Caste (OBC) women. The Table No.2. gives details of the total number of Panchayat

Samiti constituencies by reservation across the district of Rajasthan. It may be seen from the table that the highest number of constituencies is in Jaipur district, followed by Alwar district. The least number of Wards is found in Jaisalmer district.

These 5,257 Panchayat Samiti members would in turn elect 237 Pradhans for the entire state. Of these there would be 80 women Pradhans- 13 SC women Pradhans, 14 ST women Pradhans, 9 OBC women Pradhans and the rest from the General category. Table No. 2 provides details of the number of Pradhans in each district, and as well as the details of the women Pradhans by reservation.

4.iii Voter Turnout

For the Panchayat Samiti elections in Rajasthan as Table No 3 reveals, about 64 percent votes were considered valid. About 54 percent of them were men voters and about 46 percent were women voters. In all the districts of Rajasthan less than 50 percent of the women had cast their votes to express their preference for their Panchayat Samiti members. The highest turn out of women, ie., about 50 percent was in Sikar district, and the least was in Jhalawar district, ie., about 40 percent. In all the districts, less than 60 percent of the men had cast their preference for the Panchayat Samiti ward members. The highest turnout was in Barmer district, about 59 percent, and the least turnout was in Dungarpur district, about 50 percent.

4.iv Percentage Votes and Parties

Of the total valid votes polled in the state as a whole, the Congress party was marginally ahead than the BJP. About 36 percent of the total votes were polled in its favour, and about 34 percent was in favour of the BJP. The independents secured about 29 percent, and the balance was received by other parties in the State. Across districts, Alwar and Bharatpur showed a distinct preference for independents who secured about 57 percent and 61 percent respectively of the total votes polled in the district. In Hanumangarh, Dholpur, Jhunujunu and Sawai Madhopur as well the independents were preferred over the candidates from the national parties. Banswara district preferred the Janata Dal over other parties. In Rajsamand district, the BJP was marginally ahead of the Congress in the proportion of votes polled. However, across the district of Rajsamand, Congress received the highest proportion of votes. In Chittorgarh district, BJP secured the highest proportion of votes.

The Congress party did well in the western Rajasthan region- its traditional catchment area. Barmer, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Nagaur and Churu showed a preference for the Congress party over BJP. Interestingly, Ajmer district, with a maximum number of literate population in the state preferred BJP over the Congress party. The southern Rajasthan, mainly Chittorgarh, Kota, Udaipur preferred BJP

over the Congress party. Kota and Bundi districts, were overwhelmingly in favour of the BJP party, and about 70 percent of the total votes were cast in its favour.

4.v Seats and Parties

Translated into number of seats of the Panchayat Samiti, the BJP managed to pip slightly ahead of the Congress, although it had received marginally less proportion of votes than the Congress. It managed to get about 55 seats more than the Congress party. In terms of proportion, the BJP managed to wrest about 39 percent of the total Panchayat Samiti seats in the State whereas, the Congress managed only about 38 percent of the total seats. The independents and other parties won about 22 percent of the total seats (see Table No 4).

In Bharatpur, Alwar, Banswara, Hanumangarh and Tonk districts, the independents and other parties managed to get 50 percent or more of the total Panchayat Samiti seats. In Tonk district, the independents secured about 73 percent of the total Panchayat Samiti seats in the district. In Bundi and Kota districts, the BJP got about 70 percent of the total Panchayat Samiti seats. The BJP did well in Ajmer, Baran, Chittorgarh and Udaipur districts-the southern and eastern portions of the State, where the BJP had long ago wrested control from the Congress party. The Congress managed to retain its control in the western Rajasthan region.

4.vi Election of Women Block Members and Political Parties

As mentioned above, 1,743 seats are reserved for women, the Congress party was ahead of the BJP in the overall number of seats secured. The Congress party secured about 41 percent of the total seats reserved for women, and the BJP secured about 37 percent. The independents and others secured about 21 percent of the total seats. **In the reserved categories, viz., the reservation of women's seats for SC, ST and OBC the Congress Party had a substantial lead over the BJP.** In OBC women's seats the Congress party had secured about 47 percent of the seats compared to 33 percent of the BJP. SC women in the Congress had won 44 percent of the seats, and the BJP had won only 35 percent, and among ST's the Congress party had won about 44 percent of the seats whereas the BJP had won 36 percent. Restated, for the entire state the Congress Party still managed to retain its hold among the SC, ST and the OBC women, whereas, it conceded the positon to the BJP in the General women seats (see Table No.5).

For the women's seats overall, the pattern across districts is similar to that obtained for all the Panchayat Samiti seats in the State. To elaborate, the independents and other parties had secured an advantage in Alwar, Bharatpur, Banswara and Hanumangarh. Whereas, in Tonk district overall the independents and other parties had done well, in the election to the women Panchayat Samiti members, the Congress party was preferred. However, in Sawai Madhopur, the independents were

preferred over other mainstream parties. In Kota district however, the Congress was a washout, and this was across all women's seats in the Panchayat Samiti. In Banswara, the Janata Dal was preferred over other parties.

4.vii Election of Pradhans and Parties

In the election of Pradhans to the Panchayat Samiti, the anti-defection law was not applicable. This benefitted the ruling BJP. In spite of obtaining only 34 percent of the votes, and 39 percent of the seats in the Panchayat Samiti it managed to get 120 Pradhans out of a total number of 237 ie., about 51 percent were elected. The Congress managed to elect only 87 Pradhans, ie., about 37 percent whereas, there are only 30 Pradhans who are independents and from other political parties, ie., about 13 percent. While the infighting within the Congress party made its job easier, the advantage of being a ruling party also facilitated the BJP.

In Tonk district, where the independents and others in spite of securing about 73 percent of the total Panchayat Samiti seats, could not get a single Pradhan elected. The spoils were shared equally between the BJP and the Congress party. However, the two Pradhan posts reserved for women were taken by the BJP- a general and an OBC candidate. In Baran district as well, the independents have been co-opted into the BJP, and they helped get 6 out of the 7 Pradhan posts. The two Pradhan posts reserved for women-General and ST- were also taken by the BJP. The Congress party managed to secure only one post.

In Ajmer district, the Congress in spite of securing about 30 percent of the total Panchayat Samiti seats was not in a position to get even a single Pradhan elected. The three Pradhan posts reserved for women- two general and one OBC- were taken by the BJP. Of the 8 Pradhans to be elected in this district, the independents and other parties managed to get one Pradhan elected, and the rest was secured by the BJP. In spite of faring poorly in Alwar district, in terms of the votes and the Panchayat Samiti seats secured, the BJP managed to wrest 5 out of the 14 Pradhan seats in the district.

4.viii Women Pradhans and Parties

For the women Pradhans overall, the BJP managed to wrest more than 50 percent of the posts in its favour. In 11 out of 31 districts in the state, they had managed to get all the women Pradhans elected out of their party. The Congress however, could get all the Pradhan seats only in 7 districts of the state. The party could only get 28 of its women's candidates elected as Pradhan out of a total number of 80 Pradhans. It is interesting to note here that in its pocket borough of western Rajasthan, composed of its traditional supporters; viz., the Jats, it managed to get all the Pradhan seats in Barmer, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Churu, and majority of the seats in Nagaur district. However, in Jaisalmer, Ganganagar and Hanumangarh, the BJP

managed to wrest the seats from the Congress. The Janata Dal managed to get all their women candidates elected as Pradhans in Banswara district (see Table 6).

It may be seen from Table 7 that the Congress party had a marginally favourable result in the case of the SC women and OBC women only. The BJP has more than 50 percent of the women Pradhans in the general category, and about 50 percent of ST women Pradhans. In the remaining SC, ST and OBC Pradhans it has more than 50 percent of the Pradhans elected from it. Given the details in the table above, it can be stated that the ST leadership has conclusively been taken away by the BJP, whereas it has managed to forge slightly ahead of the Congress party in the SC and OBC groups as well.

4.ix Conclusion

Analysis shows that for the first time large numbers of rural women have got elected on party tickets. This will obviously change the character of the parties. It is now dependent on the women to change the structure of the parties from within. But what is very interesting is that the BJP which till now did not have a rural base in Rajasthan, got an opportunity to strike roots through women and tribals.

Section 5

THE FIELD STUDY OF THE ELECTIONS

5.i Objective

The objective of the study was to get into the depth of the experience of the elections particularly of women. To examine as to who were the women who stood for elections. Were they wives, daughters and relatives of those in power? Why did they stand? What was their involvement in the election? What were the problems they faced as women ? What was the response of the community? etc.

5.ii Methodology

It is our opinion that no outside researcher can study the election unless they are based there for a sufficient period of time to understand the dynamics thrown up by the politics and the interest groups of that region. Thus we did not do this study ourselves. The information source were friends who belong to the area and are related to some voluntary agency or mass organisation. They were involved enough to understand the various layers and were able to put some distance to that situation and did the major job of putting facts together. Thus there may be a bias as elections are events in which every body takes some position about the election and the candidates. Many of the people who were our source were writers involved in the election process and have ended up writing about it. But we felt that we could take care of this bias.

Our method of studying politics and election has mainly been of looking at people's narratives. All of us who have the experience of being village based in Rajasthan know that politics is one subject where ordinary people, mostly men have a deep knowledge and interest. It seems like collective history and experience in which everybody has something to say. This is due to the fact that men have the fora to not only talk and thus codify that history and transmit it from generation to generation, but also are active decision makers in that politics. Yes it has been the active arena of upper caste men and not the lower caste and the tribal. However, the latter may be passive decision makers. They do take the decision as a group, as to whom they are allying with. Secondly they do have access of that knowledge as they are part of that fora that men have, even if they may not have the space to actively contribute. The fora that are being referred to are the *chaupal/hatahai* (central public space in the village) and the *Bazaar*, now even in small villages. The common site in most periods of the year and in most parts of the State, is to have men congregate in the day and evening and share the gossip of the day. This is also true for poor and lower caste men who may not sit on the same level as the upper caste. They sit at some distance and may not hold forth but will be there as listeners.

However, during the course of interactions (training, workshops and informal chats) we realised that most women are not the carriers of this collective history and may only know a little. The reasons may be because of the number of villages that form their Panchayat, caste wise breakup, the *jati* of the Sarpanch and his political situation. The reasons are obvious. First of all they are daughters- in- law in their place of residence. Since they have come from another village, that itself puts them at a disadvantage(different vantage point) of picking up information. The first fifteen years of the reproductive period keeps them busy with chores of child bearing and rearing apart from taking care of survival. The older women and those living in their natal homes, by this logic should be better informed, which to some extent was true, but then not necessarily the dynamics of the politics or that of the party, or of the institution may be fully understood. Some women may know of it from an experience of a different sort. If she has had to struggle for a piece of land or as part of Development beneficiary scheme, and has had to visit the various functionaries and institutions then she will know of the dynamics. How do women get inducted to this information? There are fora for women like the 'well' or going for work together. Information does circulate between them through these meetings but they remain on the margins of this process of both constructing and carrying the history. Those women who have had the input of some intervening agency, for whom looking at politics may have been of some importance for their intervention, are also better informed. The kinds of questions people are asked accordingly widens their framework of knowledge.

The method of the study chosen was the case study of candidates. That is construction of the story of an election through a candidate. The reasons were obvious. Election information can be rhetorical, and full of opinions that the only way that we could get concrete information was by demanding little(study the election of one candidate of your area). Through that we felt we could capture some textures of what was happening and understand the changes. We also felt through this we could get the candidates and their supporters and family members to speak.

Some guidelines consisting of a list of questions were circulated. The questions were divided into four parts. Although the writers were told that they could abandon the questions and evolve their own if needed.

The first part consisted of questions relating to the constituency. The geographical, caste, class composition of the ward / Panchayat / Panchayat samiti / Zila Parishad. A brief history of the Panchayat or Panchayat Samiti. Elections in the past, role of the diverse caste and interest groups, the funtioning of the Panchayat, the role of the Government functionaries, the relation of the Panchayat with the MPs and MLAs of that area and development through the Panchayat. Finally the context of the present election.

The second part consisted of information related to the candidate. The interest group the candidate belongs to, decision making process of the candidate, whether standing independently or on a party ticket, the political background of the family and the candidate, understanding of development issues, about PRIs and the 73rd Amendment Act.

The third part consisted of the election politics, the different interest groups, their candidates and their relationship in their election, the supporters of the candidate, the method of campaign, who did they meet, money spent, alliances struck for election purpose, problems etc

The last section consisted of the questions related to the polling process. Voters' lists, filing nomination, organising agents, polling station, parties, counting, declaration of results and the aftermath.

However, by the time we got our stories, the elected representatives had begun working and in many instances we got to know a bit about how they had started working, the problems faced by Elected Representatives etc.

The case study became the means of beginning the documentation of the election. All kinds of stories were registered and reported. Some came in the oral form others were documented.

5.iii Selection of the Area of Study

We wanted to have a glimpse of the election on a wide scale. Thus instead of doing an indepth study in one area we spread ourselves as much as we could in order to study representative regions of the State. For instance the situation in western Rajasthan is very different from the rest of Rajasthan. Western Rajasthan on the one hand has the world famous IGNP canal, which has mixed communities living near it, peasant and pastoralists. The canal has changed the agrarian pattern in some places. Secondly, many communities remain as feudal as ever and to have an understanding as to what meaning was given to reservations for women would definitely be different even within that area. Southern Rajasthan is the Adivasi belt of the State. Till now the representatives of the Adivasi population have been the 20 to 25 percent upper caste people who have been governing the five tribal districts. Thus the election pattern would be different here as compared to other areas. The eastern districts of Bharatpur and Alwar have a distinctive Muslim population called the *mevs* who are an interest group in themselves and govern the politics of that area. Apart from the fundamentalist forces on both the sides, Hindu and Muslim manipulating the religious emotions, no election is unaffected by this situation. The status of *mev* women is unique. They are barely a few hundred of these *meonis* who have graduated. How would they respond to this? The central district of Ajmer, a highly literate district has a large number of important voluntary agencies working in the region including the SWRC who took a decision of entering the election fray.

This definitely changed the election scene in one block of the district. We decided to understand the situation here.

Similarly we took up certain areas which were unique due to existing struggles of local people, for instance, the struggle of the oustees of the Bisalpur dam that is coming up in Tonk district, the Alwar district *Kisan Andolan* against the industries becoming the privileged sector, and the peasants and workers struggle with the State on wages and transparency of information in the Rajsamand district.

However the final selection of an area could happen only if there was a person interested in getting involved with the study, keen on coordinating the work, and as far as possible giving in writing the facts of the area. The person could make any kind of selection of the candidate.

We managed to spread our study to twelve districts. Our information was from the villages of the districts of Bikaner, Jodhpur, Hanumangarh, Chittorgarh, Udaipur, Dungarpur, Ajmer, Rajasamand, Alwar, Bharatpur, Sawaimadhopur, Jaipur.

In this way we managed to study closely the election of about fifty women candidates, which included about four of Zila Parishad, sixteen Panchayat Samiti *Sadasya*, seventeen Sarpanches and thirteen ward members, fifty percent of who were SC and ST women. The study also looked into the election of about fifteen male candidates, which included Adivasi, SC and OBC. Collection of basic information regarding all the Elected Members of four complete Gram Panchayats in Udaipur district was also carried out. Apart from case studies, several stories were collected from these areas.

Apart from that we studied the intervention of about three mass based organisations, one literacy network, six voluntary agencies and one Government programme in these districts.

A total of thirty eight thousand seven hundred ninty one women were elected(see Table 8). Out of which thirty three thousand five hundred sixty six constituted ward members, over three thousand women Sarpanches and approximately seventeen hundred fifty block members. There were eighty Pradhans of the blocks, about three hundred thirty Zila Parishad Sadasyas and ten Zila Pramukhs.

5. iv Observations

Our observations cannot be generalised for the entire State or even for an entire district. It would also not be possible to speak for the thirty eight thousand women who are now in power. Our observations speak of the depth of the situation. They are merely suggestive of the trends that are emerging now that women have a place in politics.

A. Who Were The Women Who Stood For Election?

Age group

As studies of most States show, in the State of Rajasthan too, most of the women who won or entered the fray were between 25 years and 40 years, who are still in the reproductive age group. It is important to add here that since the age of a majority of the rural women is always an approximation, the question relating to age is to get an idea of the age group of women who are being given a public role. Till now it was the *"kakis"*, the *"Buas"*, the women who were over fifty, who in most cases had stopped menstruating, who did not have the day to day responsibility of looking after the home, were the ones who were legitimately allowed to indulge in "Panchayati" and were often seen resolving disputes in the village. It is often said in the village that the woman who has stopped menstruating is like a *'mard'* (the male being the "normal" and the female body being the abnormal one till she stops menstruation) Thus, who was the village society trusting to play a public role in today's context? Were the *'kakis'* challenged?

A study of four Gram Panchayats of Jhadol block of Udaipur district shows the average age of the women of each Panchayat who got elected (all figures have been rounded upto one) (Refer to Table 9).

The average age of the women of the four panchayats as revealed by the table is only 33. In comparison that of men is 40 years. Average age of the Panchayat members is around 36 years.

The age may vary from region to region. For instance, from our own limited evidence of the candidates who stood from Alwar district for the Zila Parishad elections, the average age was 35 years. The age of the candidates who stood for the Panchayat Samiti election ranged from 28 years to 53 years, the average being 31 years. The average age of Sarpanches being 35 years and that of ward panches being 43 years. (from 23 years to 65). Although these figures do not provide a real picture but it can be said with some conviction that a lot of younger people (25-40 age group) got an opportunity to contest the election. In the case of women **it wasn't just the *"kakis"* that people sought.**

The implications will have to be observed. We do not have the ages of just the winning candidates thus we cannot say that these are the precise averages of those who won the election. However, it is important to understand the argument often made that the younger they are the more they will be controlled by the family and the elders, due to being younger and the domestic roles and responsibilities of that age group. They may not travel on their own and may have to depend on their menfolk, as society does not permit younger women to travel on their own. In the same logic it

may be stated that they will not be doing independent work. It may be convenient for them to hand over work to their husbands or the brothers-in-law and they will take over.

Literacy and Educational Qualifications

Our sources have often reported that the candidates are 'literate' . In Rajasthan often a person who can only sign is called "literate". Secondly, those women about whom it is claimed that they are fifth pass can probably only recognise alphabets and may have relapsed to illiteracy due to lack of the use of their skills. Thus it will neither be a reliable exercise to reach a conclusion from our data about literacy skills nor will it be of any help. At one level it can be stated that a Sarpanch needs to have literacy and numeracy skills. It is important to have this skill for the self -confidence of an elected representative. But whether this will give actual control over the functioning of the Panchayat is very questionable for those who have come in for the first time. Maja of the Shetkari Sangathana who was a Sarpanch in Dhulia district, was highly literate and was a school teacher before becoming a Sarpanch. She found it very difficult to comprehend the 20 types of records of her Panchayat.and would fall back on the Panchayat secretary's discretion for comprehension. Thus we do feel that analysing this variable at this point of time will not enrich us.

Yet it can be stated without hesitation from our limited evidence that there is a difference in the literacy skills of candidates who have been elected as Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti members and that of Sarpanches and Ward panches. For Ward Panches, literacy was not considered an important criterion at all either by the people, nor was it a condition for qualifying in the rules. As stated earlier, the new Act relaxed the criterion of literacy skills as a condition for the qualification of the Sarpanch's candidature. Although for the Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad member's post, this was kept intact.

However, we do have evidence that in those situations where ordinary people had a chance to put up a candidate they saw to it that the candidate was *"hoshiyar"*, which included having literacy skills but this was not the central criterion of *"hoshiyari"*. In these situations they went out of the way to get the woman who was educated/literate back to the village. This was in the case of Nimuchana Panchayat Samiti *Sadasya*, where Krishna, an SC was called back from Delhi(for the reserved seat), or Madhu Bharadwaj Sarpanch, Palawal Jatan was called back from Jaipur. In the case of Shabana of Laxmangarh, Alwar district (now deputy-Zila Pramukh), people pressurised her to stand for the Zila Parishad member election as she was highly educated, an M.A. They felt that the few educated women *mevs* must get a chance to stand. But in all these instances literacy skill was combined with that of class. Even in the case of rural Bikaner district where literacy skills are very low

amongst women of all castes, whenever a group challenged a situation, a "consensus" candidate was being forced upon them by the powerful in the village (the powerful would be the proxy Sarpanch).The Scheduled caste group put up a candidate who was worthy of that post and literacy once again became a skill that they sought. This can be seen in the case of the Sarpanch elections of Peenpera, Rambagh and the Panchayat Samiti *Sadasya* of Baluri. But in all these cases the men of the families belonged to the service classes and were definitely not poor (in broad terms the middle class of the village). Thus it was not the criteria of an educated woman but also the class, the family she belonged to which made them seek her.

People do consider the post of the Sarpanch as important and therefore may complain that they have a Sarpanch who is *"anpadh"* and her husband is the actual Sarpanch. This was also stated by the Pradhan of Bassi Panchayat Samiti.According to him the block had only one woman who was worthy of being a Sarpanch as she was the only one who was educated and had a good deal of initiative. Others were Sarpanches in namesake only. There is in any case a class bias for who makes a good Sarpanch.

It is difficult to conclude that there is a direct correlation between literacy as a critical criteria for selection and the younger age group of women coming in the fray for the Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti members and Sarpanch. (It is those under 40 years who have greater chance of being literate). This could be explored further in the future studies.

Socio-economic background and the interest group they represented.

No generalisations can be made about the class of the women who stood for elections. However, with higher stakes for the post, the chances of the person being " better off", and not belonging to the poorer classes were more. Since the election is a contest between power groups. it is important to also know which interest group the person was representing, or the backing that the candidate had. So even if the candidate was poor or SC or ST (due to the policy of reservation) the interest group could be that of the upper caste, rich, of a particular party, or that of the previous power holders of the village or they could be the new ones that have come into being due to the presence of Voluntary Agencies/ mass based organisations.

It was for the ward panch election where a lot of women stood, who were quite poor, without any backing of a village group and did not succumb to pressure of the community to withdraw. This was also reflected in the other elections but to a very small degree.

In village Bavli of Mohali Panchayat, district Sawai Madhopur, a Jatav (SC) dominated village, despite the pressure of her whole family and community that Sita

bai ought not to stand against Kevli Bai for the Ward panch election, the former could not care less and she fought the election.

Similarly in village Palawal Jatan, Dakha devi a poor Jat, despite one half of the *Jat* community having decided to put up a Meena woman as the candidate for the Sarpanch elections and the other half had decided to support another candidate, insisted that she did not care about community decisions but would stand for the elections and she got 33 votes.

However, the elections for the three posts of Sarpanch, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad members was different. Our experience of the Sarpanch and the Panchayat Samiti member shows that these two posts had the highest stakes. The seat of the Sarpanch has always been a very important one and that of the Panchayat Samiti although being contested for the first time, this seat was looked upon as being important in terms of voting for the Pradhan or being a contender for the Pradhan. The Zila Parishad being at a distance and till now having not been an important institution of the Panchayat Raj, did not have the same stakes.

The relatives of traditional power wielders definitely did not keep out of the elections. The general category seats for women had the wives and daughters of the already powerful fight the elections. However, our limited evidence shows that there has been a major entry of women in the election whose families have a service class background, linked to Government service or some programme of a Government or an NGO. These families had no background of politics. In those where Development agencies were active several development workers(of Government and NGO), Total Literacy Programme workers, who may be poor, but competent also got a chance but they had the backing of the voluntary agency/mass organisation whose workers they were. Thus though they may not be privileged in terms of money but they are privileged in terms of exposure, and knowledge.

B. Whose Decisions: Women As Candidates ?

There was a diversity in the consciousness of women and the family and community towards women's entry and decision making into the electoral arena. The response was along a broad spectrum.

Husbands being the defacto elected representatives ...

There were some stories of the husbands being the defacto candidates in the election, managing the whole campaign and even printing the banners in their name. For instance in the case of Mukesh Sharma's wife, who stood from rural Alwar on a Panchayat Samiti *Sadasya* seat remained un-named through out. After she won the election it was Mukesh Sharma who wore the garlands and was busy with jubiliations with his male friends till somebody realised that her signature was

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needed by the polling officer. It was then that they sent for her. She came with her face covered, signed and went away.

So was it with Dariya Kanwar of Baluri Panchayat, Bikaner district. Amar Singh her husband fielded her as the BJP candidate for the Panchayat Samiti. She did not step out of the home even after winning the election. The people say that Dariya Kanwar practices purdah and does not even know where the *diggi* for water is located. In fact the story circulates that she did not know what to do with the ballot paper and brought it home, instead. When Dariya Kanwar won the election there was not a single woman present and when the news of her victory reached the village, Amar Singh was surrounded by men and it appeared as if he had won the election. He had conducted a high velocity campaign and had spent more than Rs. 2 lakhs on the campaign.

Similarly in the case of Makra Dev Block Jhadol, District Udaipur. The ex-Sarpanch Pratap Singh lost the Zila Parishad elections on a BJP ticket and was keen on having his hold in his Panchayat so he put up his first wife, Kamala Devi as the candidate for the Sarpanch post. His second wife was very keen to stand for the elections. She is literate, knowledgeable and bold as compared to the first wife who does not step out of the house. She also began attending the local women's group meetings before the elections were announced. However, she was not given a chance to stand in the elections. Kamala Devi won the election. Definitely Pratap Singh wanted total control over the Panchayat thus did not even trust his second wife who seemed to have some opinion of her own, to fight the election. Initially the people had expressed a desire that they had wanted a *"padhi-likhi"* (educated) woman as the Sarpanch. It was the second wife who therefore stood a better chance and the two opponents of Kamla who were literate. However, the BJP campaigned aggressively for Kamla and she won.

A wife contesting her own husband during the election...

As it was in the case of Rehmati (a poor working class woman) of Kakniawaas, Ajmer who fought Mullahji her husband in the ward member election. According to her, Mullahji had fought several elections in the past and this time she had decided to stand so he should have respected her wishes. However, when he filed his nominations, she refused to withdraw her candidature and campaigned for herself. She was also clear that her vote was her own and Mullahji's vote was his own and they both had the choice to do what they wanted with it. She lost the elections and so did Mullahji. But the experience was fun and of tremendous learning. She plans to fight the Sarpanch election next time.

A situation where the husband gave full moral support to his wife

Thirty year old Archana Bohra (M.Com. pass) of Ajmer was very keen on standing for the Panchayat Samiti member elections from the village of her in-laws, Rupangarh, which is her permanent place of residence. Rupangarh seat for the Panchayat Samiti member was reserved for a woman of general category. Her husband was not keen that she stand for elections. He felt that they were a non political family, very respected as his father was teacher and politics was not a respectable occupation. She convinced him and took him to the BJP office and registered as a BJP party member. The BJP group in her village who also felt that she was the deserving candidate proposed her name for the party ticket. However, the Ex- Maharaja of Kishangarh and former MLA Jagjit Singh managed to get the ticket for his wife, Kamlesh Kumari. Archana was very angry and decided to stand anyhow and confront the Maharaja of Kishangarh. She stood as the BJP rebel candidate. All her posters and banners had this line of being a rebel candidate. In her campaign she spoke of the high handed ways of the ex-maharaja of Kishangarh and warned them that he would be controlling the constituency if Kamlesh Kumari got elected. On losing the election to Kamlesh Kumari she was not disturbed. When a large group of villagers reached her house in Ajmer and asked her to stand for the Sarpanch elections she agreed. She won the election comfortably this time. The ex-maharaja of Kisahngarh hated her guts. He is her arch enemy today as Kamlesh Kumari has been elected as the Pradhan and in effect he is the proxy Pradhan. But she has been working with a good deal of energy and enthusiasm despite being under his censure.

When asked as to what gave her the guts to face such opposition she felt that she had not only the support of a lot of ordinary villagers but also the complete trust and support of her husband, just being by her side has been a very critical factor.

Assertion by communities of traditional power wielders through women...

The election was also an opportunity for communities who have always been out of the power structure to assert themselves through the women candidates. For instance in the election of the Gram Panchayat of Peenpera. Sukhamani, an SC of Gopaliyan, Bikaner district, refused to succumb to the Thakur's pressure of his wife coming in unopposed. The Thakur had called a meeting of all caste representatives of only the main village of the Panchayat and decided that the woman Sarpanch should be a nominal one. After all they could not allow the women to handle the matters of the Panchayat. Therefore Rukma Kanwar the wife of the Thakur was decided as the consensus candidate.

The poor Rajput men felt Rukma Kanwar would be an ideal candidate for them as then she would have to step out of her home and this would elevate the status of their women who due to poverty had to step out of their homes for work.

The Naiks (SCs) of Gopaliyan were very worried about the candidature of Rukma. They knew the Thakurs' ill feelings towards the SC and the poor. They decided to challenge this and they also had a better candidate with them. Sukhamani who was higher secondary pass and the adult education worker, was a willing candidate and decided to confront the Thakur. She was also supported by the local NGO Urmul Trust which prevented the Thakurs from doing a disinformation campaign.

Pressure was brought on her to withdraw her candidature. She was asked to save the Thakurs' *izzat*. However she and the Naiks refused. Knowing that even if all the voters of Gopaliyan would vote she would not win. She still said let the ballot boxes decide this issue. The Thakur also brought in the BJP MLA of the area to force Sukhmani to withdraw. They also decided to use the caste issue aggressively. No upper caste would be able to drink water in the house of a SC. Sukhmani instead decided to talk on issues of employment, water scarcity and even got a hand bill printed. Sukhamani lost by 422 votes. However the SCs have decided to continue challenging the Thakur.

The same was the case of Shanti Devi, Sarpanch of Sandla Panchayat, Tonk district. Sandla village along with sixty six others shall be partially or totally submerged when the Bisalpur dam will be fully constructed. The oustees have been struggling with the State for a fair rehabilitation. Shanti Devi is one of the most vocal persons of her village on this issue. Despite the fact that these Panchayats do not receive any funds for development as they will be submerged soon, the elections were fought with the same intensity and fervour as elsewhere and the issue of the election was the negotiation with the State on issues of compensation and rehabilitation. Sandla being an SC reserved seat had another contestant who was put up by the upper caste. Shanti Devi was supported by a majority of the SCs who felt that although all castes are equally affected, several upper caste families had managed to get compensation. The SC's felt that they must have a representative who would genuinely take up their point. The SC's were pressurised by the upper caste to bring in the other candidate but they refused to succumb and Shanti Devi became the winner. Several such stories were collected where the reservations gave the oppressed caste an opportunity to contest the traditional power wielders.

Wanting to establish a point in the election...

Ratan Devi of Silora block stood as an independent candidate for the Panchayat Samiti seat election as she wanted to establish the point that an independent, other than congress and BJP, (the two main parties of her area) also has and can retain

a separate identity in politics. There is a tradition that independents lose their identity soon after the election. They usually join the party which grants them greater favours. After winning the Panchayat Samiti member election, Ratan was put under great pressure by the Ex-Maharaja of Kishangarh. He wanted her to change her decision of being a contender for the Pradhan seat as he feared her defeat. Ratan was not very keen on the Pradhan seat. But she did not wish to vote for either Congress or the BJP so she decided that the best way to abstain from voting was to vote for oneself. The Congress who had only five seats were very keen that Ratan fight as their candidate, she refused this proposal and said that she would fight as an independent only. The Congress in the end decided not to put up any candidate and vote for Ratan instead. Ratan lost the election to Kamlesh Kumari the BJP candidate.

In contrast Kamala Chaturvedi of Kishangarh joined the congress as the Silora block Pradhan seat was reserved for a woman and she wanted to become the Pradhan. She felt that the Panchayat Samiti member had no role and if she wanted to really function at the block level, then an executive post was important. Since the Pradhan vote was an indirect vote, a vote cast by all the directly elected members of the block she felt that she needed the support of a party to get sufficient votes for the seat. Kamla lost the Panchayat Samiti member election by only four votes.

Both Ratan Devi and Kamla Chaturvedi are members of different voluntary groups working in that region.

Getting involved in the election...

In the majority of the cases the women who stood for election had their names proposed by either their families or a group in the village. Even if the decision was the husband's, the family's or the community's the manner in which the women got involved was amazing.

Maya Yadav, of Bharatpur district is the wife of the Ex-Sarpanch Roop Singh of Dhilavati Panchayat. Since he had his eyes on the Dhilavati seat, he wanted one of his persons in the Panchayat Samiti. So he got his wife a Congress party ticket for a Panchayat Samiti constituency seat. Maya although the wife of a Sarpanch never got involved in any of his public affairs. She used to say initially that she was fighting the election because Sarpanch Sahab had asked her to. So she hardly got involved in her own campaign in the beginning. It was her family who went canvassing from place to place but she gradually got involved and went without covering her face and visited every house twice to woo her voters. Maya lost the election but the election has left her with an even stronger conviction that she must contest again. She says that now that she has learnt about politics she will contest again and show the world that she can also win an election.

Chanda fought the Ward Panch election from one of the wards of Harmara village. One day before the election she was put up by one of the Sarpanch candidates so that she would be his "vote " in the Deputy Sarpanch election incase he won the Sarpanch election. Her only condition for standing for the election was that she must not lose her self respect (which was that she must not lose the election). Chanda saw no reason as to why she should have campaigned for herself. She in any case does not move out of her house. However, she was very depressed after losing the election and did not take food for two days. She had reached the conclusions that she had lost because the people who had put her up had also put up the other woman and had taken her for a ride.

In contrast Ghisi Bai who was elected as an unopposed SC member from one of the wards of Nallu Panchayat, Ajmer district was not interested (in the least) about the Panchayat meetings. Although she attends every meeting and is very clear on the issues that the Panchayat ought to take up for her village, she is not in least the impressed by her post. Instead she kept expressing her unhappiness of having to attend meetings, as on one occasion she had to pay two workers thirty rupees each to work on her farm as she could not be there. She felt that no Panchayat meeting was worth such a sacrifice. When an effort was made to impress upon her that an SC woman ward panch is a rarity, she reacted sharply and said " So should I die for name and fame? " . It was only out of a sense of duty that she was coming for the meetings. She wasn't enjoying them.

It is interesting that both Chanda and Maya were put up by players in politics who saw these women as instruments for themselves. However, these women very quickly saw themselves in it and built an identity with that role. The point being made is that whoever may have taken the decision what meaning did these women give to the election. In contrast Ghisi Bai's experience speaks of how a Panchayat will need to be sensitive to women's needs in order to involve them more creatively.

C. The Campaign (A Strength Giving Exercise)

Mobility

The election was also an exhilarating experience in terms of the mobility that it gave to the women. Santra, a SC woman from Harmara village, who campaigned for Ratan Devi said that the campaign had a sense of freedom about it. Because you could legitimately leave the house early in the morning, you could walk into people's homes freely, inspite of being SC nobody stopped you from entering their house. Then she would come back late evening but would not be blamed for neglecting the household by her absence.

Even if the women did not take the decision of standing for the election, the curiosity of the voter in some places to know the candidate he was electing brought them out and gave them mobility.

It was on demand of the male voter that in some places the candidate had to campaign publically. For instance in the case of Shabana of Laxmangarh block, when she was approached by the villagers to fight for the Zila Parishad election, she put a condition before them and her family that she would only stand for election if they gave her the permission to move around without the purdah. They agreed to this which resulted in men and women becoming very curious to see the face of a *mev* women. They came from great distances to see her. Or in the case of Ratan, the Panchayat Samiti candidate from Harmara whose door to door campaign brought out her opponent, Sharada Tank whose husband was then the Ex-Sarpanch and is now the Sarpanch, was a proxy candidate. Had it not been for Ratan Devi she would not have had to step out. But she was forced to go and meet the voters as Ratan was doing an intensive campaign. It was not sufficient to be the *Sarpanch-ki-bivi.* The other BJP candidate Laxmi Vaishnav also had to move out of her house.

Similarly in the case of Sheela of Gaduawaas Alwar, she was not keen on moving out of her house but due to the people's curiosity about her she had to get involved in a public campaign. However, when she did move out it was with a group of women and she only went and met the women of her village.

This was the general case. Women candidates due to reasons of propriety moved with women from their family and were most comfortable about meeting the women folk in the campaign.

Both the dimensions of moving with women folk and meeting women, brought women out in groups for the first time in such large numbers in the male dominated election campaign.

The moving out of the home and campaigning as a candidate or as a supporter is a major shift in women's image. Generally the development workers who go about door to door are called *" roti phirti randa"* meaning the crying widows who go from place to place bothering everybody. With women having the legitimacy to go door to door and demand people's time and attention even if it be for just a short span, is an important experience in terms of the road it opens for women to play such roles later.

Addressing women as voters

For the first time women voters were addressed in their homes in the election. Till now the men would take the decision and inform the women as to who they should cast the vote for. Since women were only comfortable with talking to women, all

women candidates who campaigned met them. This further involved more women in the election. Due to women being more comfortable with a low profile campaign as the male gaze is difficult to take or did not have the confidence to be in the public, there were very few who addressed rallies and meetings. The Zila Parishad candidates from our study were the only ones who addressed public rallies. For most of the others, Sarpanches and Panchayat Samiti members at the most they may have had small meetings in mohallas or villages, otherwise it was mainly a door to door campaign. The entry of women will probably change the nature of campaigning as compared to the usual methods where only men campaigned.

The strength of the reservation thus turned out to be that it simply did not involve the thirty three percent women (i.e. the thirty eight thousand and more women) who got elected. It also brought out many more in the political process, as candidates, supporters and as voters who needed to be addressed.

Promises made by women

Yet another dimension of the election was that many of the women did not know enough about what to "deliver" as they were not sure as to what would be under their jurisdiction. And they also lacked the confidence to make false promises. Although the male supporters may have made promises of bringing in *"vikas"* on behalf of the women, by and large the women, if they met the voters they said that they would keep in touch even if they lost the election. Which meant that they will keep the relationship going. Probably this was the only dimension that seemed to be in their control. This was brought out in the election of several candidates including Shakuntala the Zila Parishad candidate who stood on a Congress ticket from Jodhpur and won the election. She was absolutely unsure of the role of the ZP Sadsaya that she preferred to be honest and say that *"I will keep in touch and show my face to you"*.

Alcohol and other expenses in the election...

Did women candidates supply alcohol during the election? This is a critical question as it was observed in this election that more alcohol was distributed in these elections than in the MLA election. The night before the electon called *"Katla- ki-raat"*, distribution of alcohol is like a ritual. The consumers are mainly men. Although there is no correlation between consuming the alcohol supplied by a candidate and casting the vote for her/him, supplying it is looked upon as a necessity for the election. The State Election Commissioner issued a code of conduct for election which takes serious cognisance of this fact. However, nobody even knew about the code and could not care less.

In those instances where a woman candidate was representing an interest group rooted in the village, community, party and the election was outside her control,

alcohol was distributed liberally by her supporters. For instance Munni Devi stood as the BJP candidate from Bhadoon in Ajmer district. It was alleged by the villagers and the Congress candidates that alcohol was liberally supplied by the BJP. When she was asked about this she said that she did not distribute alcohol of her own accord. However, if her party did then that was their business. She had her conscience clear as she had neither spent the money nor supplied the bottles herself.

Archana Bohra of Rupangarh in Ajmer who stood for the Sarpanch election with the co-operation of the villagers saw to it that the other party did not distribute alcohol. They made committees in every *Mohalla* so as not to allow alochol to enter the village. But in the Panchayat Samiti *Sadasya* election they could not prevent it and the opposite party distributed alochol. She also spent ten thousand rupees in block as compared to having spent nothing in the Sarpanch election.

Madhu Bharadwaj, Sarpanch of village Palawal Jatan was asked how much money she spent on the election. Her reply was " I spent (used) my tongue not money."

By and large the representatives who stood from mass organisations and voluntary agencies were very cautious about expenses and far from distributing alcohol, many did not even spend money on banners and posters. In some cases, due to their presence, alcohol was not distributed at all in that area for the election.

However, many women who stood for the elections took loans as they hired jeeps for the campaign and to transport people on the polling day. Kanku Bai, Sarpanch of Badkochra, Ajmer district, used to be a vegetable seller. She is very poor. One group in the village did not want the ex-Sarpanches wife to win, they therefore asked her to stand for the elections. Kanku was asked to contribute ten thousand rupees for the election for hiring of jeep, for posters, banners. She took a loan. Kanku won the election and she has stopped selling vegetables. She now sits at home and her husband an alcoholic and her son run the Panchayat

Dev bai who stood for the Panchayat Samiti seat from Bhim block, spent less than Rs. 200 for her elections. She was horrified when she heard from one candidate during the time counting was in progress in Rajasamand, that the woman had pawned her farm to fight the election. She was worried that if she lost the election then she would never be able to get back her land. If she won then there was some chance of earning money while in power. It is a well known fact that the expenses incurred during elections are taken back from the money that comes for development works in the Panchayat.

Fascination for the election procedure...

Since the process of election was a new thing for all the members, almost all the candidates who stood for election whether "educated" or "illiterate" spoke of the thrill

and the fascination associated with the way ballot boxes were sealed or the manner in which they were opened for counting. These may appear trivial in terms of the more serious subject of politics. However, it is a fact that social mores kept women out of the electoral arena, and it was the first time that they were given importance by the election machinery. The formality of the exercise was not intimidating, instead it satisfied their curiosity.

D. Did Women's Groups Emerge As A Force In The Election?

Was there a significant assertion by women's groups of whatever kind that exist? Did these groups throw up an alternative method of contesting the election? Especially at a time when more and more women are stepping out of their homes, was a direction given by these groups for these women as to how to relate to power structures.? We present here our limited interaction with such groups.

It was observed that although voluntary agencies and programmes like WDP have helped in the formation of women's groups, they did not automatically emerge as an interest group to contest the election or 'collectively bargain' with candidates. What was observed was that the women's group activist that seemed most visible in the election was not the ordinary village woman, except may be for the ward panch election, but it was the worker of the voluntary agency or the *sathin* as in the case of WDP that seemed to contest the election of Sarpanch, Panchayat Samiti *Sadasya* and Zila Parishad *Sadasya.* All these workers (whether *sathin,* a *dai,* a nonformal education teacher or a middle level worker of the organisation) are local people belonging to that same area.

The emphasis in the elections was definitely on the individual rather than the group. This goes against feminist values in one sense. Thus it is important to ask the question whether this is an inherent aspect of electoral politics or that the women's groups lacked a vision and therefore did not find collective expression in politics. Elsewhere in Rajasthan, organisations of peasants and workers who fought the elections as a group were able to make the election rally around an issue. Why was this not possible for women's groups? We have taken two groups to understand this point. The WDP in only three districts of Jaipur, Jodhpur and Ajmer and the SWRC group in Ajmer district.

SWRC was by far the only NGO to have jumped into the election and become a politically interested party in their area. (Some mass based organisations did play that role). All the workers resigned from the NGO and decided to participate in the elections as supporters, candidates etc. They emerged as the third front (neither Congress nor BJP) in the Silora Block of Ajmer district. All their candidates had given the same preference of election symbol and coincidentally they all got it. Thus

the third front also had a common symbol " *bad -ka -ped*" to represent itself in the elections against the *"haath"* of the Congress and the *"phool"* of the BJP.

However, the more active group in the elections that emerged in terms of strategising, planning was that of the SWRC workers than of their village groups. The Navyuvak Mandal (the youth group)was still active in some places and spontaneously became an interested party in the election. However, the women's groups except in one or two places was fragmented in the elections.

We have stories of Lali Bai of Boharu, Ajmer District contest Sunder Bai in the election to their ward. Both were SC members of the Boharu Mahila Group supported by SWRC, for the last ten years. It was decided by some of the members of the group that Sunder bai would stand. However, Lali Bai was told by her family that she should stand, and she says that she herself was curious about the elections so she decided to stand opposite Sunder Bai. She did not feel that there was anything wrong in opposing Sunder Bai, after all it was only an election. Sunder Bai won the election.

For many of their women candidates (who were workers) it was the collective experience of working as a team in the campaign, with their groups of supporters that was of intrinsic value. For instance Naurati bai (an SC) who daringly stood for election from a general constituency for the block seat knew that she could never win. So for her the campaign with four other workers was not one of having to prove herself. Instead it turned out to be a collective exercise of carrying out a strict campaign according to the code of conduct. It further helped her to explore the issues of women and the community in that area. The encounter with Hindu - Muslim politics during the election in her area made her realise that this was no more an urban phenomena but moving rapidly to the rural areas.

All the workers felt that it was the first time that they talked to everybody of a particular village. Since NGOs usually only work with the deprived groups they felt that this was the first time that they went around the whole village. In the words of Sushila *"the election took me by force to every member in the community. I feel I have rediscovered my area of work."* Sushila lost the election.

There was yet another interesting dimension in terms of values in politics. Kamala Chaturvedi, a development worker and an Ex-SWRC worker came to fight the election on a Congress party ticket from the same area as SWRC. Her reasons to fight the election were public. She wanted to become the Pradhan of the Block. The differences between Kamala Chaturvedi and the SWRC became a public issue in the election. So much so that they did not mind seeing a third party win, but not either of them. Interestingly neither won and the BJP candidate won the election. The values reflected in this altercation between the SWRC and Kamala was like that of

any other political group. Neither group showed an alternative method of sorting this problem.

WDP has been in existence for the last ten years and is now active in 21 districts of the State. The *sathins* are in only 9 districts. Today about fifty percent of the *sathins* have unionised to demand being recognised as Government employees (they are honorary village level workers) and hike in honorarium, they are presently paid a paltry sum of Rs, 250/- per month.

Several *sathins* were picked up by a particular interest group in the village and then the core group ceased to be just the women's group (if there was one). In such a case the election was managed very differently. In Ajmer district 6 *sathins* ran for the Panchayat Samiti seat on Party tickets; five on BJP tickets and one on a Congress ticket. They saw nothing wrong in joining a mainstream party and fighting the elections on public demand.

The President of the *Sathin* Union, 75 year old Kesar Bua, fought the elections on a BJP party ticket and won. According to Kesar Bua she was approached by the whole village and she agreed to stand.

It was the same with Lali Bai who stood on a BJP ticket for the Panchayat Samiti Sadasya seat from Ajmer. She says that the local BJP asked her to stand on their ticket. She agreed when several villagers also persuaded her. After all it was the wish of the village.

Similarly Shakuntala of Jodhpur who stood for the Zila Parishad seat on a Congress ticket, was a *Sathin* for nine years before she joined Lok Jumbish, a State Education programme. She is a very sincere and serious worker. Her father is an old Congress man. So when she was approached by the Congress she agreed. For her election many *sathins* and village women joined her campaign and went from village to village with her. But the election was controlled by the party and she had senior congress leaders address her election rallies.

Goga Bai a *sathin* of Jodhpur district was elected unopposed as Sarpanch of Panchayat Agolai. Here there was a convenient pact between the BJP and the Congress group. The Congress candidate who lost the block seat was given the Deputy Sarpanch seat so that they would not have to contest for the sarpanch seat and Goga Bai could come in unopposed as the BJP backed candidate. When this decision was taken Goga Bai and other women were not present. Although Goga Bai had made up her mind about fighting for the election and also announced it, she did not consider it important to be in the decision making. She left it to her husband and son to negotiate for her. Her husband who is a compounder in the Government dispensary is more active than her in the role of the Sarpanch.

Mohini of Jaipur district was initially approached by the BJP backed group to be the candidate for the Sarpanch post in Naila. However, very soon they changed their minds. They realised that Mohini had played a major role in supporting Bhanwri Devi in her battle to get justice after her gang rape. So it was considered a disqualification. Mohini is a very bold and fearless person. Her close connection with the Bhanwari case was not good for them. No other group in the village came around actively to put her up as a candidate. Mohini herself did not take the initiative to bring the women's group together.

It is very clear that the parties picked up those women who could bring them votes. It was not because of her work with women that they wanted her, but because her image would get them votes, and they could have a defacto control over her.

Most of the *sathins* who stood in the elections felt that the elections were about winning. If they get into the power structure, they could work more effectively in bringing about a change in women's lives. Thus it was not important to take other village women along with them in this process.

However, there were some other instances reported about how WDP *Sathins* refused to stand for elections despite public pressure because they felt that other women should get a chance. All powers must not be vested in just one woman. Munni Devi, a *sathin* of Jaipur district refused to stand for election. She preferred to suggest the name of some other women as she felt that she had already got tremendous opportunities and now it must go to others.

Why was there was no desire to work on an alternative method of electoral politics amongst women's groups? Obviously the so called group had a very different political consciousness and preparation for these elections. It is not that they are not clear on issues. From time to time they have come together to bargain for water or wages. However, over the years most of the women's groups of WDP and of many voluntary agencies who we met, have gradually been depoliticised. Most voluntary agencies and the WDP have begun delivering Government programmes. As such the priorities are changing and politically conscentising a village group and strengthening them as pressure groups, is not the agenda any more. These groups are used by every programme to deliver their goods.

Secondly, the support structure (whether voluntary agency or WDP) have by themselves undergone a change and therefore they have not been supportive in providing the leap needed to function as a group in electoral politics and after.

The women's movement in Rajasthan needs to seriously look into this and dialogue with all groups that have been working with "women" so as to evolve feminist ways of intervention in electoral politics with the grass root women. While the election has expedited the process of legitimising women's entry, made them more visible in the public domain, the direction that they ought to be giving the women about participation in mainstream politics is still wanting.

Section 6

SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND DIRECTIONS FOR ELECTED WOMEN MEMBERS

6. i Post Election Scenario: Identifying the support needs

In the last six months of being in power, the elected women representatives have thrown up a variety of issues. The first three months consisted of a great deal of enthusiasm to work. For instance;

As in the case of Koeli (a very poor SC belonging to Nimuchana, Alwar) soon after she became the Sarpanch she took up the issue of vacating encroachments. The first notice she issued was against her husband and father-in- law as they were defaulters too. She did not want to be considered partial.

Archana Bohra, Sarpanch Rupangarh, Ajmer, gave a notice to the liquor shop to pay the dues to the Panchayat for two months.

Kanku Bai, Sarpanch, Lotiyana, Ajmer, got a resolution passed in her Panchayat about villagers vacating the encroachments alongside the road that runs through the village. She took a group of labourers with her and went from door to door breaking the encroachments.

The Sarpanch of a village in Bhilwara, on coming into power called the Gram Sabha meeting and they passed a resolution that the liquor factory that was being planned by the State Government should be canceled on public demand. The people of that area had been struggling against the installation of the factory for the last several months. The Panchayat adopted the resolution of the Gram Sabha and sent it to the State Government. The Chief Minister gave into public pressure and cancelled the setting up of the liquor factory.

But the problems of the elected representatives have increased to such an extent that if they are not heard or no action is taken then there is a fear that they may just give up the struggle for these issues.

In a meeting of the elected members, mainly ward members of western Rajasthan they came up with the following problems...

"We are not informed about the date and the timings of the meetings. How do we extract it from the Sarpanch and the Gram Sevak?"

"We are not given a chance to speak in the meeting."

"If we are given a chance to speak nothing comes of the issues we raise."

"Even if a resolution is passed as part of a solution to a problem, nothing happens as the Sarpanch says it is not in his / her control to expedite it. People have genuine problems of drinking water, the PHC etc."

Madhu Bharadwaj, Sarpanch in Jaipur district said...

"I do not know whom to go to with my problems. I feel alone and isolated. I feel like handing over the post of the Sarpanch. The people are dissatisfied with you as nothing is in your control. We have no powers. They expect you to get employment for them, repair their handpumps. These schemes come from the Panchayat Samiti. What could I do if Employment Assurance Scheme was not sanctioned for our Panchayat? When I told them, let us all go and do a day long dharna and pressurise the Panchayat Samiti to give us the scheme, they said it is your job to run to the Panchayat. They want their names in the Below Poverty Line list. What can I do? The State Government needs to release orders for making fresh list.

The Gram Sevak is never available to give the records. He comes only three days a month. He misguided me on the road construction works. I did not know that the Panchayat works are not given on contract. On his suggestion I gave it away on contract. I do not know how to fill a muster roll and he refuses to help me. The BDO is unhappy as I organised the "Open forum" in the village and in the presence of so many villagers and members of women's groups from outside we spoke of the problems in the village and criticised the Panchayat Samiti.

The Ward Panches are all waiting for me to go wrong. When we had our first Gram Sabha more than a hundred and fifty women came. We were about two hundred people, but not the required quorum. I had gone door to door calling the people for the Gram Sabha. The women responded but the anti group wanted to see me embarrassed. The Gram Sabha did not take place. In the next Gram Sabha we only had fifty people. As the quorum was not necessary I did not bother about contacting too many people. I was really feeling let down after the first.

My family members were supportive initially. But now my mother-in-law has also begun to complain that I do not do the household work. As villagers begin coming from five in the morning. I have to attend to them and my children and the house. I have no choice but to keep doing both together. My husband is irritated with me as I keep borrowing money from him. I have to make so many trips to the Block headquarter and Jaipur. The Panchayat has no money. I don't get a travel allowance....

I wish I had not stood for these elections and I had been happy in my small world looking after my children, doing my job of teaching. I want to hand over the Sarpanchai...."

Ratan, Panchayat Samiti Member...

"No meeting of the block council is organised. Why were we elected if they did not want us to do anything. No role has been given to the Panchayat Samiti members. Members of only one party got into all the standing committees".

Maina...

"In my Panchayat none of the women ward members come to the meetings . Their husbands attend it. How do we keep them out ?"

Archana...

"It is impossible to speak to the Pradhan. Her husband is the one who attends all her calls."

Mohini (Ward Panch)...

"I was beaten by Nara Ram when I prevented him from beating his wife. I am a ward member and the Sarpanch is not interested in getting this sorted. I raised it in the Gram Sabha, and the members said this is not the place to raise personal issues and waste the precious time of the Panchayat. If they cannot be sympathetic towards me then they will never help other ordinary women. The other members also tried but in vain".

Nirmala (Sarpanch)...

"I was attacked by the anti group when we called the gram sabha. Luckily I was bodily lifted by some villagers and saved, otherwise I would have been beaten up like some of the villagers. More than three hundred women did a dharna and the police would not lodge the FIR. With great difficulty we got it lodged. We went right upto the CM in Jaipur I am a BJP party member, demanding justice but nothing has happened yet."

Kanku Bai (Sarpanch and Lali Bai P.S. member)...

"In any meeting, that we have the BDO tells us that we should bring cases for sterilisation, open Savings Bank accounts for women and see that women become literate."

On the other hand is also a situation (which probably may be the case of the majority) where the women elected have surrendered to their men folk in the family and the Panchayat are doing what they say and are not bothered with learning any thing new. In the month of July '95 when the SDM came to conduct an enquiry of fraud payments of works carried out in '92-'93. Narbada Bai, Sarpanch of Asan Gram Panchayat behaved very aggressively with the villagers. She pulled out her shoe to beat one of the villagers who had come for the enquiry and then tore his shirt. She was not alone in doing this. All the Sarpanches of that Block had gathered there demanding of the SDM that such enquires ought not to take place, and that adjustments have to be made in the records.

6.ii Responses

The elected members need a forum outside their village and also one in the village to overcome their sense of isolation.

Secondly, they have to learn about procedures particularly about filling records. Even if the responsibility be that of the Gram Sevak they have to know how to fill all the records.

Without group pressure the Sarpanches will also not be able to deliver to the people as bargaining needs to be done with the State Government for most of the things.

All the elected members have to act effectively if the meeting norms are being violated as in the case of husbands participating in the meeting etc.

If the people's democratic right is being taken away by the elected members then there has to be struggle against these representatives.

The elected representatives must be given decent travel allowance in order to work effectively.

The Government machinery does not see these representatives any more than their functionaries to implement their family welfare programme

6.iii Support Institutions

This new situation will give an opportunity for new institutions to emerge. No organisation or institution or network is as yet equipped to address this new situation that has arisen due to so many women in Panchayat Raj Institutions. What exists at present is as follows :

Governmental

It is quite clear that the agency for support and training ought not to be just Government. Rajasthan has a Training Institute on Panchayat Raj called the Indira Gandhi Institute of Panchayat Raj and Rural Development, in Jaipur which has taken on the responsibility for training all the elected members. They have conducted two day training for Pradhans, Pramukhs and Sarpanches till now. There are a great deal of limitations in their methods and information. The way they have been looking at Panchayat Raj representatives and particularly the women is as only functionaries to implement programmes of Government, especially, Family Welfare.

Non Governmental

Some voluntary agencies, networks and programmes like WDP have been organising sammelans (like international women's day) and workshops with the members in their area of work and trying to give them inputs. These have been erratic. The support that is needed at present is not just of information but of providing a continuous forum so that they can air their problems, build a sense of solidarity with each other and inculcate a strong sense of right and wrong. As the entire culture of politics of the Panchayat Raj is filled with corruption, a different ethos has to be inculcated. This would mean building a system of reinforcement for these women as well as monitoring and providing inputs whenever needed.

Neither is any group addressing these women full time nor are the voluntary groups equipped and most are not interested in negotiating with power structures and taking up issues of struggle. They can only advise as far as information inputs are needed. As such they themselves have to simultaneously build an attitude of doing such support work and then equip themselves with the required skills.

Parties

The institution of parties have mostly used women. Only time will tell as to what will be the fate of these women who have joined parties and been elected on their ticket. Since parties are now a necessary component of rural politics and the Panchayat Raj it is important to look at them as those needing intervention and as intervening agencies. It is important for groups to interact with them and know their plans and ideology for work with women. At the same time, knowing the manner in which parties have functioned it will also be important to be on guard and preempt their moves.

6.iv Codification of women's political experience

It is not sufficient to address just the elected representatives, but other village women and men also have to be involved. If we wish to see women's relationship

with politics as spontaneous then we should have dialogue with other women and widen our ambit to women's interaction with other public Institutions too. This dialogue is important as we must keep alive the experience of women in the public sphere. Such that it goes down in the oral history and it becomes a part of the folk lore. It is important that effort is made to codify these experiences in a form and language that is familiar to the ordinary women.

6.v Widening the ambit and experimenting with methods that strengthen Democracy at the grass roots...

Finally what is most important is to initiate other experiments and interactions that will strengthen democracy at the grass roots. The Panchayat edifice is in shackles and thus the reconstruction has to begin from below in which all the villagers will need to participate. People's spaces (particularly that of women) to negotiate for themselves will have to be created. It is necessary to look for alternative strategies for collective articulation of people's voices and secondly a search for issues that have an appeal to people across all categories. And a search for fora. Two types of interventions have been suggested

Intervention in the jati Panchayat

Since most of women's issues related to marriage payments, divorce, violence, inheritance etc are sorted in the *jati* Panchayat it is important to intervene in this structure. The *jati* panches are all male and now that women have entered the Gram Panchayats they must enter and begin taking an active role in these Panchayats too, In Udaipur district of WDP, between 1987 and 1991 several cases were sorted by the *sathins* in the *jati* Panchayat. They were officially not panches but due to the legitimacy of being a *sathin* would go and attend a *jati* Panchayat meeting and bring in the women's point of view. Gradually the women who were seeking justice also started entering these meetings. The sathins were given the name *nyotinis* (the female judges), informally by the panches. With the legitimacy of women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions it should now be extended in other public fora and institutions.

Creating new fora: Public hearings

At present in the State an experiment with a mode called the Public Hearing is being tried by a mass based organisation called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). A public discussion and a social audit of Development Expenditure is carried out in an open forum. Making a plea for an informed debate, the MKSS has demanded transparency of all specific information relating to expenditure on development and use of community resources. It publically presents this specific information and elicits responses. It has also requested the local and district

functionaries to participate in the debate generated during these hearings. Except for one hearing the officials have not participated at all. The five hearings have had a tremendous impact. The people have openly spoken of corruption and given personal testimonies. They have also demanded recovery of the money pilfered and putting it back in the village. The people have demanded accountability from the power wielders and declared that their role is to socially audit development expenditure. Therefore specific information has to be provided to them.

The impact of this campaign has been tremendous. The Chief Minister made an announcement in the Vidhan Sabha that people and Elected Representatives had a right to access all information relating to development expenditure of the last five years on applying to the Panchayat and Block. While enquiries have been instituted after each public hearing, the FIR 's are lodged and money is recovered. In one Block the Gram Sevaks and all the elected representatives have organised themselves and refused to show records. They insist that they will not allow a social audit. The people are willing to take this struggle to any extent to get their democratic right. These hearings have resulted in an authentic participation of the people in the affairs of their Panchayat.

Table No.1

District	Total seats	General Women	SC Women	ST Women	OBC Women	General	SC	ST	OBC
AJMER	160	35	8	1	8	70	18	3	17
ALWAR	306	60	18	8	12	124	36	20	28
BANSWARA	168	10	2	46	0	15	7	87	1
BARAN	117	20	7	9	3	38	15	18	7
BARMER	198	45	9	3	8	81	22	8	22
BHARATPUR	201	42	13	2	9	83	29	2	20
BHILWARA	211	45	11	5	10	78	27	16	19
BIKANER	110	23	9	0	6	46	16	0	10
BUNDI	96	18	5	7	1	32	12	15	6
CHITTORGARH	226	35	13	15	11	80	23	35	14
CHURU	165	34	12	0	8	68	26	0	17
DAUSA	133	19	10	13	2	39	18	26	5
DHOLPUR	94	21	6	2	4	36	13	3	9
DUNGARPUR	125	12	0	30	0	21	5	56	1
GANGANAGAR	159	28	20	0	6	53	39	0	13
HANUMANGARH	141	27	14	0	6	55	24	0	15
JAIPUR	315	64	17	11	11	122	36	28	26
JAISALMER	49	10	3	0	3	21	5	3	4
JALORE	161	30	10	6	8	61	23	6	17
JHALAWAR	126	22	8	5	6	46	14	12	13
JHUNJHUNU	190	45	9	0	8	83	21	4	20
JOOHPUR	207	48	12	0	8	84	24	7	24
KOTA	97	16	8	5	3	33	15	10	7
NAGOUR	273	56	21	0	13	119	37	0	27
PALI	192	38	13	3	10	79	23	10	16
RAJSAMANO	119	24	7	3	7	46	10	10	12
SAWAIMADHOPUR	232	36	18	21	2	72	35	38	10
SIKAR	216	51	10	0	10	95	21	6	23
SIROHI	89	15	5	8	2	26	12	16	5
TONK	122	21	8	7	5	42	17	13	9
UDAIPUR	259	34	4	47	2	55	10	96	11
TOTAL	5257	984	310	257	192	1903	633	548	428

Table No.1(a)

District	Total	All women Pradhans		
		BJP	Cong	Ind & others
Ajmer	3	3	0	0
Alwar	5	2	1	2
Baran	2	2	0	0
Banswara	3	0	0	3
Barmer	3	0	3	0
Bharatpur	3	1	1	1
Bhilwara	4	4	0	0
Bikaner	1	0	1	0
Bundi	1	1	0	0
Chittor	5	4	1	0
Churu	2	0	2	0
Dausa	2	1	1	0
Dholpur	1	1	0	0
Dungarpur	2	0	2	0
Hanumangarh	1	1	0	0
Ganganagar	2	2	0	0
Jaipur	4	3	1	0
Jaisalmer	1	1	0	0
Jalore	2	0	2	0
Jhalawad	2	2	0	0
Jhunjhunu	3	0	1	2
Jodhpur	3	0	3	0
Kota	2	1	0	1
Nagaur	4	0	3	1
Pali	3	1	2	0
Rajsamand	2	0	2	0
S. Madhopur	3	3	0	0
Sikar	3	2	0	1
Sirohi	2	1	1	0
Tonk	2	2	0	0
Udaipur	4	3	1	0
Total	80	41	28	11

Table No.1(b)

District	BJP	Cong	Ind	BJP	Cong	Ind& other	BJP	Cong	Ind& other
Ajmer	100.00	0.00	0.00	87.50	0.00	12.50	55.26	29.61	15.13
Alwar	40.00	20.00	40.00	35.71	28.57	35.71	17.35	30.95	51.70
Baran	100.00	0.00	0.00	85.71	14.29	0.00	31.55	19.05	49.40
Banswara	0.00	0.00	100.00	12.50	12.50	75.00	47.37	27.19	25.44
Barmer	0.00	100.00	0.00	12.50	75.00	12.50	33.68	58.42	7.89
Bharatpur	33.33	33.33	33.33	22.22	66.67	11.11	16.23	28.80	54.97
Bhilwara	100.00	0.00	0.00	63.64	18.18	18.18	48.76	46.77	4.48
Bikaner	0.00	100.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	30.77	52.88	16.35
Bundi	100.00	0.00	0.00	50.00	0.00	50.00	69.47	28.42	2.11
Chittor	80.00	20.00	0.00	71.43	28.57	0.00	60.00	39.07	0.93
Churu	0.00	100.00	0.00	14.29	85.71	0.00	30.57	60.51	8.92
Dausa	50.00	50.00	0.00	80.00	20.00	0.00	50.00	23.08	26.92
Dholpur	100.00	0.00	0.00	75.00	0.00	25.00	45.56	17.78	36.67
Dungarpur	0.00	100.00	0.00	20.00	60.00	20.00	43.20	53.60	3.20
Ganumangarh	100.00	0.00	0.00	66.67	33.33	0.00	30.07	42.48	27.45
Ganganagar	100.00	0.00	0.00	42.86	42.86	14.29	22.22	22.96	54.81
Jaipur	75.00	25.00	0.00	53.85	46.15	0.00	47.83	40.47	11.71
Jailsalmer	100.00	0.00	0.00	66.67	33.33	0.00	35.29	49.02	15.69
Jalore	0.00	100.00	0.00	42.86	42.86	0.00	34.01	49.66	16.33
Jhalawad	100.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	16.67	50.43	48.70	0.87
Jhunjhunu	0.00	33.33	66.67	25.00	50.00	25.00	25.67	36.36	37.97
Jodhpur	0.00	100.00	0.00	33.33	66.67	0.00	39.70	50.7	9.55
Kota	50.00	0.00	50.00	60.00	20.00	20.00	69.57	27.17	3.26
Nagaur	0.00	75.00	25.00	18.18	72.73	9.09	29.66	52.09	18.25
Pali	33.33	66.67	0.00	50.00	40.00	10.00	45.00	39.00	16.00
Rajsamand	0.00	100.00	0.00	42.86	57.14	0.00	57.80	49.54	(-)7.34
S.Madhopur	100.00	0.00	0.00	90.00	0.00	10.00	32.72	28.57	38.71
Sikar	66.67	0.00	33.33	50.00	25.00	25.00	30.05	46.01	23.94
Sirohi	50.00	50.00	0.00	60.00	40.00	0.00	31.75	36.51	31.75
Tonk	100.00	0.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	11.72	15.26	73.02
Udaipur	75.00	25.00	0.00	72.73	27.27	0.00	52.53	41.25	6.23
Total	51.25	35.00	13.75	50.63	36.71	12.66	39.30	38.22	22.48

Table 3 : Voter Turnout

District	Total Votes	Valid Votes	% Votes Polled Total	% of Women Polled	% of Men Polled	Percent Votes of Parties		
						BJP	INC	IND
AJMER	696387	443907	63.74	47.24	52.76	43	36.48	20.42
ALWAR	1277448	929678	72.78	46.07	53.93	17.43	24.51	56.57
BANSWARA	641352	391231	61.00	47.44	52.56	26.6	28.34	18.12
BARAN	450056	291209	64.71	42.21	57.79	37.77	25.94	36.28
BARMER	846747	497054	58.70	41.42	58.58	38.04	47.95	14.01
BHARATPUR	830453	593286	71.44	44.48	55.52	12.72	20.35	61.45
BHILWARA	888056	538736	60.66	45.84	54.16	42.53	43.87	13.48
BIKANER	551652	340709	61.76	43.59	56.41	30.35	43.38	19.87
BUNDI	409968	253909	61.93	48.27	51.73	45.91	38.89	14.56
CHITTORGARH	836162	530907	63.49	44.43	55.57	47.54	41.66	10.71
CHURU	723378	525906	72.70	47.77	52.23	36.19	46.11	16.31
DAUSA	584756	396660	67.83	45.14	54.86	35.27	25.36	38.62
DHOLPUR	389434	287570	73.84	42.21	57.79	27.86	20.57	48.56
DUNGARPUR	505599	268081	53.02	49.8	50.2	44.19	46.14	9.03
GANGANAGAR	725388	446784	61.59	44.89	55.11	27.4	32.25	37.93
HANUMANGARH	675076	517753	76.70	44.69	55.31	22.08	23.68	50.51
JAIPUR	1327500	913914	68.84	48.24	51.76	38.08	35.87	25.16
JAISALMER	175083	105896	60.48	43.5	56.5	39.48	44.55	15.98
JALORE	664242	406856	61.25	44.73	55.27	32.1	40.83	27.07
JHALAWAR	538529	325973	60.53	40.24	59.76	40.5	40.12	19.36
JHUNJHUNU	891224	599916	67.31	48.82	51.18	22.37	30.22	46.87
JODHPUR	929453	560944	60.35	47.08	52.92	38.73	45.43	15.84
KOTA	406230	252426	62.14	42.51	57.49	45.54	37.65	16.09
NAGOUR	1245823	833824	66.93	48.07	51.93	33.89	42	23.2
PALI	893367	479991	53.73	47.88	52.12	43.25	39.32	17.42
RAJSAMAND	499494	280315	56.12	47.74	52.26	47.18	46.33	6.2
SAWAIMADHOPUR	998573	674463	67.54	48.52	51.48	26.57	26.21	46.36
SIKAR	987333	683298	69.21	49.63	50.37	25.98	37.78	31.22
SIROHI	364154	193036	53.01	48.69	51.31	39.31	43.05	17.64
TONK	525460	360030	68.52	45.63	54.68	37.81	40.19	21.99
UDAIPUR	1096126	573489	52.32	45.42	54.58	45.54	41.58	15.7
TOTAL	22574505	14497751	64.22	46.21	53.79	33.59	35.9	28.62

Table 4 : Parties & Seats, Over are all results

District	Panchayat Samiti Seats				Panchayat Samiti seats Proportion of seats won by		
	Total	BJP	Cong	Ind & others	BJP	Cong	
AJMER	152	84	45	23	55.26	29.61	15.13
ALWAR	294	51	91	152	17.35	30.95	51.70
BANSWARA	168	53	32	83	31.55	19.05	49.40
BARAN	114	54	31	29	47.37	27.19	25.44
BARMER	190	64	111	15	33.68	58.42	7.89
BHARATPUR	191	31	55	105	16.23	28.80	54.97
BHILWARA	201	98	94	9	48.76	46.77	4.48
BIKANER	104	32	55	17	30.77	52.88	16.35
BUNDI	95	66	27	2	69.47	28.42	2.11
CHITTORGARH	215	129	84	2	60.00	39.07	0.93
CHURU	157	48	95	14	30.57	60.51	8.92
DAUSA	130	65	30	35	50.00	23.08	26.92
DHOLPUR	90	41	16	33	45.56	17.78	36.67
DUNGARPUR	125	54	67	4	43.20	53.60	3.20
GANGANAGAR	153	46	65	42	30.07	42.48	27.45
HANUMANGARH	135	30	31	74	22.22	22.96	54.81
JAIPUR	299	143	121	35	47.83	40.47	11.71
JAISALMER	51	18	25	8	35.29	49.02	15.69
JALORE	147	50	73	24	34.01	49.66	16.33
JHALAWAR	115	58	56	1	50.43	48.70	0.87
JHUNJHUNU	187	48	68	71	25.67	36.36	37.97
JODHPUR	199	79	101	19	39.70	50.75	9.55
KOTA	92	64	25	3	69.57	27.17	3.26
NAGOUR	263	78	137	48	29.66	52.09	18.25
PALI	200	90	78	32	45.00	39.00	16.00
RAJSAMAND	109	63	54	-8	57.80	49.54	-7.34
SAWAIMADHOPUR	217	71	62	84	32.72	28.57	38.71
SIKAR	213	64	98	51	30.05	46.01	23.94
SIROHI	126	40	46	40	31.75	36.51	31.75
TONK	367	43	56	268	11.72	15.26	73.02
UDAIPUR	257	135	106	16	52.53	41.25	6.23
TOTAL	5063	1990	1935	1138	39.30	38.22	22.48

Table 5 : Women Block Members and Political Parties (Percentages)

District	Women General Seats			Women SC Seats			Women ST Seats			Women OBC Seats			Women Total Seats		
	BJP	Cong	Ind	BJP	Cong	Ind	BJP	Cong	Ind	BJP	Cong	Ind	BJP	Cong	Ind
AJMER	65.71	25.71	8.57	50.00	37.50	12.50	0.00	0.00	100.00	50.00	12.50	37.50	59.62	25.00	15.38
ALWAR	18.33	23.33	58.33	11.11	27.78	61.11	25.00	50.00	25.00	8.33	16.67	75.00	16.33	25.51	58.16
BANSWARA	50.00	30.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	23.91	19.57	10.87	0.00	0.00	0.00	29.31	22.41	8.62
BARAN	60.00	30.00	10.00	42.86	42.86	14.29	44.44	44.44	11.11	100.00	0.00	0.00	56.41	33.33	10.26
BARMER	37.78	53.33	8.89	11.11	77.78	11.11	0.00	100.00	0.00	12.50	75.00	12.50	29.23	61.54	9.23
BHARATPUR	14.29	26.19	54.76	30.77	15.38	53.85	0.00	0.00	100.00	33.33	33.33	33.33	19.70	24.24	53.03
BHILWARA	44.44	53.33	2.22	27.27	72.73	0.00	40.00	40.00	20.00	60.00	40.00	0.00	43.66	53.52	2.82
BIKANER	26.09	47.83	26.09	55.56	44.44	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	83.33	0.00	28.95	52.63	15.79
BUNDI	77.78	22.22	0.00	60.00	40.00	0.00	85.71	14.29	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	77.42	22.58	0.00
CHITTORGARH	65.71	34.29	0.00	46.15	46.15	7.69	73.33	20.00	6.67	45.45	54.55	0.00	60.81	36.49	2.70
CHURU	32.35	58.82	8.82	16.67	75.00	8.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	37.50	50.00	12.50	29.63	61.11	9.26
DAUSA	68.42	21.05	10.53	30.00	30.00	40.00	38.46	38.46	23.08	0.00	100.00	0.00	47.73	31.82	20.45
DHOLPUR	52.38	19.05	28.57	33.33	33.33	16.67	0.00	50.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	50.00	45.45	21.21	30.30
DUNGARPUR	33.33	50.00	16.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	30.00	70.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	30.95	64.29	4.76
GANGANAGAR	32.14	39.29	28.57	40.00	45.00	10.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	50.00	16.67	33.33	37.04	38.89	22.22
HANUMANGARH	11.11	22.22	66.67	7.14	42.86	42.86	0.00	0.00	0.00	33.33	33.33	0.00	12.77	29.79	51.06
JAIPUR	42.19	46.88	10.94	58.82	35.29	5.88	27.27	63.64	9.09	45.45	45.45	9.09	43.69	46.60	9.71
JAISALMER	40.00	50.00	10.00	33.33	66.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	33.33	33.33	33.33	37.50	50.00	12.50
JALORE	26.67	56.67	16.67	20.00	70.00	10.00	0.00	66.67	33.33	37.50	50.00	12.50	24.07	59.26	16.67
JHALAWAR	50.00	31.82	18.18	12.50	87.50	0.00	60.00	40.00	0.00	33.33	66.67	0.00	41.46	48.78	9.76
JHUNJHUNU	24.44	28.89	46.67	44.44	33.33	22.22	0.00	0.00	0.00	25.00	62.50	12.50	27.42	33.87	38.71
JODHPUR	41.67	54.17	4.17	41.67	58.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	25.00	50.00	25.00	39.71	54.41	5.88
KOTA	81.25	6.25	12.50	62.50	25.00	12.50	80.00	20.0	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	78.13	12.50	9.38
NAGOUR	26.79	55.36	17.86	42.86	38.10	19.05	0.00	0.00	0.00	15.38	69.23	15.38	28.89	53.33	17.78
PALI	52.63	26.32	21.05	46.15	53.85	0.00	33.33	66.67	0.00	40.00	50.00	10.00	48.44	37.50	14.06
RAJSAMAND	50.00	50.00	0.00	85.71	14.29	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	42.86	57.14	0.00	51.22	48.78	0.00
SAWAIMADHOPUR	8.33	33.33	55.56	11.11	27.78	55.56	33.33	28.57	38.10	0.00	50.00	50.00	15.58	31.17	50.65
SIKAR	35.29	37.25	19.61	30.00	30.00	30.00	ERR	ERR	ERR	10.00	70.00	20.00	30.99	40.85	21.13
SIROHI	53.33	40.00	6.67	40.00	60.00	0.00	25.00	75.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	40.00	56.67	3.33
TONK	42.86	47.62	9.52	37.50	50.00	12.50	0.00	85.71	14.29	20.00	40.00	40.00	31.71	53.66	14.63
UDAIPUR	61.76	35.29	2.94	50.00	50.00	0.00	48.94	46.81	2.13	0.00	100.00	0.00	52.87	43.68	2.30
TOTAL	39.43	38.62	21.04	35.16	44.19	19.03	36.19	43.58	11.67	32.81	47.40	19.27	37.46	41.31	19.10

Table 6 : Women Pradhans & Parties

District	All Women Pradhans			
	Total	BJP	Cong	Ind & other
Ajmer	3	3	0	0
Alwar	5	2	1	2
Baran	2	2	0	0
Banswara	3	0	0	3
Barmer	3	0	3	0
Bharatpur	3	1	1	1
Bhilwara	4	4	0	0
Bikaner	1	0	1	0
Bundi	1	1	0	0
Chittor	5	4	1	0
Churu	2	0	2	0
Dausa	2	1	1	0
Dholpur	1	1	0	0
Dungarpur	2	0	2	0
Hanumangarh	1	1	0	0
Ganganagar	2	2	0	0
Jaipur	4	3	1	0
Jaisalmer	1	1	0	0
Jalore	2	0	2	0
Jhalawad	2	2	0	0
Jhunjhunu	3	0	1	2
Jodhpur	3	0	3	0
Kota	2	1	0	1
Nagaur	4	0	3	1
Pali	3	1	2	0
Rajsamand	2	0	2	0
S.Madhopur	3	3	0	0
Sikar	3	2	0	1
Sirohi	2	1	1	0
Tonk	2	2	0	0
Udaipur	4	3	1	0
Total	80	41	28	11

Table 6(B) : Women Pradhans & Parties

District	Women Pradhans Percent			Total Pradhans Percent			Panchayat Samiti % of seats		
	BJP	Cong	Ind	BJP	Cong	Ind & Other	BJP	Cong	Ind & Other
Ajmer	100.00	0.00	0.00	87.50	0.00	12.50	55.26	29.61	15.13
Alwar	40.00	20.00	40.00	35.71	28.57	35.71	17.35	30.95	51.70
Baran	100.00	0.00	0.00	85.71	14.29	0.00	31.55	19.05	49.40
Banswara	0.00	0.00	100.00	12.50	12.50	75.00	47.37	27.19	25.44
Barmer	0.00	100.00	0.00	12.50	75.00	12.50	33.68	58.42	7.89
Bharatpur	33.33	33.33	33.33	22.22	66.67	11.11	16.23	28.80	54.97
Bhilwara	100.00	0.00	0.00	63.64	18.18	18.18	48.76	46.77	4.48
Bikaner	0.00	100.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	30.77	52.88	16.35
Bundi	100.00	0.00	0.00	50.00	0.00	50.00	69.47	28.42	2.11
Chittor	80.00	20.00	0.00	71.43	28.57	0.00	60.00	39.07	0.93
Churu	0.00	100.00	0.00	14.29	85.71	0.00	30.57	60.51	8.92
Dausa	50.00	50.00	0.00	80.00	20.00	0.00	50.00	23.08	26.92
Dholpur	100.00	0.00	0.00	75.00	0.00	25.00	45.56	17.78	36.67
Dungarpur	0.00	100.00	0.00	20.00	60.00	20.00	43.20	53.60	3.20
Hanumangarh	100.00	0.00	0.00	66.67	33.33	0.00	30.07	42.48	27.45
Ganganagar	100.00	0.00	0.00	42.86	42.86	14.29	22.22	22.96	54.81
Jaipur	75.00	25.00	0.00	53.85	46.15	0.00	47.83	40.47	11.71
Jaisalmer	100.00	0.00	0.00	66.67	33.33	0.00	35.29	49.02	15.69
Jalore	0.00	100.00	0.00	42.86	42.86	0.00	34.01	49.66	16.33
Jhalawad	100.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	16.67	50.43	48.70	0.87
Jhunjhunu	0.00	33.33	66.67	25.00	50.00	25.00	25.67	36.36	37.97
Jodhpur	0.00	100.00	0.00	33.33	66.67	0.00	39.70	50.75	9.55
[illegible]	50.00	0.00	50.00	60.00	20.00	20.00	69.57	27.17	3.26
[illegible]	0.00	75.00	25.00	18.18	72.73	9.09	29.66	52.09	18.25
[illegible]	33.33	66.67	0.00	50.00	40.00	10.00	45.00	39.00	16.00
[illegible]eamand	0.00	100.00	0.00	42.86	57.14	0.00	57.80	49.54	-7.34
[illegible] Madhopur	100.00	0.00	0.00	90.00	0.00	10.00	32.72	28.57	38.71
Sikar	66.67	0.00	33.33	50.00	25.00	25.00	30.05	46.01	23.94
Sirohi	50.00	50.00	0.00	60.00	40.00	0.00	31.75	36.51	31.75
Tonk	100.00	0.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	11.72	15.26	73.02
Udaipur	75.00	25.00	0.00	72.73	27.27	0.00	52.53	41.25	6.23
Total	51.25	35.00	13.75	50.63	36.71	12.66	39.30	38.22	22.48

UMA Resource Centre

Occasional Paper Series No.3

Women in Decision Making :
A Study of Gram Panchayats in Maharashtra

Prepared by

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1995

This Study was conducted by Stree Aadhar Kendra, Pune and presented by Dr. Neelam Gorhe at the ISST Seminar.

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[Foreword, Section 2, 3, 4, 5]

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Foreword

With the passage of mandatory 30 percent reservation for women in the Panchayat Raj system, women taking part in the decision making process has become the focus of national attention. Women's issues are not only being looked at as a grassroots problem, but they are being pushed into the institutionalized framework of the Indian political system. Four years have passed since the introduction of 30 percent reservation for women in Maharashtra. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) are beginning to research on women in Gram Panchayats.

The Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) has taken an interest in the Panchayat Raj system throughout the country and women's place within that system. Therefore,they have called for a research seminar for eight states of our country to present their story of women's quest for decision making. ISST requested Stree Aadhar Kendra to conduct a research project on women in Panchayat Raj in Maharashtra.

Stree Aadhar Kendra (SAK) is a non-profit women's development organization in Maharashtra with centres in several districts in the state. SAK works to promote the cause of women both through grassroots programmes and the governmental system (that is,legislation and courts).

In response to the ISST research request, SAK developed a research project on Gram Panchayat women in three districts of Maharashtra. The purpose of this research is to establish an idea of the experiences of Gram Panchayat women, their perception of politics and their role in it. The reservation for women in the Panchayat Raj system is intended to draw women to play an active role in their local government and to create a space for women to introduce their perspectives and issues. The objectives of the interviews conducted by SAK was to examine the following:

1. The women's sources of social and political information.

2. The women's awareness of the political system, its processes and schemes.

3. The women's definition of politics and women's place within it.

4. The active participation of women in Gram Panchayats.

5. The perceptions of other Gram Panchayat members to women's political participation.

The field research was conducted through personal interviews. A structured questionnaire was used for the interviews. However, the questions were sometimes altered on a case to case basis. The interview consisted of 69 questions focusing on four main topics.

1. biographical information

2. political awareness and opinions

3. participation of women members in the Gram Panchayat

4. activities of the Gram Panchayat

Out of a total of 32 Gram Panchayat women, 12 were from Pune district, 11 were from Latur district and 9 were from the Osmanabad district. The women Gram Panchayat members in Pune district were selected through SAK contacts. The women Gram Panchayat members in Latur and Osmanabad were also identified through SAK contacts and random selection.

The information and analysis contained in this report will focus primarily on the women's political awareness and participation. Political awareness and participation are the basis for increasing the contribution of women in local self-government.

Women are very rarely asked to consider what comprises their political system, much less their place within it. Active political participation requires these considerations from the women involved. Without political awareness, passive political participation to simply fulfill the 30 percent reservation is possible, but the intended constructive, empowering participation is impossible.It is important for the Indian Government and NGO's to get an idea of the political awareness and participation of current Gram Panchayat members. From that knowledge, an action plan can be developed to help increase the benefits received by women's participation in the decision making process.

This preliminary research intends to show a few experiences of women who are now Panchayat members, and therefore,the decision makers for the women of their village. Following this introductory research, SAK plans to expand its research into more detail to include a wider cross-section of women in Gram Panchayats.

Section 1

MAHARASHTRA: PAST AND PRESENT

Historical Background

The State of Maharashtra has always been a forerunner of reform movements, be it social, educational or political. Women have broken the shackles of tradition and worked relentlessly for the betterment of the plight of women. Outstanding among them is Pandita Ramabai Saraswati who laid the foundation of a movement for women's liberation. She can indeed be considered as the symbol of modern Indian womanhood. Educated in Sanskrit at a time when women were barred from learning the Hindu scriptures, choosing to marry only at the age of 21, when child marriage was the order of the day, her world wide tours, lectures to international audiences, all gave Pandita Ramabai Saraswati a unique place in the annals of Indian womanhood. She was publicly honoured with the title Pandita, spoken of as a modern day incarnation of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning.

Savithribai Phule was another woman who contributed greatly towards women's education in the 19th century. Savithribai was the first woman teacher in modern Maharashtra. She along with her husband Jotiba Phule set up a school for girls. Inspite of being continually maligned by orthodox sections of the society, they continued relentlessly in their mission of educating the women folk. They encouraged women of all castes to attend their schools.

Ramabai Ranade was another notable contributor to the women's movement. She took part in several women's organisations and worked actively for equal political rights for women. Ramabai also made fiery speeches supporting the extremist politics of Tilak.

When Anandibai Joshi received her degree in medicine in 1886, she became the first Indian woman to do so. Thus, the women of Maharashtra set a trend of progressiveness as early as the 19th century. They have inspired countless small and big revolutions which have changed history and society.

The Panchayat Raj History

The Panchayat Raj history is another good example of their progressiveness. The Panchayat Raj System in Maharashtra has been in place since 1962. Maharashtra is the only State in which the Panchayat Raj System has been based on direct elections since its inceptions. Most other states based their Panchayat Raj Systems on Nominations. Maharashtra in 1990 was well ahead of the 73rd and 74th Amendments. It implemented the 30% reservations for women within the Panchayat Raj System. It was also the first state to implement the mandated Panchayat Raj

Reforms. The first legislation passed in the post-independence era was in 1958. This was called the Bombay Village Panchayat Act 1958. This Act remains in force, to this day, except for a few amendments. Under this Act the village Panchayats were assigned the task of collection of land revenue and maintenance of land records.

On May 1, 1960, the state of Maharashtra was formed. The state government appointed a Committee on Democratic Decentralisation. This Committee headed by Vasant Rao Naik studied the subject of Panchayat Raj in all its aspects and made a model proposal for the state. It was on the basis of the recommendations of this committee that Maharashtra Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis Act 1961 was enacted and in May 1962 Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis were first constituted. Maharashtra became the eleventh state to adopt the Panchayat Raj System in the country.

The Panchayat Raj setup was reviewed from time to time by committees appointed by the State. The two important committees were the Panchayat Raj Review committee of 1970 (Bongirwar Committee) and the Panchayat Raj Review Committee of 1984 (Patil Committee). On the basis of the recommendations made by these committees, some changes have been made in the Panchayat Raj System in Maharashtra without altering the basic features of the same. Instead of adopting a new Panchayat Act, the Maharashtra State Assembly has amended the existing Bombay Village Panchayat Act 1958 and the Maharashtra Zilla Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti Act, 1961.

There are certain unique features of the Panchayats and the most striking one related to women are the all women Panchayats. Maharashtra has the distinction of being the first State to elect an all women Gram Panchayat in 1984. The credit for this achievement goes to the citizens of Manje Rai Panchayat in Indapur Tehsil which is the first all women Panchayat. At present there are approximately 16 all women Gram Panchayats within the state. Take for instance, the tiny village of Brahmanaghar, nestling among the hill slopes of the Sahayadri. This village was earlier totally cut off from civilisation due to inadequate communication and most of the people lived in poverty. Poverty forced the menfolk to take up jobs in the cities which exposed them to modern liberal thoughts and ideas. And as many of the villagers were once members of the leftist Lal Nishan Party they were also introduced to the concept of empowerment of women. Hence, the people of the village decided to elect an all women Panchayat in their village. The Panchayat consists of 7 women. They are all typical village women, none of whom have studied beyond the seventh standard but have attended some adult literacy classes. Sulochana Sana, the most articulate among them has also attended a first aid training course and accompanies the doctor when he visits the village. She is enthusiastic about the role women will play in the development of the village. Pushpalata Dhumal, another elected member

from a slightly well-to-do family, says, improving the sewage system and building a water supply tank are part of her agenda. This shows that women of this tiny village have taken their job seriously and are confident of making it a success. Thus, the women of Brahmanghar village have broken out of the confines of their homes and stormed into a traditional male bastion to form an all women Panchayat. (Indian Express 6th December 1994)

Government Initiatives

After the National Commission for Women was set up, Maharashtra was the first state to follow with a state legislation setting up a State Commission for women in January 1993, followed by a separate department of women and child welfare.

The Maharashtra government has announced a policy for women and child development which is a step towards gender equality. The basic objective of the policy is to create equality in the economic, social, political, cultural and constitutional sectors. The highlights of the policy includes eliminating violence against women, ensuring equality in both the spirit and letter of the law, improving women's economic status, appropriate use of media, increased participation in local self government, and, enhancing community participation in government activities.

To ensure empowerment of women, a provision in the policy states that 10% of all government and Gram Panchayat land at the village level and 10% of the Panchayat income will be placed under the control of local women's committee, headed by the elected women representatives.

Another aspect of policy which should be encouraging to women is that, if 75% of women in a Gram Sabha vote for closure of country liquor shops, the government will ensure its closure. Also, the cess on liquor will be raised and will be channelised for welfare programmes for women and children. The policy states that it is an "attempt to provide women a rightful place in society as partners with men in shaping the destiny of the state and the nation". So much for well-intentioned documents. One needs to watch how seriously it is really implemented.

Is Maharashtra taking a step backward with the present change in government? The BJP-Shivsena election agenda proclaimed that women need **protection** not **reservation**. They are playing with the two phrases of "Stree Mukti" and "Stree Shakti". "Stree Mukti" connotes women's rights and emancipation, whereas "Stree Shakti" signifies the glorification of women's traditional subordinate roles, and looks askance on women participating more meaningfully in society. It is difficult for a village level woman to grasp the nuances of the two phrases correctly resulting in a confusion in her mind.

At a training programme conducted by Dr.P.V.Mandlik Trust, when women were asked the question, "How many of you would like to become a Sarpanch?", one woman got up and said "I would not like to become a Sarpanch as women should not become Sarpanches". The trainer felt that this woman had been influenced by her party diktats. Incidentally she belonged to the party presently in power. In such a situation the very concept of women's empowerment seems to be in danger.

However, despite these incidents, the fact remains that the state will have over 60,000 women members in the Panchayats (refer to **Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres**, May Update 1995). Also, Maharashtra will have the first batch of elected Mahila Sarpanchs heading 4921 Gram Panchayats. A notable feature is that many younger women with the bare minimum of literacy skills have jumped into the political arena. These rural women seemed enthusiastic about the opportunities offered to them. Their priorities are education, clean drinking water, health centres and transport. However, enthusiasm alone and courage to enter politics is not sufficient for women to effectively participate in the political processes. This is illustrated in the study conducted by Stree Aadhar Kendra, described in the following sections of this paper.

Looking at the situation of women representatives in Maharashtra is like watching a complex jigsaw puzzle fall into place. And sometines, the inherent contradictions are so many, that the pieces do not quite match. An advanced state where social issues are concerned, there is a history of women breaking the shackles of tradition and participating with a lot of zest and enthusiasm in progressive movements. Maharashtra has several major victories regarding women's representation in the Panchayat Raj System. But there are also incidents like the Jalgaon sex scandal which nullify the effect of this progress. Watching the women representatives of Maharashtra will be a rewarding exercise for any student of social and political history.

Section 2

MAHARASHTRA: A PROFILE

The State of Maharashtra is spread over about 307,713 sq.kms. It has a population of 79 million and a sex ratio of 935 women for every 1000 males. The literacy rate is 64.87%. This data is based on the census of 1991. Also by the year 1993 Maharashtra has achieved 100% electrification of its villages.

2.1 District Profiles

2.1.1 Pune District Profile

Pune district has an area of 15,642 sq.km. According to the 1991 census, Pune is the second most populated district in Maharashtra, with a population of 5,532,532. Per square kilometer, the population density is 354 comprising 69 households. Pune district has 14 talukas and approximately 1,844 villages. The district literacy rate is 71 percent, male 80.56 percent and female 59.77 percent. Pune's rural literacy rate is 60.75 percent, male 74.76 percent and female 46.28 percent. The male female ratio is 933 women per 1000 males. Pune district has 46 percent of its population working in agricultural cultivation or labour. There are 12,575 km of road throughout Pune district.

2.1.2 Latur District Profile

Latur district was carved out of Osmanabad district in 1981. It has an area of 7,157 sq.km. According to the 1991 census, Latur's population is 1,676,641. Per square kilometer, Latur's population density is 234 comprising 40 households. Latur has seven talukas. The district literacy rate is 55.76 percent, male 70.47 percent and female 39.74 percent. Latur's rural literacy rate is 51.63 percent, male 67.18 percent and female 35.35 percent. The male/female ratio is 942 women per 1000 males. In Latur district, 79 percent of the population is working in working in agricultural cultivation or labour. Infrastructure throughout the district consists of one rail line and 4,295 km or road. In September 1993, Latur district was hit by an earthquake measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale. Throughout the district, thousands died or were injured. Many villages, particularly in the Ausa taluka were completely destroyed.

2.1.3 Osmanabad District Profile

Adjoining Latur district, Osmanabad has an area of 7,563 sq.km. It's population is 1,276,327. Per square kilometer, Osmanabad's population density is 167 com-

prising 31 households. Osmanabad has 11 taluks and approximately 1,554 villages. The district literacy rate is 54.27 male 68.39 and female 39.16. Osmanabad's rural literacy rate is 51.23, male 65.18 and female 35.80. The male/female ratio is 937 female per 1000 males. In Osmanabad district, 82 percent of the population is working in agricultural cultivation or labour. Osmanabad district was also greatly affected by the 1993 earthquake. The district suffered from extensive village damage and human loss, primarily in the Umerga taluka.

2.2 *Profile of women Gram Panchayat members*

2.2.1 *Biographical information*

Taluka
Pune: All 12 women live in the Haveli taluka
Latur: All 11 women live in the Ausa taluka
Osmanabad: All 9 women live in the Umerga taluka

2.2.2 *Age range*

Pune: 27-73, average 39
Latur: 25-60, average 43
Osmanabad: 25-60, average 42

2.2.3 *Caste/religion*

Pune: 1 Brahmin; 9 Maratha; 2 Mali
Latur: 9 Maratha; 1 Rajput; 1 Matung; 1 Lingit; 1 Muslim
Osmanabad: 4 Maratha; 2 Dhungar; 2 Lingit; 1 Kholi

2.2.4 *Marital Status*

Pune: 10 married; 2 widowed
Latur: 9 married; 2 widowed
Osmanabad: 9 married

Type of family
Pune: 10 nuclear; 2 joint
Latur: 7 nuclear; 4 joint
Osmanabad: 3 nuclear; 6 joint

2.2.5 *Head of household*

Pune: 10 husband; 1 nephew; 1 herself
Latur: 6 husband; 3 herself; 1 son; 1 father-in-law
Osmanabad: 7 husband; 1 brother; 1 brother-in-law

2.2.6 *Number of Children*

Pune: ranged from 0-5 children, average 3 children
Latur: ranged from 3-7 children, average 4 children
Osmanabad: ranged from 0-6 children, average 3

2.2.7 *Education*

Pune: 8 partial primary; 3 secondary; 1 completed teacher training
Latur: 9 no education; 1 pre-primary; 1 secondary
Osmanabad: 6 no education; 3 partial primary

2.2.8 *Literacy*

Pune: 11 literate; 1 illiterate
Latur: 1 literate; 10 illiterate
Osmanabad: 3 literate; 6 illiterate

2.2.9 *Occupation*

Pune: 8 household workers; 2 own agricultural cultivation; 1 service; 1 retired
Latur: 5 agricultural labour; 4 own agricultural cultivation; 1 construction; 1 tailor
Osmanabad: 4 agricultural labour; 4 own agricultural cultivation; 1 construction

2.2.10 *Household income*

Pune: Rs.15,000 - Rs.60,000 - Average Rs.32,500
Latur: Rs.1,200 - Rs.100,000 - Average Rs.17,500
Osmanabad: Rs.4,000 - Rs.50,000 - Average Rs.17,500

2.2.11 *Manages household expenditures*

Pune: 8 husband, 2 herself, 2 joint husband/wife
Latur: 4 husband, 3 herself, 2 both husband/wife, 1 son, 1 father- in-law
Osmanabad: 7 husband, 1 brother, 1 brother-in-law

The area from which the Pune interviews were taken is prone to urban bias. All the interviews were from villages within 15 km of Pune city. Also, the women interviewed were all in some way attached to Stree Aadhar Kendra which increases the probability of political awareness. Given these factors and the small population sample, the interviews in no way give the complete picture of women in Pune district. However, they do tell the story of some women taking part in the decision making process.

Latur and Osmanabad are adjoining districts and the situation of women is very similar. Both districts have felt the effects of a devastating earthquake. The interviews were gathered randomly with the assistance of the Stree Aadhar Kendra staff in the area. The districts of Osmanabad and Latur are much more rural and isolated than Pune district. Both districts have generally had a history of little social activity. The villages, and consequently the women Gram Panchayat members are virtually untouched by urban influences. The interviews of Latur and Osmanabad provide a picture of rural women's experiences in the Gram Panchayat system.

2.3 *Political Awareness and Perceptions*

Information Sources

Where do you receive information about Indian politics?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Newspaper/T.V/Radio	12	-	2
NGOs	2	-	-
Village	1	-	-
Husband	-	1	-
Gram Panchayat	-	1	-
No Knowledge	-	9	7

Where do you receive information about women's issues?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
NGOs	11	1	2
Newspaper/TV/Radio	4	-	-
Gram Panchayat	-	1	-
No women's issues	-	1	-
No Knowledge	-	9	7

Where do you receive general news (i.e social events, daily occurrences)?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Newspaper/TV/Radio	10	-	2
Villagers	8	6	-
No knowledge	-	5	7

Source of information is a crucial aspect of awareness and consequently participation. Women Gram Panchayat members need to have a source of information.

Without such information, women cannot address women's or their village needs. In Pune, most of the women interviewed have established sources of political and women's information. From their responses, the Pune women seem to be recipients of enough information to become functioning members of their Gram Panchayats. However, the women from Latur and Osmanabad indicated they have virtually no sources political information or knowledge of women's issues. Such topics seemed alien to the women and their daily lives. One woman from the Latur district said that there were no women's issues in her village. Five other women said there were no needs in their village. A lack of access and interest in basic political knowledge is the cause of low participation in politics. Women, who do not have political information presented to them, are never confronted with information that asks them to contemplate their political situation. Dr.Manu Kulkarni, UNICEF state chief- M.P., said in 1994, "Sharing information is power, but withholding information is superpower". A lack of access to information feeds the male dominated power structure and the prevailing behaviours of the Gram Panchayat.

2.3.1 Panchayat Raj information:

Where did you learn about the Panchayat Raj system?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Family members	3	2	2
Gram Panchayat	3	-	-
Villagers	-	2	3
Newspaper/TV	2	-	-
NGOs	2	-	-
School	2	-	-
No knowledge	-	7	4

Where did you learn about the Gram Panchayat elections?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Sarpanch	5	-	-
Family members	3	2	3
Villagers	-	5	2
School	2	-	-
NGOs	2	-	-
No knowledge	-	4	4

Where did you learn about the 30 percent reservation for women in the Panchayat Raj system?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Newspaper/T.V	6	-	1
NGOs	5	1	-
Family/Villagers	1	2	1
Gram Panchayat	-	3	-
No knowledge	-	5	7

One step beyond general political knowledge, understanding the Panchayat Raj system and its processes enable women to become productive Gram Panchayat members. Again, there is significant gap in the political knowledge of the Pune women and the women in Latur and Osmanabad. All the women in Pune stated that they had knowledge of the Panchayat Raj system. However, upon follow up questions, it became evident that six of the women had only very general knowledge. Two women said that they could not say how they would utilise Gram Panchayat funds because they had no understanding of the funding to Gram Panchayats. They added, without funding knowledge, they could not address any of the problems in the village.

The Latur and Osmanabad women said that they had no working knowledge of the Panchayat Raj system. Most women were completely unaware of the government reservation for women in Gram Panchayats. It is very difficult for the reservations to have the desired effect if women do not even have an understanding of their local government system, how it works and the special allowances made for them within the system.

2.3.2 *Social activity in village*

Are there any women's organisations working in your village?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	9	7	8
No	3	4	1

If there is any injustice going on in your area, who comes forward to help?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Police	9	2	1
NGOs	6	-	-
Gram Panchayat	4	3	2
Villagers	2	-	-
Herself	2	1	1
No one	-	4	6
"no injustice in village"	-	2	-

* most women indicated more than once source of help accounting for the above 100 percent statistics

In most of the women's villages, NGOs are present. Much of this active involvement is a result of the close proximity of Haveli taluk to Pune City and the earthquake that effected both the Ausa and Umerga talukas. In Latur and Osmanabad, ten of the women were unaware that there were women's organisations working in their village. In general, other village or NGO members would answer the question for the women.

The women in Pune again seemed most aware of injustice. This awareness comes from their greater knowledge of political issues, women's issues and the workings of the political and legal systems. Much like the lack of women's issues in the village, two women indicated that there was no injustice in their village. Such comments show either an ignorance of village problems or an unwillingness to accept that such things exist and the need for action. Given the women's position as Gram Panchayat member, there were a significantly small number of women who said that they themselves would address the injustice in their village. One women from the Pune district said, "if they come to me, I will help them. But if they don't come to me, even if I hear about it, what can I do?" There seems to be an apathy among many of the women interviewed to come out and support the women in their village. It is much easier to ignore or pass off problems to the police. Much of this apathy is

derived from not knowing how to address such problems. Also, the idea that such problems are solved within the family is still very prevalent in rural India.

2.3.3 Awareness of social movements and government schemes:

Are you aware of any social movements?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	6	2	2
No	6	9	7

Are you aware of government schemes for backward castes, women and rural development?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	4	2	2
A few	7	-	-
No	1	9	7

The third step in political awareness is knowledge of social movements and government schemes. If the women are aware of the opportunities available to them, they are much more likely to utilise their position as leader in the community to solve area problems. However, in this third area of awareness, there is a sharp decline in knowledge among the women from Pune, as well as Latur and Osmanabad. All the women who indicated that they were aware of social movements and government schemes qualified their answers by restricting it to only very general knowledge of historical and local movements. Two women in Pune district indicated that they were aware of social movements, but upon further questioning could not name any. While general knowledge of the political system is a tool for increasing political awareness and initial participation, awareness of government schemes is a tool for utilising the institutional power given to women who are within the government framework. Women simply holding 30 percent of the Gram Panchayat titles does not immediately cause a shift in the Gram Panchayat male dominated power structure. It is easy for women to feel their role and power as Gram Panchayat members marginalised because they are unaware of what the issues are and the tool available to them. It is also easier for men, to comment that women are 'numbers' not 'members'. This remark was made to women Gram Panchayat members in the Shirur Block of Pune district.

2.3.4 *Perceptions of women in politics:*

Is the reservation for women in Gram Panchayats necessary?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	12	7	5
No	-	-	2
No Comment	-	4	2

Many women said it was important yet in Latur and Osmanabad only 5 women are attending the meetings. When asked why, many of the women could not give a reason.

Are there enough government schemes for women?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes, but implementation is low	4	2	2
No	1	-	-
Not aware of schemes	7	9	7

Do you feel that men or women are better administrators?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Women	12	7	5
Men	-	1	3
Both	-	1	1
No comment	-	2	-
Why?			

2.3.5 *Pune:*

* "Women have less addictions".
* "Women have more of a sense of duty to the community".
* "Women have a real need to make things better".
* "If women can take care of the house they can take care of the village".

* "Women are sincere; look at the example of Indira Gandhi".

* "Women have an innate ability to take care of people's needs".

* "Women have needs that can only be understood by women".

2.3.6 Latur

* "Women are aware of women's needs".

* "Women promote community development".

* "If there are women leaders, the women in the village will feel more free to talk to them and express their needs".

* "Women need a chance at leadership. Men have always been the leaders".

2.3.7 Osmanabad

* "There is a need for gender equality in leadership".

* "Women will not quarrel".

* "Women are better leaders because they are not corrupt. Men are at the root of all evil. They are very selfish. Men do not care about or pay attention to women's problems".

* "Women should not be in politics. Women do not have the capacity to take on leadership".

* "Women should not be in politics".

In your opinion, what is women's role in politics?

2.3.8 Pune:

* "Women need a place to take their own decisions. A place to take stances on behalf of women".

* "Power is necessary for women".

* "Women have a role in politics, but must not be inhibited. There is no place for passive women or women puppets in politics".

* No comment (3)

* Embarrassed and confused (4)

2.3.9 Latur:

* "Women need to be active and take interest in politics".
* "Women's role is village development".
* "Women must come forward and take an active part".
* "All programmes need women in them. Gender equality must be the aim".
* "It is time for women to take leadership roles".
* "50 percent reservation is necessary".
* "Women do not have a role in politics".
* No comment (4)

2.3.10 Osmanabad:

* "Women are not given respect, therefore they are not solving problems. When women come together to solve problems and combat the corruption in politics, they are strong". (This women has only attended four meetings in three years.)
* "Men do nothing but foster corruption. 10-20 women come together and village problems are solves". (This woman has never attended a meeting.)
* "Women are doing proper work in politics but are being ignored. Women need a strong voice in politics".
* "50 percent reservation for women is needed".
* "Women should not be in politics".
* "Women are in politics for status only".
* "Women should not be in politics".
* "Women do not have a role in politics. They would not do any work".

What is your definition of politics?

2.3.11 Pune:

* "Service for the weaker people".
* "Today's politics is corrupt and biased. Politics must mean sincere and devoted efforts for the betterment of society".
* "Politics works to meet people's needs and keep order".
* "Two types of politics one is selfish and one is a form of social work. The current politics is selfish. It is the taking away of each others rights and is a fight for power. Politics must redefine itself as social work".
* "I don't know".
* No definition (2)

2.3.12 Latur:

* "Politics means village development". (3)
* "Politics is working for people. Work for people who are not able to develop themselves. Village development is needed on an equal level for both the rich and poor".
* "Politics means what? How would I know? I'm not allowed to think about it".
* "I have no knowledge on that subject and I don't care" (2)
* "I don't know". (2)

2.3.13 Osmanabad:

* "Politics means corruption".
* "Politics is the security of the world".
* "Politics means rural development and the development of the disadvantaged".
* "Politics means village development".
* "Meaning of politics?"
* "I don't know".

* "I don't know. The sarpanch dominates our village and does not let us know".

* "I don't know the meaning of politics and I don't care".

The perception of politics and women's role varied among the women interviewed. Many of the comments in this area were inconsistent with the women's actions. Women who had no knowledge of the Panchayat Raj system, could not identify any women's issues and had never attended a Gram Panchayat meeting were claiming that women should present a united front to address women's issues and combat corruption within the political system. Most of the women, when asked, could not explain their answers or give a definition of politics. An assumption can be drawn that many of the "feminist" views expressed, particularly from Latur and Osmanabad, were inspired by the interview itself and do not reflect actual convictions that the women as village leaders are planning to put into practice. One can also conclude that many of these women do not even view themselves as within the political system. Therefore, they do not see the inconsistency of their answers. Actual participation in the Panchayat Raj system is being carried out by only 55 percent of the women interviewed. Excluding Pune district, the participation drops to 25 percent. Political awareness is the backbone of political participation. It can be seen that in the women interviewed there is a severe deficit of political awareness, which inevitably leads to their lack of participation and marginalisation of the 30 percent reservation goals.

2.4 *Participation in Gram Panchayats:*

General political ties and participation:

Have you voted in any elections?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	12	11	9

Are you a member of a political party?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	10	1	-
No	2	10	9

According to their responses, all the women are exercising basic political participation as regular voters. However, the meaningfulness of the consistent voting is called into question by the lack of political awareness. It can be assumed that the women derive much of their voting patterns from outside sources and not opinions they have developed on their own.

2.4.1 *Position in community:*

Did people come to you with various problems before you were a Gram Panchayat member?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	9	2	2
No	3	9	7

Do people come to you now?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	11	4	3
No	1	7	6

If the women are requested to help in various village problems, it is a good indicator both of their role as leaders and their awareness of villager's needs. In Pune, all but one women said they are considered someone within the village whom people express their problems and needs. This communication line between the women and the villagers establishes a necessary link of information which empowers women in the actual Gram Panchayat meeting. Women who bring expressed village problems to the Gram Panchayat meeting have added weight behind their participation in the meetings. The majority of the women in Latur and Osmanabad are alienated from village communication and are further set back in political participation. If the women do not have the confidence of villagers to solve their problems, particularly village women, they cannot begin to take a meaningful part in expressing the needs of the village. Until villagers look at their women Gram Panchayat members as active leaders to address village needs, women will have a difficult time overcoming the male majority to actively participate.

2.4.2 *Standing for election:*

How did you decide to stand for election?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Husband	1	6	7
Family members	1	3	2
Gram Panchayat members	4	1	-
Villagers	-	1	-
Own initiative	6	-	-

Who helped you file your nomination papers?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Family villagers	2	11	9
Sarpanch	4	-	-
Cooperatives	4	-	-

2.4.3 Did a party support you while contesting?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	6	6	5
No	6	5	4

In Latur and Osmanabad, family members seemed to have the biggest pull among the women in their decision to stand for election. All but two women indicated that they did not intend to stand again for election or that they would do so only upon instruction from family members, primarily husbands. The Pune women showed less influence from outside forces in their decisions to stand. Much of the personal initiative in the Pune women can be attributed to their overall higher political awareness. The personal initiative in the Pune women is a good sign that their perception of the women's societal role is expanding to include political activity.

2.4.4 Participation in Gram Panchayat:

Do you attend the Gram Panchayat ?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Attend meetings regularly	12	4	1
No	-	2	1
No, husband attends	-	3	4
No, other male family members attend	-	1	1
Attended less than five times	-	1	2

In Pune, at first one woman's husband attended the meetings for her. However, now she has convinced him to let her attend the meetings. Also, one woman only attends the first 30 minutes of the meetings because of scheduling conflicts.

Do you speak in the meetings?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	8	3	1
No	2	-	-
When addressed	2	2	-

*of those women attending meetings

Do other women members speak at the meetings?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	11	5	1
No, not attending	-	5	7
When addressed	1	1	1

* In one Pune Gram Panchayat, two women members never attend.

How do the male members react to women's participation?

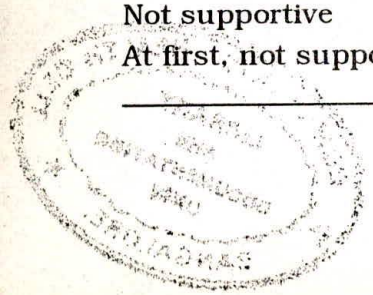
	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Positive	3	4	-
Negative	5	1	3
Indifferent	4	-	2
No comment	-	6	5

Have any male members expressed their views of the reservation for women in Gram Panchayats?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes, supportive	3	4	-
Yes, unhappy	9	1	3
No	1	-	2
No comment	-	6	5

How does your family feel about you being involved in the Gram Panchayats?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Supportive	8	11	9
Not supportive	2	-	-
At first, not supportive	1	-	-



This is the area that most clearly displays the marginalisation of the 30 percent reservation. Only 55 percent of the women are taking an active part in the Gram Panchayat meetings. In Latur and Osmanabad, only two of the Gram Panchayats actually had 30 percent women members. Most Gram Panchayats had only two or three women to a total of 12-15 members. Beyond a basic lack of participation, the benefits of women's reservation are being further nullified by male members attending for 45 percent of the women in the Latur and Osmanabad districts. These women have completely disassociated themselves from the Gram Panchayat process and consequently decision making of their village. None of these women knew even the basic activities of the Gram Panchayat meetings. Yet, two of these women had been Gram Panchayat members for 15 years. All the women from the Latur and Osmanabad district stated that their families were supportive of their Gram Panchayat activities. However, based on the amount of actual participation, it can be concluded that much of the family support is solely for standing for the election not actual participation. Upon further questioning, five women indicated that they were interested in participating and learning more about the Gram Panchayat, but said their husband would never allow it. In Pune district, the women are much more active, but with that activity comes family resistance. More women indicated that their families questioned their Gram Panchayat participation.

2.4.5 Attendance of training programs:

Have you attended any training programs to help you as a Gram Panchayat member?

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	6	-	-
No	6	11	9

This is the essential element of meaningful participation by Gram Panchayat women, but until now has not been far reaching. Widespread training programs will serve as a catalyst for women's empowerment in the political sector. If women, continue to look at themselves as uneducated and politically unsuitable, they will allow themselves and other women to be ignored in the village leadership. Training programs must also reach the general village community. Without confidence and support to take up leadership, it is difficult for even "politically aware" women to overcome ingrained attitudes and behavioural patterns of an entire village.

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2.4.6 *Opinions of Gram Panchayat membership:*

Do you feel it is worth your effort to be a Gram Panchayat member?

Of those attending

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	11	2	1
No	1	2	-
Indifferent	-	1	-

Of those not attending:

	Pune	Latur	Osmanabad
Yes	-	1	2
No	-	2	1
Indifferent	-	3	5

The Pune district women consistently stood out as the more politically aware and participatory Gram Panchayats members. However, one woman from Pune said that it was not worth her effort because of a lack of monetary compensation and productivity in her Gram Panchayat. She indicated that she would prefer "social work" to "politics". In Latur and Osmanabad, on the other hand, the majority of women did not take part in the political process. They inherently expressed a negative or indifferent view of Gram Panchayat work because they have had no experience as members. Ironically, three women who had never attended a meeting felt it was worth their effort to be in the Gram Panchayat because of their increased status within the community. The active members expressed a lot dissatisfaction because of their inability to address community problems. The political corruption that is commonly discussed at the upper levels of government manages to make its way into village level government. Whether it is in the form of sarpanch domination or misuse of funds by members, the corruption inhibits women's participation and increases their negative perceptions of political "power". One woman from Osmanabad said, "In my village, village development is the sugarcane and grapes of the male Gram Panchayat members".

Section 3

DISCUSSION OF MAHARASHTRA PAPER AT THE ISST SEMINAR

The discussion presented the complex situation facing the state of Maharashtra. It shows clearly that despite a progressive society and provisions for women in the state policy they have not had far reaching effects. Women representatives have their share of problems and they are still attempting to solve them using simple innovative methods.

One common problem prevailing in almost all the states was that of travelling to the block. A woman has to manage the multiple roles of wife, mother and active Gram Panchayat member. Many women find it difficult to travel to the block. Also, lack of adequate funds for travelling has hampered the mobility of women members. But an experiment in the Pune district attempts to solve this problem. This involves having a *Gram Kacheri* in each village. A *Gram Kacheri* is where all the officers come to the village on an appointed day and listen to the problems of the women members. All the women seem to be happy, that instead of their going in search of the BDO and animal husbandry officers, the officers come to the village. The women are taking this idea very seriously and make it a point to attend the *Gram Kacheri.*

Another experiment which Dr.Neelam Gorhe mentioned was to train women to write different kinds of applications for obtaining loans, to various government officials about matters regarding Gram Panchayats, inviting somebody for a programme and so on. For the illiterate women, activists in the village are helping them write out these applications. A follow-up action on these despatched applications is taken at every monthly meeting of the Gram Panchayats. However, another participant felt that letter writing is not an adequate substitute for actually visiting the offices. When a woman goes directly to the office and interacts with the various officials, it enlarges her vision and she gradually learns to negotiate and deal with the officials. Letter writing is not going to give her first hand experience that she will get by visiting the offices herself. However where actual visits are not possible, this could be the next best alternative.

A trend that women activists are treating with mixed feelings is that of male politicians talking "pro-women". The men feel that they will get more political mileage and media support if they voice their support for women's empowerment. Though this trend is creating an awareness among men about importance of women's issues, the underlying vested interest is obvious. It enables them to get a ticket for the next elections.

Mr.Vasant Nachane of Dr.P.V.Mandlik Trust talked about a provision that has been recently introduced. It says that a Gram Panchayat will be assisted by a vigilance committee in its functions. The vigilance committee will have 5 members. The Sarpanch will be the President and the other members will include a freedom fighter, a woman member, an ex-soldier and a social worker. This experiment had just begun, but its fate is not known due to the change in Government.

Such issues are a continuous cause for concern to the activists and trainers involved in the process of encouraging women's empowerment.

The following section elaborates on the need for training and orientation programmes and the organisations involved in the process.

Section 4

TRAINING AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS

It is clear that women lack awareness and must be provided with training to overcome their inhibitions and function effectively in the Gram Panchayat. Awareness is the first step towards women's empowerment. But for reservation to have the desired effect, many factors need to be looked into.

Initially, women should be motivated to participate. Efforts should be made to instill a desire in them to involve themselves in politics. They should develop in themselves a desire to tackle issues concerning the village and women.

It is important to stress upon the women that 'they' are the decision makers for their sisters. Over centuries, women have been socialised to resort to a back-seat, hide in the background and serve as a perfect foil to their fathers, husbands and sons. Women hesitate to step out of the secure confines of their homes into a traditionally male dominated atmosphere.

A trainer or a training organisation thus faces a daunting task. A trainer has to start with altering the attitudes, perceptions and later proceed to other issues.

There are two trends apparent in training programme in Maharashtra. Bigger institutes which are closer to the government stress on personality development, while women's organisation concentrate more on women's rights and atrocities against women. The organisations that have done commendable work are P.V.Mandlik Trust, Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres, Chaitanya, Janarth, Yashvantrao Chavan Pratishthan, Mumbai, Indian Institute of Education, Law College Society and Stree Aadhar Kendra.

One more positive factor is that many educational institutes from Ahmednagar, Buldana, Akola, Latur-Osmanabad Districts are coming forward to train Gram Panchayat women. The sociology department of these educational institutes and the NSS would like to associate themselves with the training programmes. They are willing to provide 50% of the funds and also premises for training. Two Sugar factories, Ganesh Sugar Factory in Ahmednagar and Devur Sugar factory in Pune district have also expressed their desire to train women in Panchayat Raj. But here again, working out strategies and having a conceptual clarity in the training process must be taken into account.

The goal of Stree Aadhar Kendra is to improve the quality of life for women, promote places for women in the decision making processes and help them in their struggle against discrimination, atrocities and social customs. Their training programmes

have focussed on the various aspect women need to know to function effectively and actively as Gram Panchayat members.

During a training programme organised by the Stree Aadhar Kendra in Sangli, the Minister for Rural Development who was also present was anxious to know why they had sessions on health and atrocities against women. He was of the opinion that these problems could be tackled by women's organisations. Why should these be discussed at a training programme for women Panchayat members? But at the evaluation of the training, the feedback received by the organisers was that the most popular sessions were those on health and atrocities against women. This shows that women have realised that there are various problems that can be tackled at the Panchayat level and that they should not restrict themselves to areas of basic amenities like sanitation. A training programme helps enlarge the vision of women and enables them to identify issues relevant to their daily lives.

Stree Aadhar Kendra has also launched a training programme within Pune district and proposes to educate around 1000 women in its first year. It also plans to launch similar programmes in other districts of Maharashtra.

Another attempt to increase awareness is the news feature service of Stree Aadhar Kendra by which an article published in one district newspaper is simultaneously published in 15 other districts. The contents of these articles are on women, health and women's rights.

Dr.P.V.Mandlik Trust is an organisation in Maharashtra which gives monetary assistance for socio-political activities. It has taken up the challenging task of awakening the women members of Gram Panchayats. It has conducted its activities in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. They have taken the help of experts in the field to decide the content and methodology of their programme. They have also released a series of booklets in Marathi on "Rules and Procedures of Gram Panchayat meeting", "Effectiveness of Gram Sabhas", "Some important development schemes to be implemented at village level", all printed in bold type and accompanied by illustrations. This makes easy reading for the illiterates and neo-literates.

A few guidelines were suggested by Dr.Neelam Gorhe, on content of a training programme at the ISST seminar. Three basic aspects have to be conveyed to the elected women representatives.

1. Their duties and rights as citizens of India

2. A background information on women's movement

3. Their functions as elected women representatives of the Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat.

The sessions must consist of

1. Women's rights
2. History of women's movement
3. Health
4. Negotiating tactics - i.e., talking in meetings, passing resolutions, allocation of funds and so on.
5. About the concept of "power"
6. About the Panchayat Acts
7. Mock Panchayat sessions and other role-plays.

Programmes of this nature would serve as a catalyst in the process of women's emergence as an able leader at the village level.

Section 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences of the women from Pune, Latur and Osmanabad demonstrate varying degrees of political awareness and participation. The interviews from demonstrate women with the beginnings of increased social and political consciousness. The women have access to political information and have begun to take an active part in political participation. Latur and Osmanabad are on the other end of the spectrum. The women do not have any sources of information and are still inhibited from taking an active part in their Gram Panchayats. Empowerment requires information. More importantly, it requires access to information. The December Conference on Women in Decision Making held in Pune concluded with the slogan: **Jaankeri Ek Satta Hai; Satta Ki Jaankeri Hasil Karna Hai!** (information is power. And access to information is power.) Male Gram Panchayat members will continue to have the upper hand and look like more qualified decision makers, if they are the only members with sources of information.

The brief glimpse of women in Gram Panchayat clearly displays the structural empowerment of women intended by the reservation has not yet begun to take place throughout all of Maharashtra. The reservations create a place for the needs of the women within the structural framework of politics. This place in politics helps "legitimise" women's issues. However, for this structural empowerment to be fully attained, the women must be aware of their newfound political power and how to utilise it. Currently, the reservations do little good for the women in Latur and Osmanabad who are unaware they exist. Three areas of awareness are needed:

1. awareness of the political system, its processes and socio-political issues

2. awareness of women's issues

3. awareness of village issues

Awareness is the starting point of women's empowerment. However, in order for the reservation of women Gram Panchayat members to reach their full potential, three other elements must be present:

1. a desire to be in politics and address the village and women's issues through the local self-government

2. a willingness to represent the needs of all women

3. a village-wide willingness to allow women to be active participants in the Gram Panchayat.

These three elements will only fully result after the aspect of political awareness has been addressed. Political awareness is needed because it instills in women a desire for action and instills within the village a willingness to let women take action. It is therefore vital that NGOs work towards increased social and political awareness in women.

The structural support provided by active women members in the Panchayat Raj system is an asset to any work being done in development. In order to make political resources available to women to be used to their full potential, it is important that NGO's relinquish their hesitancy to be involved in the "political process". The Panchayat Raj system needs to be looked upon as an asset in the quest for empowerment and development in the village community.

The tool for increased awareness is inevitably education and training. Training in the sense of a forum for interaction for women to discuss new ideas, concepts and issues. The definition of training assumed throughout this report is a strengthening of people's, particularly women's, social and political identities. This can only happen through dialogue. If the training programs are conducted in a "teacher to student" or 'educated to ignorant" format, the consciousness of the participants will not be raised or altered. The format of training programs must serve as a catalyst for raising the self- confidence, altering the self-image and utlimately promoting a deeper understanding of the power structure within the village and Gram Panchayat. A deeper understanding of the power structure will lead to an understanding of how it can be shifted from its patriarchal focus and enable women to have a piece of the power.

For the Panchayat Raj system to reach maximum utilisation, political awareness must go beyond the women members. Political awareness of women members is just the first step in the four step process to increase the awareness of the entire village. All groups must be targeted before women can find a healthy environment for their active participation and empowerment.

1. increased awareness of women representatives

2. increased awareness of all village women

3. increased awareness of all Gram Panchayat members

4. increased awareness of the village as a whole

If awareness programs are focused on only one sector of the village population and never expand in the entire village community, there will never be a majority to overcome prevailing attitudes of village politics and women's role within it.

It is important to realise that training women to become decision makers goes much deeper than straightforward political education. Women taking part in the Gram Panchayat decision making is not the first step in their development as decision makers. Women have to become decision makers in other aspects of their lives before they can take a decision making role in the political arena. Women must first view themselves as decision makers within their families. Secondly, they must view themselves as decision makers for their "sisters" of the village, recognising all women as one common group. Only then will they have the capacity as decision makers to become productive members of their Gram Panchayats. Women have been socialised into accepting their role within the patriarchical family, community and political system. Programs need to be conducted in such a way that will reorder the ingrained patriarchal values and foster growth in their personal identity. The change in their personal perceptions must reach the point where they recognise their rights as women and their place within the political system. This involves altering the women's self-image to include decision making and consequently political interests and activity. Self perception development entails not only supplying them with avenues for information, but instilling in them a desire for information. This can only be accomplished by broadening the women's perception of the woman's role, within their own minds, to extend beyond the household door.

Without enhancing the women's self identity, a women Gram Panchayat member does not necessarily guarantee gender sensitivity. Some of the women Gram Panchayat members interviewed stated that they had no interest in politics. Others stated that they did not bother with political information because it was an area strictly for men. Several women even stated that women did not have the capacity to be leaders. Training programs must address the psychology within political awareness as well as political education. Straight forward education only begins to scratch the surface. Unless attitudes and perceptions are altered, the activities of village Gram Panchayats and their women members will not change.

Women's political participation is an area of interest to all NGO's, not strictly women's organisations. Women have shown countless times to be interested in the development of the entire village. This trends results from women facing such issues as water scarcity, sanitation, education, health and housing needs most intimately everyday. It is only logical then for women to be mobilised in the political process and to be the primary focus of development training. From a focus on women, human development will take place on all levels.

In fact, many of the women taking the initiative to act in politics are not focused on strictly women's issues. Rather, they are focused on village development issues. It is important that women's organisations do no alienate these women or their convictions. Many women's issues can be addressed under the umbrella of village

development. Women's organisations must expand and welcome such village activists into the empowerment of women.

On the other hand, NGO's not solely focused on women's issues must also join women's organisations in working for political awareness. The empowerment of women within the family and Gram Panchayat has resulted in an overall increase in village development. For example, according to Aalochana, in several of Maharashtra's all women Gram Panchayats, they have been successful in raising the educational standards, closing liquor dens and addressing water, fuel and sanitation problems.

Promoting women as village decision makers requires NGO's, to recognise women as decision makers within their own organisations. Many NGO, while advocating women's empowerment, continue to be male dominated at the decision making levels and oppress women by their organisational structure. NGO's need to follow the government policy and provide 30 percent reservation within their decision making bodies. Otherwise, NGOs are not displaying a commitment to women and their needs and furthermore are loosing a valuable perspective on development issues.

Large scale political awareness programs would have far reaching effects. However, such projects cannot be tackled by three or four women's organisations alone. Other NGOs must join in a cooperative effort for training projects. Substantial progress can only be attained through a unified, multi-organisation coalition. An NGO coalition must be developed within Maharashtra. In addition, the multi-organisation coalition must be backed by government and have a legitimate place within the governmental framework to operate.

Furhtermore, political parties must realise the need for political education. Currently, political parties are actively supporting elections in the Panchayat Raj system. It is necessary that they extend their support to political education. Regardless of ideological view points, basic political awareness will benefit any political party. It will enhance the political process and its stability.

For too long the women's movement has been divided over issues. Religion, caste, class and other barriers stand in the way of a united women's front. Time is continuously being wasted debating issues rather than taking action. For many years organisations and conference recommendations have called for a united front to address women's empowerment. It is time to take concrete action; a united effort for political training can be a gateway for creating coalitions in other areas of development. The effort made by three or four organisations is no comparison to the chorus of a multi-organisational effort focussed on the same goal. Divided efforts give power to tradition and prevailing attitudes by scattering resources and not fully

addressing all the issues at hand. Divided efforts prove ineffective when looking at the complete picture. Rather than have one organisation working for women's empowerment and another organisation working for a new well in the village, it would be much more productive for a women's training program to help village women address the problem of a new well on their own, within the resources allotted to them. Furthermore, it would give the women confidence that they have enough life experience, knowledge and power to address their needs.

It is important for this untied coalition to receive support and backing from the institutionalised government. The Maharashtra government has already begun to offer such support to women through the creation of the women's commission and the policy on women, but the support and legitimization cannot remain in the high levels of government. It must begin to reach the village.

It is necessary for discussion on women in Panchayat Raj and their political awareness to move from broad theoretical recommendations into a concrete action plan within each state. Based on the experiences in Maharashtra, a framework in which one such coalition can be created has been developed.

Each district should organise a commission for women. The commission should consists primarily of local NGO representatives and area women activists. It is important to keep the commission local and focussed on district women. As one of its primary efforts, the commission should develop an action plan for district-wide political and social training.

The action plan should include a combined effort of all NGOs in the area. In its initial stage, the commission should train at least one women Gram Panchayat member in each village. Following this initial effort, the commission, aided by government mandate, should develop a women's committee within each village. The commission should create a women's group in the villages where none exist or work within the framework of the mahila mandal already in place. The women that have already received leadership training should be the head of the women's committees. Extensive training should then be conducted for the committee women. The training should be arranged in such a way that the women in turn could undertake the training of the other women within the village. The emphasis of the training programs must be on allowing women to discover their own resources and capabilities. This can only be accomplished through dislogue and interaction format programs.

Initially, the village training of women should be an NGO organised effort, but hopefully, with the introduction of such social and political issues into the village, everyday conversation can become a tool of training. The women's committee will need legitimisation from both the government and NGO's in order for the village

attitudes to be surmounted and full scale village training to take place. It is important to instill in the women themselves the initiative to stand for election or become a member of the women's committee, but they must also have enough organisational support to overcome the family and village odds.

As part of that organisational support, training must also conducted for other Gram Panchayat members and the village as a whole. While training of Gram Panchayat women and a village women's committee are the initial target, training cannot stop there. Government legitimisation of women representatives and women's committees can only provide so much support to women. It is necessary to begin shifting the perceptions of the villagers and Gram Panchayat members to include women as decision makers. Otherwise, current behaviours, such as male family members insisting on attending the meetings for the women, will persist.

Admittedly, such an extensive program is a long and arduous process, but any attempt to alter balance of power within the village is bound to be just as great an effort. Until women can be accepted and accept themselves as decision makers of their village, 30 percent of the Panchayat Raj system will continue to be marginalised. A 50 percent reservation can only be the aim after extensive political awareness and leadership training. Fifty percent, or even thirty percent, does little more than look good on paper if the women are not made aware of their need for a voice in government. Raising women's consciousness is the basis for women taking an active part in the decision making of the family, the village and the Indian political system.

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Himachali Women
and
Gram Panchayats

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This paper basically examines the issues related to Himachali women's participation in Gram Panchayats and also the HP Panchayat Raj Act 1994. The paper is divided in two parts. Part one consists of three sub-sections, namely (1) socio-economic context alongwith physical conditions within which Himachali women in the lower hill areas live (2) various responses gained through individual interviews and group interactions amongst the Women Members of Gram Panchayat (WMGP). (3) conclusion.

Part two is a critique of HP Panchayat Raj Act 1994.

The team is grateful to Ms. Madhu Sarin for allowing us to use extracts from her study "Situational Analysis". The Team also expresses its thanks to Ms. C.P. Sujaya who intereacted with WMGP's in groups and wrote the evaluation of SUTRA'S Training Programmes for WMGP's. We have taken extensive quotations from this report.

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Part II **[196-207]**

Critique of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act 1994

Part I

Himachali Women and Gram Panchayats

Section 1

Prologue

1.1 Situational Analysis

Prior to its formation as a Union Territory of the country in April 1948, Himachal Pradesh consisted of 30 princely states which were subsequently merged with the Indian Dominion. During the reorganisation of Punjab in 1966, most of the hilly areas of Punjab, were also merged with Himachal Pradesh and it attained full statehood on January 25, 1971. The state has an area of 55,673 square kilometers and comprises 1.69 percent of total area of the country. According to the 1991 census, the population of the state was 5.11 million which was only 0.64 percent of the population of the country. The state is divided into 12 districts with the population inhabiting 16,807 villages and 58 towns covered by 103 Tahsil/sub-Tahsil.

Geographically, Himachal Pradesh can be divided into three zones. The first, the outer Himalayan zone, is the most populated area of the State and consists of valleys and the Shiwalik hills.

The second is the inner Himalayan region consisting of rugged mountains and narrow valleys with a lower density of population. The third zone is that of alpine pastures which remain snow covered for about half the year and is very sparsely populated.

The analysis is based on the experience of our work mostly in Outer Himalayan Zone which is densely populated and to a lesser extent in the inner Himalayan Zone.

1.2 Distribution of Population

As per the 1991 census, Himachal Pradesh was the least urbanised of all Indian states with only 8.70 percent of its population living in urban areas compared to the national average of 25.72 percent urban population. Only the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli had a slightly lower urban population at 8.46 percent.

Out of the 58 towns in the state, not a single one belonged to Class I with a population of over 100,000. 37 of the 58 towns belonged to Class VI with a population of less than 5,000. Only Shimla, Solan and Sirmour districts had a urban population above

the state average with 20.43. 12.47 and 10.05 percent of their respective population living in urban areas.

Thus, Himachal Pradesh is even more a state of villages than the country as a whole. Further, as per 1991 census, out of 16,807 inhibited villages, as many as 62.78% had a population of less than 200 each. The larger villages with a population above 1000 are concentrated in the districts of Una, Kullu and Kinnaur. 52.8 percent of the total rural population of Solan district (Where SUTRA's HQ is based) lives in villages with a population of less than 200. In Dharmpur Block of Solan district, a village would consist of no more than 10 to 15 houses, and these too are spread over a large area.

Such a scattered settlement pattern, combined with the hilly terrain of the most of the state with difficult and poor communications, makes village life isolated and tough. This is particularly so for the house bound women.

Sometimes, days pass without the women so much as seeing a non-family person and many women spend a large part of their lives either in their maternal / paternal homes or in their *Sasural.* This in itself is a crucial aspect of Himachali women's situation. Because of their isolation, they have very limited access to outside information, particularly about their legal rights and it is all the more difficult for them to find group support or organize collective action in situation of crises.

1.3 Role of Women in the Subsistence Economy

From the above data, it is evident that the vast majority of rural households in Himachal Pradesh are engaged in cultivating their own small or marginal farms. However, due to the lack of economic viability of the majority of land holdings, many of which consist of small terraces on hilly terrain, the only avenue for economic betterment is through (non) at least one or more members of the family finding some non-farm employment, usually outside the village. It is the under employed men in the household who are on the look out for such employment. In such a context, women's participation in agriculture is increasing, rather than decreasing, and in many households, effectively they have become the main cultivators.

The pattern of women's increasing participation in agriculture is substantiated by the census data for the state from 1961 to 1981. During this period, the overall proportion of cultivators to the total workers in Himachal Pradesh declined from 80.68 percent to 65.19 percent. However, in 1991 when we look at the distribution of male and female cultivators, whereas 56.48 percent of the total male main workers were returned as cultivators, as many as 96.43 percent of the total cultivators were female.

According to the 1991 census, 33.83 percent of the total population of Himachal Pradesh was returned as main workers. This represented 47.89 percent of the male population and 19.71 percent of the female population. Thus, tabulation of women's work tends to be under-reported due to the definition of what constitutes as economically productive activity used for defining 'work' for census purposes. A man or woman doing household duties or making something only for domestic consumption (and not for sale) is not doing any work in census terminology. During the 1981 census, for the first time, a new category of marginal workers' was added. Those who had worked for less than 6 months or 183 days during the previous year were included in the category of 'marginal workers' (according to 19991 provisional figures, amongst the marginal workers 89.17 percent were women). Further, among the 'non-workers', 98-67 percent of those engaged in the 'non-work' of performing 'household duties' were women. Among their 'household duties', almost 1/5 th of the total women were also engaged in cultivation, agricultural labour or forestry.

Although the 1971 and 1991 data is not strictly comparable due to the addition of the category of marginal workers in 1981, from our studies it is clear that although there has been a slight decline in the percentage of women 'main' workers, there is a substantial addition of women 'marginal' workers. If one dispenses with the definition of household duties as constituting 'non-work' particularly where such duties include cultivation, agricultural labour etc. then we find that almost half the female rural population (46.60 percent) consists of workers - close to the 51.45 percent of rural men workers. The only difference is that whereas only 4.24% of rural men were listed as marginal workers, as many as 16.37% of rural women were marginal workers. Further, 92 to 96 percent of rural women workers in all the three categories were engaged in cultivation. From this, one can deduce that rural women constitute the bulk of the labour force of the state's agricultural economy in the subsistence sector, but they work without any wages, with their work being considered 'marginal' or a part of their 'household duties' while the bulk of the new wage based employment opportunities, in both the agricultural and non- agricultural sectors are going to men.

The high percentage of women 'marginal' workers reported in the 1981 census is probably a reflection of the increase of women's participation in cultivation due to the men finding other employment. Due to the smallness of land holding and the seasonal nature of cultivation work, productive employment in cultivation on the average holding is for less than 183 days a year. Thus, despite their increasing role in cultivation, women's work continues to be seen as 'marginal.'

It does not increase their economic independence or power as they do not work for a wage but for mere subsistence or survival. In fact while men find some economic mobility through non-farm employment, women get even more tied to the family's land, the bulk of which is owned by men. The coparcenary Hindu Joint Family

systematically excludes women from the inheritance and ownership of property. Although this has been remedied in Hindu Undivided Family, very few women claim their share of their parental family property. Due to their insecurity at their in-laws' home, they are afraid of antagonising their brother(s) by claiming their share of the parental property in case they need to rely on him/them during a crisis.

1.4 Culturally Defined Attitudes Towards Women

There is a considerable cultural diversity among the sub-groups of Himachal's population. Given the tough hilly terrain and difficult communication between areas even within the state, different pockets have strong cultural identities which have had limited exposure to outside influences. The outer Himalayan Zone (areas such as Lower Kangra, Solan, Lower Sirmour etc) is inhibited by the descendants of people from the plains who were driven into the hills a couple of centuries ago due to persecution by the Moguls. Here one finds a blend of Punjabi and Pahari culture. The inner Zone (areas such as Kullu, Chamba, Upper Mandi, Upper Sirmour etc.) has a much stronger *'Pahari'* culture. However, attitudes towards women among most of the population are defined by strong patriarchal society norms.

Within this patriarchal framework, a woman's main value lies in the capability of her body to produce male offsprings and being a good, uncomplaining manual labourer. In her own right, she has little identity and is not expected to have any desire for self-fulfillment. Here socialization from birth focuses on making her a subservient to the demands of patriarchy. Her parents invest little in her development as she is *'Paraya Dhan* (someone elses property)' who eventually has to be gifted in to another home. At her in-laws, she is an outsider, viewed with suspicion till she established her complete loyalty to her new home and proved her worth by giving birth to a male child. The strength of this cultural attitude is reflected in the ostracism of women unable to bear child, she is compared to an infertile cow. People consider it inauspicious to be with, or eat in the company of, such women. The fact that it might be the husband who is infertile or unable to produce male progeny is not recognised by society.

It is not only her body on which a woman has no control. She is not permitted to choose her own god or goddess either. In some parts of the state (e.g. Sarkaghat of Mandi district), while in her parents home, the woman must worship the god/goddess of her father's clan. At her in-laws, she must worship the god/goddess of her husband's family but she is not permitted to do even this till she has produced a son! Thus, even her right to faith in a god/goddess is conditional to her producing a male child.

Because of this social role assigned to the women, excepting in certain pockets, (e.g. the area across the Giri river in Sirmour district) her virginity is jealously guarded

till she is married off. Her parents' family honour depends on delivering her to her home of marriage in an 'unpolluted' form. Should, through some accident, an unmarried girl lose her virginity before marriage, she not only brings dishonor to her family but becomes unacceptable to most 'respected' males. The rest of her life is often spent as a piece of social rubbish.

In more remote areas such as Chauhar Ghati in Mandi district, the obsession with pollution of a woman's body takes a more bizarre form due to rigid caste differences. Here if a higher caste woman is found to have had a relationship with a lower caste man, her de-pollution involves an elaborate ritual. A deep ditch is dug in the ground and the woman is made to stand in it. The ditch is then covered with wooden planks (with the woman still underneath) which, in turn, are covered with earth. Only after the earth on the planks has been ploughed is the woman allowed to get out of the ditch. She has to discard her old clothes and wear new ones before coming out. A higher caste man having a relationship with lower caste woman does not need to be de-polluted. In fact, a man does not get polluted no matter how much he indulges in violating social norms or abusing women. The entire burden of maintaining cultural values is placed on the woman's shoulders.

A saving grace of Pahari culture is that a once 'honourably' married but later deserted or divorced woman is permitted to remarry. In fact, remarriage through the *'Reet'* system involves the woman's new husband having to pay the old one a certain price for her - a kind of bride price. However, all the negotiations are done by male members of the two families and the money stays in the control of men.

Attitudes towards widow remarriage, however, are harsh, particularly amongst the Rajputs of the lower belt, in districts Kangra, Hamirpur, etc. Here, the woman is held responsible for her husband's death and made to feel that the rest of her life is worthless.

In Sangraha block of Sirmour district falling across the Giri river, the adult woman seems to have greater freedom and can walk away from an oppressive husband to another man. There is no premium on a girl's virginity either and widow remarriage is not frowned upon. Possibly because of this freedom, she has greater value and is treated better. The study quoted above found that in this area, men share the burden of agricultural, livestock and domestic work more equitably with women than in all the other 3 districts of Mandi, Solan and Hamirpur.

Unfortunately, with the opening up of interior areas and the dissemination of dominant values through the formal educational system, women even in such pockets are being made to renounce the limited freedom offered to them by the traditional culture on 'moralistic' grounds, 'Educated' girls look down upon women leaving oppressive husbands a symbol of 'backwardness' or 'illiteracy'. On the other

hand, the inflow of outsiders into such areas is resulting in increased sexual exploitation of women due to the more liberal sexual attitudes of the local culture.

This is in no way an indicator of traditional culture placing women on a pedestal. Even here, the birth of a male child is still celebrated with fervour while the birth of a female child receives little attention. Marriage of girl children between the age of 10 to 14 is still widely prevalent and there are cases of girls having been forced to change 3 to 4 husbands by the age of 13 to 14. Such practices have their inevitable impact on the education and health of young women..

Pollution taboos related to child birth and menstruation are unique features of hill culture. In most parts of Himachal Pradesh child birth has traditionally taken place in the cattle- shed with the mother and the new born being kept there for several days as they are considered 'dirty'. Similarly, during menstruation, women are not allowed to enter the kitchen, cook or serve food, enter the temple or touch men. On reaching puberty, girls are not allowed to read the scriptures and are made to believe that they will go mad if they enter the temple during menstruation.

In interior areas like Chauhar Ghati in Mandi district, women are not allowed to enter the house at all during their menstruation and have to live in a cattle shed during those days. Should they enter the house for any reason, they have to mud wash the whole house to purify it.

These values and customs are powerful tools of keeping women manipulable and subservient and keeping them afraid and ashamed of their bodies. They systematically create a sense of powerlessness among women through a process of internalising these values from childhood. Girls are conditioned not to look up at men, not to talk back, work without being heard and learn to adapt to their destiny from early age.

Section 2

2.1 *History Of Panchayat Raj*

The Panchayat Raj system in Himachal Pradesh, before it achieved full Statehood, was mainly governed by the Punjab Panchayat Raj Act. This Act was based on a 3 tier system. Himachal had its own legislation on Panchayat Raj in 1968 and the major components of the Punjab Panchayat Raj Act were incorporated in this legislation.

Though the Zilla Parishads remained more or less on paper, the elections for Gram Panchayats were held very regularly. Elections for Block Development committees were not held as all the Pradhans of Gram Panchayat from the Block were made members of the Block Development Committee.

The speciality of HP Panchayat Raj Act 1968 was the formation of Nyaya Panchayats. In the initial years, the members of Nyaya Panchayats were nominated by the State Government. But since 1978, the Nyaya Panchayats were merged with the Gram Panchayats.

Thus, the role of the Gram Panchayat from 1978, became two pronged: Development and administration of justice under certain clauses of IPC.

Because of this twin role given to Gram Panchayats, the importance of GP's in the everyday life of people increased tremendously.

An amendment in 1978 to the Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act 1968, empowered the Gram Sabha to elect the Pradhan and Up-Pradhan instead of being selected by members of the Gram Panchayat.

Because of this Amendment, the Pradhans and Up-Pradhans became not only powerful, but their accountability towards the members of the Gram Panchayats was reduced. It was true that a few of these members of the Gram Panchayats would undertake arm-twisting tactics to get the things they wanted from Pradhans, but this was reduced by the Amendment. At the same time it also reduced their importance.

Concerning women's participation in the Gram Panchayats. the HP Panchayat Raj Act 1968, made it mandatory for every Gram Panchayat to have atleast one woman member. If a woman member could not be elected, then the Gram Panchayat had to co-opt one woman as a member with voting rights. Thus, it was upto the men to decide which woman would suit their purpose and fulfill the requirement of the Act.

2.2 *Social Movements and Women's Participation*

As mentioned above, the Himachali topography does not permit an environment for social movements. Small, scattered and isolated population villages made it very difficult for the people to come together for any social movement. Most of the area was also under a feudal system till 1947 which also restricted any changes within the social system.

Certain areas under Punjab and other areas under princely rule, had witnessed a miniscule freedom movement, but by and large, HP remained quiet during the first half of the 20th century, thus there were neither any mass movements nor any women's involvement in them

In more recent times, due to pressures on development by the Block Development Office, the government functionaries were forced to form the Mahila Mandals and by the end of 70s, more than 50% of the villages in Himachal had a Mahila Mandal.

The aim of forming a Mahila Mandal, was to create an environment for women's participation in 'development programmes'; but as it has happened all over the country, these Mahila Mandals became part of patriarchal system. In fact, these Mahila Mandals were used by the government functionaries and local politicians to strengthen the dominant developmental programmes/projects/processes.

On the other hand it provided women with a reason for getting together. This process lead to the situation where men started accepting the concept of Mahila Mandals and they became less inimical to the idea of women getting together without any social festivity.

In the late 70s, the NGO's capitalised upon this situation and started actively working on women's issues.

Thus, when SUTRA started working in HP in late 70s, it took very little time for them to organize Mahila Mandals. But the quality of inputs in Mahila Mandals differed vastly and thus, one got two sets of Mahila Mandals; one organised by the BDO's to strengthen the patriarchal system and other organised by the NGO's to initiate a struggle for creating a space for women in society.

2.3 *Drawing Women in Social Movements*

Because of this awareness building and group formation of Mahila Mandals (MM's) by SUTRA and its sister organizations, women were becoming more articulate and organised. These women launched various struggles on common issues; such as absenteeism of school teachers, lack of proper facilities at school, non-availability of local revenue officials etc. Actually these were the traditional areas of GP's. Most

of them felt threatened by women and this built up hostility between MM's and Gram Panchayats over a period of time. This grew more distinct when women launched an agitation against liquor vends. Most of the GP's were in favour of opening liquor vends in their Panchayats. The hostility was further fuelled by State politicians and bureaucrats by providing cash incentives to GP's on sale of liquor.

On the other front, the women who were nominated to GP's carried a feeling that they were holding the position by courtesy of the Pradhan of the GP. Thus many of them did not want to do anything which might antagonize the Pradhan of GP's. This created a big gap between women from MM's and women from GP's.

Thus there were horizontal as well as vertical hostilities between the people involved in GP's and the women involved in MM's.

2.4 *Gram Panchayats and SUTRA's Interventions*

For initiating the process of democratization of Gram Panchayat's(GP's), SUTRA organised legal literacy programmes and conducted residential, awareness generation programmes for the members of MM's. SUTRA enlarged the meaning of legal literacy by including duties and functions of GP's alongwith Nyaya Panchayats with the basic faith that unless women partake in functioning of the GP's, nothing much could be achieved. So SUTRA developed posters on various functions and duties of GP's and undertook a massive campaign on the same. These efforts created further fears amongst the male members of GP's. They threatened and started campaigning against SUTRA, with the covert support of MLA's and bureaucrats.

Neither the bureaucracy nor the people involved in GP's, nor the political parties were interested in creating an environment for the participation of women in the affairs of the GP's and SUTRA's efforts to motivate members of MM's to partake in the affairs of GP's were isolated.

2.5 *1991 Election of the Gram Panchayats*

When elections for Gram Panchayats and Block Development Committees in 1991 were announced, we at SUTRA felt that the elections would be held in accordance with the upcoming constitutional amendments. So, we decided to undertake a campaign to motivate members of MM's to participate in the elections. But the biggest hurdle was the State Govt's silence on the matters of:

.Percentage of reservation for women.

..Constituencies to be declared as reserved for women in GP's.

Our efforts to generate interest amongst the MM Members for participating in elections was like shooting in the dark. Later SUTRA came to know that the State Govt's policies of reservation was based on ad hoc system in which:

1. Wherever there were 5 members of GP's, one seat would be reserved for women.

2. Wherever there were 9 members of GP's, two seats would be reserved for women (one seat for SC women).

3. Wherever there were more than 9 members, 3 seats would be reserved for women (one for SC women).

4. No reservation for the Pradhan and Up-Pradhan posts were declared.

5. For the election of Block Development Committees (BDC) 20-22 percent seats were reserved without any rationalisation or atleast SUTRA failed to understand the rationale.

   Another factor was the total silence on the constituencies which were to be reserved. It was revealed only a week in advance of the election dates.

Considering the H.P. geographical structure, a GP consists of 6 to 10 villages with an average population of 200. But SUTRA associated MM's were not in all the villages of the GP. In fact, most of the GP's, had one or two MM's which were affiliated to SUTRA and MM's are based at the village level. The involvement of MM's in the GP election was possible only where a reserved constituency of GP held a SUTRA affiliated MM's.

2.6 Scenario after the Elections and its effects

Thus, a scenario after elections was something like this: in a typical Gram Panchayat body, 8 people were involved - (5 members + Pradhan + Up-Pradhan + Secretary) of which 1 is a woman or alternatively - 10 members (7 members + Pradhan + Up-Pradhan + Secretary) out of which 8 were men and 2 were women.

To understand the silent features of this scenario and also to understand the background of Women Members of Gram Panchayats (WMGP's), we decided to conduct detailed interviews of 70 WMGP's. On the other hand, we had completed the training of these WMGP's and we organised group meetings to evaluate the training programmes. Ms. C. P. Sujaya conducted these meetings.

Given are the findings from both these efforts, which we hope, will help us develop an overall picture of WMGP of today and probably of tomorrow.

While collecting information from WMGP's, we focused more on the general aspects of motivation as well as special aspects like the family's financial background and gender relations within the family.

Section 3

Dialogue

3.1 General...

Given the subordinate position of women in society and the rigid culturally defined attitudes towards her, support from the family for acquiring a position of 'leadership' seems to be a paradox and there are still a few Gram Panchayats who have refused to accept the Government's order to elect atleast one woman as member on their Gram Panchayats. How do the family members react to this scenario?

66 WMGP's out of 70 WMGP's responded that their family was very supportive and in few cases the family members even encouraged her to act as WMGP efficiently.

To solve this puzzle, let us first have a look at the age group of WMGP's.

The majority of WMGP's are above 50 (25 out of 70). In fact the oldest one was 65 years old. There were 20 WMGP's who have crossed the age of 40. Thus we have 54 WMGP's out of 70, who have crossed the age of 40. Only 16 WMGP's were below the age of 40 but above 30.

Thus, it seems the 'family' is ready to provide support to those women who have fulfilled not only their all patriarchal duties but have also done with 'patriarchal' obligations.

Another explanation could be that out of these 70 WMGP's, 17 have atleast one daughter-in-law and 26 have a daughter of more than 12 years of age but who have dropped-out of school. This also clearly shows that there is someone (a female) who is taking over, atleast partially, the domestic responsibilities. Thus, for a woman to get some freedom, another woman needs to be subjugated.

As C.P. Sujaya found out, "the point that arises for consideration here (on the age group of WMGP's) is whether the role model of a woman member of the Panchayat in Himachal Pradesh is going to be an older woman or whether, in view of the very arduous nature of an average rural Himachali woman's working day, younger women will opt out of the race? In addition to hard work, younger women are also under a stricter vigil by the village community as a whole, and the behaviour and the demeanor that is accepted or excused on the part of an older woman is not liked or understood when the women is young and in the reproductive phase. Some of the women -- in their late forties and some who were younger still -- were well aware of these pitfalls and dangers."

But there are cases where no support is forthcoming from the families. The opposition coming mainly from sons. On MM front too, we have found the same problem with young sons opposing their mothers participation in MM's.

Premi Devi, a widow of 39 has two sons aged 19 and 17 and no daughter. Her sons are opposing her work as WMGP on the ground that the domestic work is suffering.

Jai Devi (age 45) has 5 sons and one daughter (youngest). Her eldest son is 22 but unmarried and the daughter is school going. Her sons are getting upset as the domestic workload is suffering because Jai Devi is giving lot of time for Panchayat work.

Zaveri Devi of 45, has a married son and two unmarried daughters. Though Zaveri's husband who is a Chowkidar in the Panchayat is very supportive to her, her son is opposing her. The grounds are, *"Kya milta hai in Panchayat ke kamose? Muft ka samay barbad kar rahi ho" ("What do you gain by working for the Panchayat? This is a total waste of time").*

On the other hand Kamla Devi of 35, has one son and one daughter, both school going, husband is in govt. service and very supportive of her, but she herself feels that she should not continue working as WMGP. Reason : she is illiterate and she feels that she is not able to do full justice to her job.

As C.P. Sujaya found, "This whole issue was discussed during the Group Interactions. The sex-based divisions of labour seemed to be unchanged in the scenario presented by the younger women. They had to make adjustments in order to cope with their new responsibilities in the Panchayats - no one else in the household seemed to making any. On the day of the Panchayat meeting (which is once in a month in some and twice a month in others), the women got up a "little" earlier (4 a.m. instead of the usual 5 a.m.?), did all the house work by 9 or 10 a.m. so as to be in intime for the meeting and remained there till 4 or 5 p.m. In addition to this they had to spare time for undertaking visits and inspections whenever the Pradhan wanted them to do so. It appears that these women were outside their homes for atleast 10 days in a month on account of work connected with Panchayat. Many of them seemed to feel that the Pradhan gave them more than their fair share of work. When asked whether the male members of their families helped them in their housework, the answer was invariably in the negative. However, here and there, there seemed to be the beginnings of an awareness on the part of the husband that it was necessary to lend a helping hand to the wife. The important point to note was that the women really did not seem to expect this change of attitude on the part of the husband. They took it all as part of the new arrangements where it was incumbent on them to work harder and longer both inside and outside the home. As one of them put it, "this is our duty (Farz). One of the women said that her experience of working as WMGP had given her the idea of taking up public life/politics permanently, but in order to plan for this

properly, she said that she had already decided to sell her buffalo. When specifically asked about whether the change should not affect men also, one of the women said that the very fact that she was not a member of the Panchayat was itself indicative of the extent of the change that had taken place in the thinking of men!"

3.2 *Economics*

As it is already mentioned that the HP economy is essentially a subsistence economy and it is true that very few families are landless and distribution of land holdings is not directly related to Caste, still the major point in economics is to study what kind of 'cash income' the family has.

We found that 29 families had more than 2 acres of land whilst 32 families had less than 2 acres of land. 9 families had no land at all. But out of these 70 respondents, 50 respondent had atleast one family member working in the organised sector whilst only one family had a male working in the unorganised sector. Rest 19 families 15 had land less than 2 acres whilst 4 had land more than 2 acres.

This clearly shows that families who have advanced in terms of gaining access to government or other organised sector jobs, have also developed access to 'political power' may be through their wives.

Of course educational levels also are a major factor in this issue. 30 out of 70 WMGP's were illiterate whilst 40 had accesses to some education. Considering their age, it also seems that the literate women had a good financial background at their *'maika'* (parental house). This is so, because spread of education in Himachal Pradesh took place since 1970 and prior to this there were hardly any educational facilities available to the villagers, specially in the interior villages. Only those people sent their daughters to schools in the 50s and 60s who were 'highly educated' or had a sound 'financial background'.

3.3 *Support Base*

1. How did women get involved in Panchayats? Who provided them support? Whether their support base was the Mahila Mandal or people in general? What role did political parties play? These were the few questions which needed to be answered.

56 WMGP's learned about the Panchayat Elections from villagers (read men). Only 3 WMGP's learned about the elections from TV/Radio news service. 10 women were informed by their family members whilst only 1 woman told us that it was she on her own who learned about the elections. None of the respondents learned about the elections from Mahila Mandals even though 50 of the women were members of Mahila Mandals.

Does it show that MM members do not give much importance to GP's? Does it mean for MM's, GP's are untouchable? We experienced this while working for MM's. Most of the our active MM members are not yet convinced that GP's could be a forum for raising "Women's issues". The attitude of MM members towards GP's has historical reasons as mentioned earlier. Women in general feel that the GP's are the bodies for partisan politics and all politics is dirty, as Ms. Sujaya found that, *"The women have no clear ideas, for example, regarding the "politics" of Panchayats and they do not seem to have spent much time in analyzing and dissecting the real definition of politics, as distinct from political parties."*

Who prompted them to contest for elections or file nomination papers?

It was found that 35 women received a proposal for contesting the elections from villagers (read men) whilst 11 women were driven to the fray by their family members. 9 women received proposal from political parties or political leaders of the village. Only 2 women received proposals from their Mahila Mandals. 11 women took the decision to contest election on their own.

This is further analyzed by looking into the support received by these women from various sections of the society.

60 out of 70 women interviewed were members of Mahila Mandals but only 4 women received exclusive support from Mahila Mandals. 46 women received the support from villagers (read men) and not from MM's. 2 women were supported by political parties. 8 WMGP's received a joint support i.e. from villagers (read men) as well from the Mahila Mandals.

Thus, what does it show?

C.P. Sujaya found out that' "One of the striking features of the way the women were elected to the Panchayats was the almost universal recourse to finding a 'consensus' woman in the village, thus obviating the necessity for an electoral exercise. Almost in every case, the story was the same, either there was no other woman who was willing to stand for elections, or those that did, were persuaded to withdraw. What their elders (males) in the village wanted them to do. They felt that they wanted to experience the thrill of fighting against other women and the heat of campaigning. They were aware that when it came to the turn of men, even those belonging to the Scheduled Castes, there was no question of finding a 'consensus' candidate! Alternate candidate were found out without any difficulty and the village did not consider it a matter of prestige that only one person should stand. But when it came to the turn of the women, the collective reaction of the village appeared to be that there should be no contest - - - that for women to stand against each other was somehow not a respectable thing to do! One woman was told that the village would 'disintegrate' ("toot jayega" in Hindi idiom) if more than one woman stood for election. This same woman was offered Rs. 500 by a villager elder to withdraw her candidature. This woman, now

secure in her position as a Panch is nevertheless quite bitter about the whole vent - - - "Aazadi gaon mein nahin aayee" (freedom has not yet reached the villages).

A relevant point to note here is that in the older Panchayat Raj System that was prevalent in Himachal Pradesh - - - before the introduction of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution and the passing of new legislation in the State, women used to be nominated on the Panchayats, not elected, and the process of nomination may have, more often than not, involved the location of a "consensus candidate" from amongst the women in the village or community. The nomination used to be the privilege of the male leaders of the village or community including the Pradhan of the Panchayat. What is being played out now appears to be a throw back to the old modes of functioning. There were only two women out of those who attended the evaluation meetings who had stood against men in elections to non-reserved seats.

What do these women think about role of political parties in Panchayats ? 28 women out of 70, are connected with certain political parties and 9 women received proposals from political parties or political leaders to contest the elections, but only two women sought active support from their political parties. From this one can deduce that women think very poorly about any role of political parties in the Gram Panchayats. Why is it so? When this point was discussed, women reacted very strongly.

We found that attitudes towards the role of conventional party politics in the Panchayat Raj elections evoked very definitive responses. At the same time there was a certain ambivalence or lack of clarity in the answers given to the questions about political beliefs and to what extent elections should be fought on party platforms. Part of the ambivalence was due to the obvious lack of political education and awareness that was evident in their untutored responses.

Astonishingly, all the women were unanimously of the opinion that irrespective of party affiliations, the elected Panches should maintain absolute impartiality and objectivity towards all sections and groups in the village and community. The women held very strong beliefs on this issue and expressed themselves very strongly. One could not help but feel that in a group of similarly placed men the answers could not have come with such strong conviction and certainty. The women had great contempt for groupism and cliques that were part of local Panchayat politics. Many of them spoke scathingly about their Pradhans (male) who wanted to benefit only members of one or the other party. Where the women seemed unsure of themselves and faltered in giving answers was on the role of politics in Panchayat elections. Some of them felt that there was nothing wrong in fighting on party basis; whereas some others thought that politics was dirty and should not be brought into the arena at all. Some of the women who favoured politics were party workers and had worked for quite some time in the party organization at the local level. One of them said that

she had entered politics after she was inspired by the example of Indira Gandhi. But many of the women had no experience of any sort of party politics and had never taken part in any political activity. What was remarkable was that all these women came together to outrightly condemn the partisan politics of the men. This is yet another pointer to the possibility of women being able to forge a new path for themselves in the use of power rather than tread the "male" corridors of powers.

But what about WMGP's participation in any social movements? How many of these WMGP's took part in any sort of social movement even though they were members of Mahila Mandals or political parties prior to becoming a WMGP ? It is true, as said earlier that, HP has, in general no background of any illustrious social movement, but it is also true that in the last decade or so, many village based movements have taken place, specially around the issues like drinking water or liquor. Has participation in these movements helped the women to become WMGP? Has their active involvement in political parties encouraged them to take part in any social movements?

We found that :

Though 60 women had a membership of MM's prior to becoming WMGP, but only 14 had a background of participation in any social movement like, anti-alcohol movement, *jungle bachhao,* dharna against corrupt government officials, *morcha* against wife beating and atrocities connected with dowry.

Out of 28 women connected with political parties, only 8 women had taken part in certain social movements.

Thus, 48 WMGP's had no background of any social movement nor have they taken part in any social movement. This clearly shows that women who silently accepted the 'patriarchy' are preferred to women who had challenged 'patriarchy' by taking part in social movements.

Thus, when there is a problem related to women, it was obvious that large support comes from either villagers or Gram Panchayats. It was found that 38 WMGP's sought support from the Gram Panchayat whilst 29 sought support from Mahila Mandals while dealing with women in crises.

What is the level of understanding as far as local problems were concerned. We found that :

25 WMGP's were not able to locate any local problem. Lack of various facilities like drinking water, supply of electricity, lack of balwadis, lack of health services, lack of veterinary services, roads and small bridges were dominant areas.

17 WMGP's felt that the major problem was atrocities on women related to alcohol, dowry and desertion and majority of these women had a background of social movement.

This clearly shows that for the majority of WMGP's, women related problems were not a centre-stage one. This is understandable as majority of WMGP's were promoted and supported by villagers (read men) and very few had participated in social movements related to women's issues.

On the other hand it is also true that social services are the dominant features of women members of Gram Panchayats thinking and not unemployment or poverty. (In fact only one woman has expressed this as a serious local problem.)

3.4 Access to information

Communication is the biggest problem in Himachal Pradesh as the population is scattered over the rugged hills. In such a topography, having a regular access to newspaper is like a full moon night. Villages which are on the roadside and are connected by buses or very close to roads, do have access to newspapers. Thus, it is not surprising that 49 WMGP's do not receive newspaper. 6 WMGP's do receive newspaper, but they are illiterate. Thus, these 6 WMGP's, ask one of the younger member of family (usually a daughter) to read the newspaper for them. 10 WMGP's read newspaper on their own whist 5 WMGP's do not read newspaper even though they have access to it.

Due to a subsistence economy and majority of the families of WMGP's having a person working in organised sector, possession of a television set or radio set is not very difficult. Thus we find that 46 families had a television set or radio. But having a television set or radio does not ensures that the WMGP listens to news regularly. Only 31 WMGP's informed us that they tried to listen to local news atleast while 15 WMGP's informed us that they do not listen to any news at all.

The major reason for this, seems that, the timing of news - 7 to 9 p.m. is for cooking and cleaning the post-dinner dishes. How did we expect a woman to sit in front of the TV set and ignore her chores ?

3.5 Gram Panchayat Meetings and WMGP's Status

As mentioned earlier, the meetings of the Gram Panchayats are held regularly. In most of the GP's, there is a meeting every month whilst in few GP's (specially GP's from Mandi district) have two meetings every month, one solely devoted to the work of Nyaya Panchayat and the other to Gram Panchayat.

All the WMGP's have taken part in atleast 75% of the meetings held during the last one year and they have invariably participated in Gram Sabha meetings. But generally the Gram Sabha does not get quorum and thus has to adjourn or recall its members.

Most of Gram Panchayats have fixed dates for the meetings and there is no mention of any special invitation to be sent to members for the meetings. In few Gram Panchayats, the *Chowkidar* has been made responsible for reminding the members.

60 out of 70 WMGP's expressed that the timing for the meetings was fine with them. Ten WMGP's, who have expressed that the timing for the meetings are not convenient for them, have various reasons, chief amongst them is that they have to walk a long distance to attend the meeting and thus, wanted the meetings to end by 3.00 p.m.

As far as keeping personal record of the GP meeting is concerned, it is not the practice prevalent in Himachal Pradesh, but few WMGP's said that they keep the record of the meetings with them. Such WMGP's are 13 out of 70.

As far as signing the Minute Book at the end of the meeting is concerned, every WMGP is aware about this procedure (atleast, after the training at SUTRA) and do the needful.

Most Gram Panchayats hold their meetings in Panchayat Ghar and it is a practice of providing chairs to all the members. There were stray cases where, the SC WMGP had not been provided chairs, but such are rare cases, and after attending the Training, this SC WMGP demanded a chair and got it (she had to fight for it).

As far as discrimination based on caste is concerned, except one SC WMGP (the same one who had to fight for her chair) informed that other members would distance themselves from her whilst drinking tea. Again she had put up a fight and got justice.

But this picture is not universal in Himachal Pradesh. In the interior areas of Kullu, Shimla, Sirmour and Chamba districts, we have been told that an SC WMGP is not allowed to enter the Panchayat Ghar and participate in Panchayat meetings. She has to sit in the veranda and listen if she wanted. Of course, further investigation in this regard are required. Unfortunately, SUTRA had not been able to reach out to these areas.

But is this the end of the story ? No, even if a woman is allowed to sit in Panchayat meetings and she is not discriminated against, and is provided a chair to sit on, the story does not end. How much and in what form have these women contributed towards the better functioning of Gram Panchayats ? More importantly than this, Were they allowed to do so ? Were they effective ?

We have received various responses on this account. The majority of WMGP's have said that they were allowed to speak and were heard. 35 WMGP's had no problem in making a point or raising an issue during the GP Meetings. Male members did listen to them and sometimes acted accordingly.

But there are instances where men listen, make a show of paying attention and then continue their business. This is probably because the woman member is older in age and culture demands that men pay 'respect' to older women.

But there are innumerable instances where male members either make passes at or laugh when a woman member makes certain points or raises certain issues.

Raising issues like liquor definitely antagonises the men but there are other issues also where women do get opposition from men members.

Occasionally, the women have complained of men making derogatory or lewd remarks - *"Now it is the time of women's rule. What is the fun in having these meetings - just listen to women and act". "It is the foolishness of the government to provide reservation for women". "You are here just because of reservation. Otherwise you would never have entered the Panchayat Ghar on your own".* Many WMGP's informed us that when they try to speak or try to make a point, certain members laugh lewdly.

In such a situation, how do women get support? 32 Gram Panchayats out of 70 have more than one member (31 have two women members and one big Panchayat has 3 women members). Do these 32 women get support from each other? 18 women members do get support from other women members. In fact 5 women told us that both the women members continuously collaborate with each other whilst 13 women told us that they support each other on an certain issues. 13 Women told us that their counterparts either do not attend the meetings or just reach the Panchayat Ghar to sign the attendance register.

Who are these 13 women ? 9 belong to SC and 4 belong to Aryan castes (such as Brahmin, Rajput or Khatri). All these 4 Aryan caste women belong to very rich families.

It seems that participation by SC women is much below the desired level, this is mainly because most of these women have been driven into the Panchayats under compulsion. Further investigation is required in this regard.

3.6 Acting As GP Members

Do women feel confident to act as GP member? Yes, all the 70 women told us that they feel very confident about this role. What kind of work have they done for their constituencies, then ? It seems, almost everything under the sky.

Paving the path	36
Provision for Drinking Water	29
Developing *pukka* drainage systems	12
Construction of rooms for Schools and repairs	24
Path Construction	27
Tailoring Classes	01
Construction of low-cost toilets	01
Construction of Health Centres	02
Johars (surface water collection tanks)	02
Construction of small bridges	01
Provision of old age pension, widow pensions, handicap pensions, etc	01

But most of the women informed us that, though they have undertaken and supervised the work, the financial dealings were rarely handed over to them. These were done either by Pradhan himself or alongwith the Secretary. It seems somehow, the Pradhans and secretaries don't trust women's ability to undertake the financial part of implementing of any schemes (or they just want to make some money).

3.7 Leadership Qualities

Were the WMGP's community leaders prior to holding their posts ? 38 women told us that before they became WMGP's, women from their villages use to approach them with various problems whilst 32 women told us that no woman ever approached them for any kind of help prior to their becoming WMGP.

What were these 38 women doing prior to becoming a WMGP?18 were holding certain positions in the Mahila Mandals. 8 were connected with certain political parties whilst 10 were not only connected with political parties but were also members of Mahila Mandals.

There was one woman who belonged to the richest family in the village and that was the only reason why other women approached her to seek her help. Another woman was not only richest in the village but was also Pradhan of Mahila Mandal.

Thus, it seems that prior to choosing a woman as WMGP's various aspects have been considered by men : one of them is that the woman has had other exposures than the domestic work or is rich enough to have a time to 'move around.

On the other hand, around 55% WMGP's had the support of most women in her village and had a certain experience in 'problem solving'. This had definitely helped them to 'speak-out' in the GP Meetings.

3.8 Gram Sabha and WMGP's participation

Organising a proper Gram Sabha is the biggest problem for majority of Gram Panchayats in Himachal. Only 23 Gram Panchayats had a proper Gram Sabha, where the GP presents the budget, information regarding various schemes and the Gram Sabha takes the decisions regarding the implementation of these schemes.

But in the remaining 47 Gram Panchayats, no proper Gram Sabha is held. Most of the time, people were invited under the pretext of selection of IRDP families or Antodaya families. In such a Gram Sabha, no fruitful discussion takes place either on the budget of the Gram Panchayat or work done by them.

One woman member told us that, to fulfill the required quorum she collected all the women from her village (members of Mahila Mandal) and made them sit in the Gram Sabha for a while.

The apathy of people in general towards the Gram Panchayat and its functions is rooted in localised politics. The mechanisms that are required to encourage people to take an active part in Gram Sabha need to be discussed separately.

But what is interesting is that, the women members told us that they feel very hesitant *(Sharam aati hai)* to speak in the Gram Sabha as it is full of men.

3.9 Training

58 respondent have attended a training programme conducted by SUTRA. Out of 12 women who had not attended any Training Programme, 2 were members of BDC whilst 10 were members of Gram Panchayat.

How did this training programme help women in to becoming more effective members of Gram Panchayats ?

Ms. Sujaya found that, "the main contribution of the SUTRA training was to enhance the self-image and self-confidence of the women. This was a tremendous sea change. Earlier, they used to sit silent and nervous in the meetings of the Panchayats. They had so many false beliefs, so many misunderstandings, so many area of ignorance about themselves and their roles and duties. They were conscious of their state of illiteracy and lack of

knowledge of the simplest and most elementary facts regarding the functioning of the Panchayat. The thought that all financial matters were the exclusive preserve of the Pradhan and the Secretary of the Panchayat."

3.10 Leadership in Panchayat Raj

Almost all the women expressed the desire for the GP's to function in a participatory manner and decisions being taken by a majority. Obviously, this was not happening. The reasons being as mentioned earlier; the Pradhan and Up-Pradhan are directly elected and the Pradhan is treated as Chief Executive Officer of the Gram Panchayat. This not only gives him tremendous power over other members, but because he is directly elected,he does not feel accountable to other members. Thus, the decision taking process in the Gram Panchayat is based on the *'dadagiri'* or Pradhan.

Within this context, what are the necessary qualities of a Pradhan? According to respondents, the following special qualities would be essential :

1. He should not be a drunkard
2. Not be corrupt
3. Be ready to encourage women to take part in GP's
4. He should be above partisan politics
5. He must respect women
6. He should have an ability to listen to women members
7. He should have an ability to listen to the miseries of women and act upon them

But what about Women Pradhans ? Do women feel the situation should change if there is a Woman Pradhan ? What should her qualities be?

Some of the responses to the above questions are listed below :

1. Having a women Pradhan would encourage other women members to partake in the affairs of GP
2. Women members would receive basic support
3. Women's problems/concerns would get priority
4. It would increase the 'izzat' of women
5. Women members would not hesitate to partake in the meetings.

6. Co-operation amongst the women would increase

7. Women members would not feel 'left-out'

8. By having a woman Pradhan, there would be less corruption in the Gram Panchayats

9. Men would not be able to suppress women members

10. Social Justice would become a reality

11. An aware woman would be ideal for the Pradhan's post

12. Dissemination of information for women, regarding various schemes and financial dealings would become a reality

13. Women's voice would be heard

14. Atrocities on women would decrease

3.11 Dealings with Government Officers

The first government officer the WMGP's have to deal is Secretary of the Gram Panchayat.

What do the WMGP's think about him ?

33 WMGP's felt that the Secretary is helpful to the members and provides all the necessary information to them.

37 WMGP's felt that the Secretary is not only uncooperative, but also does not treat members with dignity, specially women members.

Most of WMGP's felt that the secretary is corrupt and a drunkard.

Sujaya found that : "The powers, duties and functions of the Secretary of the Panchayat. all the women knew that the Secretary was appointed by the Government, and not by the Panchayat. They knew that he could be removed or transferred only by the BDO or the Government, but some of them opined that in case of misbehaviour, the Panchayat could initiate action. Some of the Panchayats had allocated specific dates for the Secretary's attendance in their offices, as one Secretary had about two to four/five Panchayats to look after. The women were well aware of the difficulties caused by the absence of this official, especially when people from far off villages came to the office to register births, deaths or to get marriage or birth/death certificates. Some of the Panchayats had not drawn up the date- wise

itineraries. The problem was confounded because the Panchayats imposed "fines" for late registration, whereas the women felt that it was not really the applicants' fault if the failure to register was on account of the absence of the secretary. Some of the women felt that irrespective of its merits and the demerits, the practice of imposing these fines had made the people vigilant in the matter and there was no greater willingness on their part to register these vital events in time. One of the very few women who had been elected to the Block Samiti and who had obviously taken pains to find out more about the matter tried to tell the others that they were charging fines that were in violation of the provisions of the statute. The discussion became extremely lively at these proceedings by recounting the decision of her Panchayat to register the births of all girls free of cost! Another woman recalled that registration of sons' marriages entailed distribution of sweets within the Panchayat office.

3.12 Resources of Gram Panchayats

Resource mobilization is the most hazardous task for Gram Panchayats. Because of the apathy of the people towards Gram Panchayats, raising resources through innovative methods is practically not undertaken by any Gram Panchayats.

In general the GP's are dependent on government for grants for undertaking various developmental work.

Following are few subjects, from where the GP's raise their resources:

1. Distribution of Ration cards and Chulha tax
2. Rent from shops/houses owned by the Panchayats
3. Death/Birth/marriage Registration certificates
4. Fines
5. Tax from fairs
6. Fisheries
7. Prison for stray cattle
8. Animal Bone collection

3.13 Finances

As far as Finances of Gram Panchayats are concerned, women are usually kept in the dark by the Pradhans. 29 WMGP's told us that they had no clue about the

finances of their GP's whilst 03 women said they had some idea. 38 women told us that they know enough about the finances of their GP's.

While interacting with WMGP's, Sujaya found that : Though some of the women had adequate knowledge about the quantum of money that the Panchayat possessed by way of bank balances, most of them were not acustomed to questioning the secretary of the Panchayat on every meeting day about the amount of money lying in the account. It had not occurred to them that asking such questions would give them a better handle over the secretary, especially in those cases where the relationship between the two was already problematic. The few women who practiced this technique were able to improve their standing, as the secretary could by no means refuse to give an answer. They knew where the money was lying, whether in the post office or in the bank, the name of the bank, the contents of the pass-book, etc. But very few of them (almost none) knew about audit, budget, the role of the gaon Sabha and its functions vis-a-vis the Panchayat, i.e., to ask for the audited accounts or for the budget or for the accounts relation to any head/scheme. Here, the biggest handicap was their lack of literacy and numeracy.

This is also related to the information regarding various schemes. 45 women said they had no access to get the information regarding various schemes of the government meant for people in general and women in particular. Only 25 women said they know enough about various schemes.

Sujaya found that : concerning Schemes for carrying out various developmental activities in the village. The women knew that the funds came mostly from the BDO, and the expenditure had to be monitored by the ward Panches in their own areas. The schemes were mostly by way of infrastructural development, such as bridges, roads, school rooms, paving of paths, etc. The women had rather hazy ideas about anti-poverty programs, such as IRDP, JRY, etc. They knew about the Antyodaya\IRDP survey, and how often, serving women were not included in the list. One of the younger women, who was married at 16 and whose husband was missing ("lapata") for several years was full of anger that both she and two widows in her village were not included in the IRDP list. They also knew about the new forms that had come to the Panchayat for surveying the families and were aware that the responsibility for the identification lay with the Panchayat secretary and the ward member. Though IRDP was the biggest employment program for the poor families, the women were not that familiar with the details of the employment opportunities provided under this program. None of them mentioned other employment-oriented anti-poverty schemes such as DWCRA or TRYSEM, though a few mentioned JRY. But overall, their familiarity with employment programs appeared to be much less than with other social development programs. [This is one of the puzzles of the contemporary Panchayat Raj scenario. Similar findings have been arrived at in Karnataka as well, where the most popular schemes with the Panchayat members,

especially the women, were those associated with housing, sanitation, roads, drinking water supply, etc.]

Most of the WMGP's felt that there should be more schemes for 'self employment' 'Schemes for strengthening the Mahila Mandals' ; ' land ownership for women'; ' dairy Development' etc. But the major concern of WMGP's was social security for women. As Sujaya found "At the same time, the women were very conscious of the increasing destitution in the villages as a serious social phenomenon. One woman said very succinctly, that "schemes" may come and go, but social security was very important. They considered the old age pension and widow pension schemes of the Government as very vital and said that "jankaari" (knowledge) regarding these pension schemes was very important for Panchayat members. The women had countless stories to tell of parents who had been left uncared for, financially and emotionally, by their children. In some cases, one parent had died, and these cases were even worse. 'In most cases, the male children had jobs, or property, or both, but they no longer cared for their parents. Many of these destitute women (as well as men) approached the women Panches for help.....Similarly, the women Panches were involved to a great extent, in the cases of maintenance where the husband refused to support the wife and the children. Abandoning wives and entering into marital arrangements with many women was quite common among men in the cultural set-up. Many of the women Panches themselves were either second wives or were married to men who had two wives. There was a lively discussion about specific cases which had come to the attention of these women, where some tricky legal point was involved, such as the cases where the divorce had taken place without any provision for the children. Where there was no cash income, the problem of making the men pay for the upkeep of the wives and their children was also more severe.

3.14 How would you visualize spending Rs. 100,000?

This was a funny question indeed, as many women did not handle cash either at home or at the GP level. Still majority of women came out with responses. 28 WMGP's felt that the money should be exclusively used for welfare of women while 9 felt that it should be used for the welfare of the whole village.

27 WMGP's felt that the money should be used for both i.e. for the welfare of women as well as welfare of village.

6 WMGP's failed to respond.

This clearly shows that women wanted to take a balanced view and even though they had the priority of increasing the resources for the welfare of women, they also know that overall development of village could also benefit the women.

But do women feel that they are better administrators than men ?

Yes, invariably, almost all the WMGP's felt that women are better administrators, because:

1. Women don't consume alcohol
2. Women are generally not corrupt
3. Women are more honest than men
4. Women are more sensitive towards other's problems
5. Women have a better understanding of a situation
6. Women do not discriminate
7. Women are not cunning
8. Women are not selfish like men
9. Women have an aptitude to work collectively. But to do this, women need the following :

a. Women must get rid of their 'sharam'

b. Women must aspire of higher education, and

c. Women must receive proper training.

Section 4

Epilogue

While going through all these responses to the questionaires, one is overwhelmed with clarity with which women have responded. This feeling is same as Sujaya had after watching the role plays performed by WMGP's on video, "The overwhelming impression that viewing these plays leaves one with, is of the deftness and the competence that the women bring into their performances, considering the fact that most of them have had hardly any experience of doing any similar activity. Since the performances are mostly unrehearsed, there are the inevitable gaps and silences in the middle of conversations, but there is also a natural flow and a sense of sequence. Some of the dialogues seem to be very long and protracted, and the issues seem to be laboured at great length, but this also reflects the perceptions of the women regarding the worth and value of discussions and verbal interactions in the attempt to resolve disputes or access services."

While interacting with women members of Gram Panchayats and Block Development Committees as Trainer, as Motivator, as Gender Sensitized (to an extent) person, as a person believing in grass-root level democracy I have mixed feelings. My feelings have become much more intricate as I have seen a band of NGOs climbing on the running wagon. Through this I have reached a state where certain issues are getting crystallized; some of them are listed below:

1. What is the meaning of self-governance? Will Panchayats acquire a position of bodies for Self-Governance or are they going to be mere implementing bodies?

2. Without having control over law and order machinery, how much we can achieve the goal of self-governance?

3. Are Panchayats political bodies or are they developmental programme implementing bodies ? Are we going to use Panchayats to carry out the developmental policies propagated for last 40 odd years or is the system going to provide freedom for the Panchayats to develop its own developmental policies ?

4. What are the instruments for implementing these policies? Are Panchayats going to develop totally new set of instruments for implementing their policies or will they have to depend upon the existing instruments and over a course of time, become 'instruments' themselves?

5. In today's context,the way Panchayats are functioning, how much women would be able to make inroads without compromising with patriarchal values? In any case, women would be in minority in the Panchayats and all the support structure developed by the system, for the Panchayats is deeply engrained in

patriarchal values. With this how much women would be able to carry out the mandate they might receive ? Or will it be a mandate which they will be forced to carry out ?

6. What are the mechanisms for developing collaborative relationships between social organizations (traditional as well as implanted ones) with members of Panchayats? It is again and again found that the traditional social institutions such as *'Jati'* Panchayats or implanted social institutions such as Mahila Mandals are refusing to develop creative relationships with Panchayats. How should we proceed ? Simple answers like 'create awareness amongst women' are not going to suffice.

7. It is experienced that the SC elected members through 'reservation' have become more accountable to 'dominant elements' of the society instead of 'weaker sections' of the society. Through reservation for women in Panchayats, what are we going to achieve ? Will achievements differ from the results of reservation for SC candidates?

8. What kind of environment is required so that women members of Panchayats became a vehicle for struggle for gender equity or equitable distribution of resources ? Do we have a capacity to generate such an environment ? This becomes much more critical in the context of New Economic policies pursued by the National leadership.

9. To act as people's Representatives, a financial cost is involved. Taking into consideration the economic dependence of women in todays context, where and how women leaders would find financial resources to act as 'People's Representatives' ? This becomes more critical in a State like Himachal Pradesh which has a subsistence economy or a State like Karnataka where majority of women have to depend upon daily wages. Our studies have clearly shown that a woman from 'influential class' or a woman from 'totally resourceless families' have been chosen for Panchayats.

10. Lastly, How many NGOs are really committed to create an environment for women's participation in Panchayats with feminist values? Do they really value elected women members of Panchayats or is there a 'class element' involved in the treatment of women members of Panchayats?

    This becomes more critical as many so called big NGOs are holding seminars and conferences in the name of women members of Panchayats and how are they treating these elected women members ? In a recently held National Conference of Panchayat Women, it was found that the Representatives of NGOs were paid a handsome per D.M. in addition to food expenses but the

elected women Representatives of Panchayats were paid a meagre amount towards food expenses ?

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1. Ms Madhu Sarin- Situational Analysis of Himachali Women - SUTRA - 1991
2. Ms C.P. Sujaya - Vibrations - SUTRA - 1994

Part II

A CRITIQUE OF THE HIMACHAL PRADESH PANCHAYAT RAJ ACT 1994 : AN ENABLING INSTRUMENT FOR CREATING PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION?

One can examine the Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act 1994 from the following vantage points:

1. Does the Act propose to devolve, in letter as well as in spirit, functions of local governance to the elected Panchayat Raj Institutions bodies ?

The Preamble to the new Act says that it is meant *"to consolidate, amend and replace the law relating to Panchayats with a view to ensure the effective involvement of the Panchayat Raj Instiutions in the local administration and developmental activities"*. Is *effective involvement* an adequate phrase, does it say everything, does it convey the full intention underlying the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution? Can it be translated to mean the Panchayat Raj Institutions are meant to be an autonomous arm of the Government? Does it reflect the spirit of Article 44 that Panchayats shall be the local units of government? That it shall be the third tier of government? Or does the phrase *"effective involvement"* give the impression that it is still the State Government that will take the initiative in *"involving"* the Panchayats in *"developmental activities"* - as a junior partner, perhaps. In fact, in two places, the Act specifies the role of the Panchayats as that of *"an agent of the State Government"* [sections 82(2) and shall be under *" the general control of the State Government or any other authority appointed by it and shall comply with such directions as may from time to time be given to it"*. ['section 82(4) and 93(4)]. Does not then, the working of the Preamble accurately summarize the approach that is reflected in the individual provisions of the Act? Who is in charge? Who is involving whom?

The Act reproduces Schedule 13 to the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, but says little beyond this [section 11(2)]:

"Notwithstanding anything contained in this Act the State Government may, by general or special order, entrust to the Gram Panchayat preparation of plans and implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice specified in Schedule II."

Schedule II contains a very large number of items --- agriculture, forestry, public distribution system, animal husbandry, poverty alleviation, fisheries --- the list covers almost all the activities and functions of the Government in so far as the rural areas of the State are concerned. It is in the preparation of plans and implementation of schemes that the Panchayats can most actively involve the public. But they need to be clear about the scope of their authority and power. Which aspects of these subjects are to be devolved to the Panchayat Raj Institutions and which aspects are to be retained with the State Government? *This is the crucial question to which the Act does not provide any answer.* It only says that the State Government *may* pass a "general or special order" specifying further details. Note the use of the word "may" and not "shall". Obviously, the process of devolution of powers of governance --- of *preparation of plans and implementation of schemes* --- has not started, the

passing of the Act by itself cannot ensure this. The process is still to begin. There is nothing laid down in the Act as to when this special or general order shall be passed. Will there be one general order covering more than one subject matter or item? Or will the discretion lie with each Department to issue each special order pertaining to the subject matter of the particular Department?

Besides Schedule I, another list of activities termed Schedule I has been appended to the Act. The operative section --- Section II (1) states as follows :

"It shall be the duty of a Gram Panchayat in so far as the Gram Panchayat funds allow to perform within its area the functions specified in Schedule I".

Schedule I contains many items which are common to Schedule II. Apparently, this is an older list which may have existed in some form in the earlier Act. Some of the common items found in both the Schedules are, drinking water/public water supply, health and sanitation, plantation of forests, welfare of Schedules Castes and Tribes, backward classes, family welfare, roads, bridges and public utlities etc. The point to be noted is that the Act has placed constraints on both the Schedules being operatinalised immediately --- in the case of Schedule I, it is subject to the availability of funds, in the case of Schedule II, it has to await the passing of the "general or special order" by the State Government. Till such time there is little that the Panchayat Raj Bodies can do, but they can hasten a decision on either issue by strong lobbying with the State Government.

2. Are the Panchayats envisaged to act as units of local self government or local government or as an extension machinery or out-reach presence of the state/central government?

The delay in framing the Rules and clarifying the position regarding Schedule I and II has created understandable anxiety in the minds of many people who are keen that the Panchayats start activising themselves as early as possible. Not much thought is paid to the larger question of the true role of the Panchayats as the repository of confidence and will of the people. *Decentralized planning means planning from the grassroots, where the needs of the village as a basic unit are to be articulated and made the foundation for planning and allocation of resources. This means that the p[planning model that is prevalent today, which allows a large numbers of national programs --- IRDP, DWCRA, JRY, ICDS, Adult Education, NLM, Non-formal Education, and may others --- are implemented uniformly throughout the 6 lakh villages of the country should be given a second look.*

This is especially relevant for Himachal Pradesh which has a topography, climate and population density that is very different from the rest of the country in most cases. It is the pattern of our village settlements, their isolation, lack of communication etc. which should determine the way that our development programs are

delivered and not a pan-Indian situation. Similarly, in every important sector, health, education, vocational training, agriculture, forestry, road building etc. the status should be analysed with reverence tow hat people possess and what they lack and they try to fill in the gaps. With the increase in literacy that has occured in recent years, for example, Himachal has an ever-increasing number of educated blue-collar and white-collar youth --- both men and women -- who are swelling the registers of the Employment Exchanges. This may not be the case with another state in the country which is much more educationally backward. As an example, Himachal has one of the largest proportions of women self-cultivating farmers in the country. Himachal also has one of the lowest proportions of landless agricultural labour as compared to other states. These are typical features at the State level but even here there are wide differences between the districts and even within the districts.

The altitude and the topography of Himachal determine the climate, the cropping pattern, the occupational structure, the type of employment generation possible, the natural resources available etc.

A genuinely decentralized administration by the Panchayat Raj bodies should take these vital differences into consideration when conceptualizing and implementing development programs. These details can be taken into account when people at the level of the village are involved in the whole process of planning, from collection of data and information onwards. Decentralized planning can be, therefore, a forum for bringing all the local needs and interests into the open and the Panchayats have to be the medium for making process possible. But the Panchayats also have a responsibility to make the planning process transparent and accessible to the general public. Otherwise there would be little difference between the old form of centralized bureaucratic planning done from the capital and the new alternative. For this to happen, the Panchayats should have the necessary flexibility to respond to locale-specific situations and needs. They should also have the freedom to take local decisions. It is not possible to say whether the Himachal Act gives this freedom and autonomy to the Panchayats because it is silent on the scope and type of decentralization which is proposed to be introduced. This can only be spelt out in the Rules and other notifications to be issued in future. But is would be necessary for the Panchayats to reflect on this issue right now.

Besides development administration, the Panchayats have to be involved in resource mobilization. Fund availability is in fact a serious issue. The Gram Panchayat has access to very limited funds in the existing set up as it does not yet have any formula for sharing of resources with the State. However, the Finance Commission set up under Section 98(1) can review the financial position of the Panchayats and make recommendations to the Government on the division of the taxes and other financial resources of the State between it and the Panchayat Raj bodies. It can also make

recommendations on the taxes, duties, tolls and fees which the Panchayats may by themselves collect, appropriate or impose as well as the amount of grant-in-aid that the Government is to make available to these bodies. Section 100 authorizes the Panchayats to impose house tax, profession tax, surcharge on stamp duty, tech *bazaari*, sanitation services fee, water rate etc. However, all these methods of raising revenues is subject to the approval for the Government. The Finance Commission is a creation of the Government and there seems to be no insurmountable barrier to the Panchayats receiving their fair share of resources. But the power given to them to raise taxes will be a very sensitive measure of how the public will view their performance.

3. Does the Act provide mechanisms by which the elected members of the Panchayats can involve representatives of people's organizations in the task of local governance?

One of the dangers facing the Panchayats is the possibility of their turning into closed systems. The Panchayats can legitimately claim that they represent the will of the electorate and that this is sufficient for them to act on their own. The tendency will then be for them not to involve other constituencies and lobbies in every day working. The Act provides for Standing Committees to be constituted at all three levels --- GP, PS and ZP. These Committees are given responsibilities in particular sectors, which may range from finance to social justice to agriculture, and they become the chief instruments of activity and power of the Panchayats. How these committees carry out their duties, how the membership is decided, what powers are given to them etc. are therefore very important questions. *The cooption of outside members on these Standing Committees is a salutary feature of the Himachal Act.* It prevents the Panchayats from becoming a closed system, restricted only to those who came in through the elections. It improves their contact with the general public and makes the running of the Panchayat administration more open and transparent. It also help the Panchayats to tap outside talent in the form of expertise, experience and commitment. *Unfortunately, in the Himachal Act the provisions for co-opting outsiders on the Standing Committees exists only in respect of the Gram Panchayat, and not the Panchayat Samiti nor the Zilla Parishad. This appears to be a deficiency as the two higher levels of the Panchayats set up are responsible for planning coordination of development activities relating to more than one Gram Panchayat / block.*

At the Gram Panchayat, there are to be three Standing Committees all of which have the power to co-opt members from outside, called the Production Committee. Section 23 lays down the details. There is a requirement for a woman member only on the Social Justice Committee. *But the functions of the Standing Committees themselves are to be devolved through a process of delegation of powers by the Gram Panchayat. There is need for greater clarity on this provision. Unless the Gram Panchayat itself is delegated powers in respect of development schemes by the State, under Section 11(2), it cannot*

further delegate functions to the Standing committees. There are two constraints on the authority or the autonomy of the Gram Panchayats to freely exercise their right to choose the individuals they want to co-opt on the Standing Committees. First, the Act lays down that the method of cooption is to be laid down in the Rules. Secondly, the cooption of outside members can be made from farmers' clubs, Mahila Mandals and Yubak Mandals "and other bodies recognised by the Government". So, the recognition of these bodies by the State becomes a crucial factor. It can choose not do so with respect to any particular body, say a cooperative society, or a voluntary organization, a trade union or any other such entity. *So, the method of cooption of the Standing Committees is to be decided by the State Government,* Obviously, this method is to be included as a part of the Rules, and till this is done, the Standing Committees cannot be fully operational.

The Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad should also have similar powers to coopt outside persons on the Committees. so that they can broaden their decision making base and have fruitful interactions wit the other bodies involved in public life and public dealings. Especially at the district level, where consolidation of Panchayat Samiti plans, execution of inter Panchayat Samiti schemes, advising the State Government on matters pertaining to development on a wide range of subjects, etc. is to be carried out by the Zilla Parishad, the expertise of local resource agencies and individuals can help in enriching the process.

At the block level, in addition to the 3 Standing Committees, the Panchayat Samiti has the power to constitute one or more committees to conduct enquiries and prepare reports on subjects relating to Panchayati Raj. Unfortunately, these Committees are to consist only of elected members (Section 87). This section has another provision --- Sub-section (2) --- which authorizes the Samiti to appoint Committees "for any part of the are of a Panchayat Samiti" to look after the execution of any "measures" or works, or to inspect and supervise any institution under the charge of the Samiti. These local area committees are to consist of "persons who are residing within such area". Obviously, this means that persons other than elected members can sit on these Area committees. Such an initiative is welcome, as it has the advantage of involving local persons who may not be associated in any way with Panchayats or with Panchayat politics, but who, as local residents are most closely affected by the works or schemes and have first hand knowledge of the way institutions are run and developmental activities carried out. The Panchayat Samiti, by involving such persons, can hear the authentic voice of the rural public, the concerned citizens, and can make changes in their programmes according to the feed back received from.

Unfortunately, here again, the autonomy of the Panchayats is incomplete, as Section 87(3) lays down that the Constitution, term of office, powers duties and procedures to be followed by the committees shall be laid down in the Bye-laws of the Panchayat

Samiti. According to Section 187(3) the bye-laws can be framed by the Panchayats but they shall not come into force until they have been confirmed by the prescribed authority. Who the "prescribed authority" is, can be known only when the Rules under Section 186 are notified. If the prescribed authority for confirming the bye laws is kept at the lowest level possible, for example, the BDO for the Panchayat Samiti, the Deputy Commissioner for the Zilla Parishad, and the appropriate local official for the Gram Panchayat, the position can still be retrieved somewhat, but if the authority is kept at higher levels, the advantage of having these committees itself would be eroded through delays and other bottlenecks.

4. Does the Gram Sabha have adequate powers vis-a-vis the Gram Panchayat?

The Gram Sabha has been described as "the soul of Panchayat Raj". It is the body that most truly reflects the relationship between the electorate and the elected. It is a unique mechanism that is found only at the Gram Panchayat level and not at the Panchayat Samiti or the Zilla Parishad level. The sense of accountability of the elected members can be tested by a vigilant Gram Sabha. If the Panchayat system is able to evoke and maintain the participation of the villagers at this level, this sense of participation can permeate the entire PR system up to the district/Zilla Parishad.

Unfortunately, in the country as a whole, not much attention is paid to the Gram Sabha. The provisions in the Himachal Act pertaining to the Gram Sabha are the following:

a) The population of a Sabha is between 1000 and 5000. The headquarter of the Sabha as well as the Sabha itself, shall be declared by the State notification. In a Scheduled area, this population criterion can be relaxed. The Government also has the general power to relax this provision, keeping in view the topography of the area.

In Himachal, the area of some of the Gram Panchayats are very spread out, and this comes in the way of holding well attended meetings. Since one Gram Panchayat consists of many hamlets, there could be rifts and local pressures which could prevent cohesion.

b) The State has the power to alter the boundaries and the name of the Sabha without taking its consent. But there has to be a previous *notification of the proposal to do so.*

c) The Sabha has to hold two meetings every year. The Pradhan bears the responsibility for convening these meetings. Not more than 8 months shall elapse between two meetings. One meeting is to be in summer and the other

in winter. The place and the time of the meeting are to be published for general information.

d) One-fifth of the members of the Gram Sabha can requisition the Pradhan to convene a meeting of the Sabha. The D.C., the Panchayat Samiti, or the Zilla Parishad can also ask him to do so.

e) The quorum for the meeting is one-fifth of the total number of the members of the Gram Sabha. For an adjourned meeting, the quorum is one-tenth. *THERE IS NO SEPARATE QUORUM FOR WOMEN.* This means that most of the Gram Sabha meetings will take place without the participation, or with minimal participation of women.

f) The powers and functions of the Gram Sabha in so far as supervision and management of the Gram Panchayat's work are concerned, are not very extensive. They can ask questions and clarifications of the Pradhan and the Up-Pradhan! They *"shall consider...and make recommendations and suggestions"* to the Gram Panchayat on the annual statement of accounts, the administration report, the audit report, its replies, and the development report, besides other matters. [Section 7(2)]. As far as their role in general development is concerned, the Act says that they shall identify beneficiaries, mobilize voluntary labour, render assistance in the implementation of schemes etc. But to what extent the Gram Sabha can make use of these provisions to invoke and sustain the participation of the people in local governance will depend on the relationship between the Gram Panchayat and the Sabha and also on the way the Gram Sabha exerts and asserts itself. Since the Pradhan and Up-Pradhan of the Gram Panchayat are the ex- officio Pradhan and Up-Pradhan of the Gram Sabha as well, the Gram Sabha needs to be conscious of the need to preserve an independent profile.

h) The Gram Sabha has the power to appoint one or more vigilance committees consisting of not less than five persons who are not members of the Gram Panchayat. These committees are to supervise the Gram Panchayat works in the area and to put up reports on these activities in the meetings of the Gram Panchayat. They also have to send them to a "prescribed authority". This is the only case in the entire Act, where the Gram Sabha has the full autonomy to set up these committees without getting approval or confirmation from any other authority. Such vigilance committees are not provided at either the Panchayat Samiti or the Zilla Parishad level. The other striking feature of this provisions is that the members of these committees should not be the elected members of the Gram Panchayat. If the Gram Sabhas can use this provision constructively, and set up vigilance committees consisting of concerned and

public spirited citizens, it can lead to greater involvement of the people in activities of local governance.

The provisions given in Section 7 of the Act describe the duties and powers of the Gram Sabha as well as the authority of the State over it. If the Gram Sabha is to act as a mini-legislature, it should have some definitive powers. But the Act stops short of giving the Gram Sabha the power of approving the statement of accounts etc. and of treating the accounts as final only after they have been formally adopted by the Sabha. Similarly, the Act lays down that the Gram Panchayat shall "give due consideration" to the recommendations and suggestions of the Sabha! But it stops short of saying that the Gram Panchayat is bound to obey the consensus decisions of the Gram Sabha on accounts, general administration, progress on works and other development activities etc. If some objections are raised by the Sabha members on the audit note, for example, is there any way of ensuring that these points are retained or noted by the Gram Panchayat for the purpose of attending to them and reporting on them in the next meeting of the Gram Sabha --- or are they not recorded at all? It appears that the Act has reduced the Gram Sabha to a mere advisory body. It has no handle over the Gram Panchayat. If the Pradhan so wishes, it can be turned into an ineffective paper tiger.

The Act lays down that a minimum of one-fifth of the members can requisition a meeting of the Gram Sabha. On the other hand, the minimum quorum required for an adjourned meeting is exactly half this number --- one-tenth. Generally the people requisition a meeting of the Sabha when it has not been convened for many months and it may be a case of the unwillingness of the Pradhan to do so. The range of population of a Gram Sabha in Himachal is 1000-5000. It means that at least 200 to 1000 signatures are needed to convene a meeting of the Sabha against the will of the Pradhan. On the other hand if the Pradhan wishes to push through certain items in the meeting for which there is no quorum, he only has to adjourn it and then manage to get a much lesser number of people to attend the same.

It is the general experience that the meetings of the Sabha do not evoke any enthusiasm or excitement. The attendance is often very thin, and meetings have to be adjourned for want of the quorum. Women, especially, rarely find the time or the inclination to attend the Gram Sabha. One of the suggestions is to insist on a separate quorum for the women, and to involve the Mahila Mandals and other organizatins to ensure that the women have full information about the Sabha meetings, that the month, date and the venue and especially the time of the day of the meeting are fixed taking into consideration the convenience of the women both from the point of view of their domestic work schedule as well as the agricultural work cycle. Since the area of a Gram Sabha is spread out in Himachal, special efforts are to be made to ensure that the meetings are well attended by both men and

women and that this is treated as one of the most important days of the year in the area.

Section 9 of the Act lays down that "the meeting of the Gram Panchayat shall be public". This needs to be clarified, and the scope of the meeting being a public event needs to be spelt out. The meeting of the Gram Panchayat is to take place at least once a month, but the venue is invariably the office of the Gram Panchayat. It is to be seen whether the meetings cannot be rotated in the different villages falling in the Gram Panchayat. so that the people can have a greater sense of participation in the management of the Panchayats. This sense of ownership and involvement is very important in view of the topography of the State as well as the isolated nature of the hamlets in many areas and districts. Whereas the village, as an individual entity, has a degree of social cohesion, the Gram Panchayat is only an administrative unit and there may not be any strong bonding amongst the various village-constituents. It is very important to create this feeling of closeness and participation in all the villages falling within the jurisdiction of a Gram Panchayat especially the hamlets which are not easily accessible and feel themselves left out.

Section 26 lays down that the Gram Panchayat *"shall"* render such assistance as *may* be prescribed"(!) with regard to the running and maintenance of the schools, dispensaries and hospitals in the area. Here, the open question is, who will run the sub-canter, PHC and other health facilities? What power will the Panchayat Raj Institutions have in the running of schools and other canters in adult and non-formal education? The second part of the question is, even if the Panchayats are given the power to supervise or aid in the management of these facilities, what is the extent of public involvement that they will look for, and whether they have the freedom to do so? All these details will have to await the issue of the "General and special orders" of the Government as well as the main Rules under Section 186.

5. Does the Act betray the intention of the framers to control the Panchayat Raj Institutions functioning?

On the one hand, the inclusion of Schedule I and II gives the impression that the intention is to involve the Panchayats in as wide a range of development activities as can be imagined. Besides these two Schedules, there are various other provisions scattered through the Act which spell out other activities which the Panchayats *can be authorized* to carry out. There are also other provisions which detail the initiatives which the State Government can take in transferring certain assets to the Panchayats. Section 11(4), for example, authorizes the State to transfer to any Gram Panchayat the management and maintenance of forests, waste lands, pasture lands, vacant lands, irrigation work, any public property, the collection of land revenue, etc. The Gram Panchayat can also issue general orders regulating the use of water,

the carrying on of activities deemed to be injurious to public health, the construction of buildings, and other dangerous and offensive trades or practices.

However, the Act makes most of these activities contingent upon the formulation and publication of Rules by the State or the issue of general or specific orders. The bye-laws can be prepared by the Panchayat but are to be confirmed by the prescribed authority. Only those organizations can be included or consulted by the Panchayats which have been approved by the State. The method of cooption is also to be decided by the State. The State can alter the boundaries of the Gram Sabha without consulting the people. The Deputy Commissioner can order the Pradhan to convene a meeting of the Gram Sabha. The reports of the Vigilance Committees have to be sent to the "prescribed authority". A majority of the members can ask in writing, the Pradhan to call a meeting of the Gram Panchayat, but if he does not comply, can go ahead and convene it" with the previous approval of the prescribed authority". The State has the power to add to or to withdraw any function from the Panchayat and take these upon itself. A joint activity of more than one Gram Panchayat has to be carried out in accordance with the Rules. Two or more Panchayats shall if directed to do so by the State, combine to start a school or a dispensary. The Gram Panchayat has the power to draw up a model plan for a village. This has to be approved not only by the Gram Sabha, but also by the State. Once this is done, all building and repair activity in the village is subject to the provisions of the model plan and the approval of the Gram Panchayat. However, the Gram Panchayat cannot take any action against the defaulter without obtaining an order from the SDM. Though any person can make a complaint to the Gram Panchayat against the public misconduct of certain public servants, the Gram Panchayat cannot take any action against him/her even though it has the power to conduct an enquiry in the matter. The Gram Panchayat has to submit the report "along with the prima facie evidence" to the concerned members of the higher bureaucracy. Action is to be taken by these authorities. The Gram Panchayat is to be merely informed of the action taken. Public servants against whom complaints can be made include (Government can extend the list), *patwari*, peon, bailiff, constable, head constable, *chaukidar*, forest guard, *gram sewak*, game watcher etc. (section 16). Section 28 lays down that the Gram Panchayat shall, "if so prescribed and so far as practicable, assist any Government servant in the performance of his duties within its area". The reverse --- what powers the Gram Panchayat possesses over the Government servants who fail to carry out their duties --- has not been touched upon anywhere in the Act. The provisions regarding the jurisdiction of the Gram Panchayat to stop the sale of liquor is subject to the approval of the State.

6. To what extent are the powers of formulation of district plans decentralized to the Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and the Gram Panchayat?

Chapter XII of the Act lays down very basic and minimum parameters of the planning process in the new set up. What is described in the Act does not take us very far and does not provide any of the important details. The process is to start from the Gram Panchayat, which is to prepare a development plan every year and sent it to the Panchayat Samiti. The Panchayat Samiti will consolidate the plans of all the Gram Panchayats in the block and sent it to the Zilla Parishad, who, like-wise, consolidates all the Panchayat Samiti plans as well as those received from the urban bodies and frames a comprehensive plan for the whole district. The Chairman of the Zilla Parishad then sends it to the State Government.

Besides this skeletal framework, the only other provision contained in this chapter is the composition of the District Planning Committee. This body, which is the most important district level mechanism for collection and collation of block-level plans, then refining them before finalizing the Plan, contains MP's, MLA's elected members of the Panchayat bodies/municipalities and representatives of the cooperative/land development banks. No other technical/scientific organization or individual experts are included. But there is a provision that the District Planning Committee shall consult "such organizations and institutions as the Government may by order specify" in preparing the draft development plan. Here again, the autonomy of the Panchayats is left incomplete. The whole process of consultation is dependent on the approval of the prescribed authority. For example, Himachal has three Universities located in different places. They deal with important development subjects such as forestry, animal husbandry, agriculture, horticulture etc. They have complexes situated in many different parts of the Pradesh which attend to many technical issues of local importance. Such institutions must be involved in the planning process so as to gain advantage from the expertise that they possess.

The Himachal Act is also not clear on the involvement of the Panchayat Bodies in the planning process after the district plans reach the State Headquarters. In fact, above the district level, the Panchayats do not seem to have any presence. There is no provision for any State-level body/committee in which the representatives of the different Departments can sit with those of the Panchayats to discuss the problems of coordination likely to arise in the implementation of the plans.

The Act does not specify how the Gram Panchayat will deal with the difficult task of framing development plan on yearly basis for the area under its jurisdiction. Besides the three Standing Committees and the other optional committees it can constitute, the Gram Panchayat has no other mechanism it can call upon to initiate and carry out the task of preparation of the annual plan. This involves collecting information, meeting the representatives of the villages, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the programs as they are implemented at present, deciding the new priorities, etc. This means that the Gram Panchayat office should have a comprehensive set of documents containing all the relevant information about the individual villages. The Act does not provide any information on the

resource position. Against what resource position should the Gram Panchayat prepare their annual plan? Most important, the division of planning responsibilities between the Panchayat bodies and the State departments has not been made. This information is necessary so as to inform the Panchayats about the extent of their own jurisdiction in each sector. The open question that still awaits an answer is whether, in this area, the Panchayats will be able to take on the role of planners and decision makers or whether they will remain as mere implementers.

7. Does the Act pay attention to the need to involve the weaker sections in the administration of the Panchayat Raj Institutions?

The situation with regard to women has been separately presented. It is seen that beyond the stipulated reservation of 30% and the nomination of a woman member in the Social Justice Committee at the Gram Panchayat level, there is no involvement of women in the day to day conduct of work in Panchayat Raj. women's question has also been completely marginalised within the system, by making it a single issue under the social justice umbrella. The fact that women's work, roles, needs and problems are equally, if not more important in productive sectors associated with the Production Committee and the health and education sectors associated with the Amenities Committee is ignored. Women's needs have been reduced to social welfare and social security.

In so far as Scheduled Castes and Tribes are concerned, not a single member of these groups is required to sit on the Social Justice Committee, or any of the other two Committees, though the reservation exists for both groups as stipulated in the Constitution. This omission is all the more glaring when we consider that Himachal has, perhaps, the highest percentage of Scheduled Castes in the country. There is of course the possibility that a member/members of this group may get elected to the Social Justice Committee. Here again, the question or the issue is one of marginalisation versus mainstreaming --- a narrow view or a broad view. The interests of Scheduled Castes, whether one looks at their involvement in agricultural, landbased, off-farm or service occupations or from the view-point of their lack of education on par with the other castes. or their lack of access to health care, cut across the work of all three Committees, and cannot be restricted to the work of the Social Justice Committee alone. In all fairness, these groups should be fairly represented in all Committees. There is the question of how to involve the members of these groups from the larger community outside in the working of the Panchayat bodies. This depends to a very great extent on how the Panchayat conducts itself, how sensitive it is to issues of caste and tribe, how well it would implement the development schemes meant for these organizations representing these groups and interests.

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Political Empowerment Of Women In A Unique Social Context : A Study In Kerala

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Section 1 of this Occasional Paper is based on a study undertaken by Ms.Sreevidya K.R. of the UMA Resource team. This paper traces the historical perspective of the Kerala Women and the State's decentralisation process.

Section 2 consists of the paper prepared by Dr. Radha of the Institute of Management in Government, Thiruvananthapuram and the discussion that ensued at the Seminar organised by the Institute of Social Studies Trust, Bangalore, between 27 - 29 April 1995.

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Section 1

INTRODUCTION

As Kerala heralds a new century, it is also likely to usher in a unique situation, a situation unprecedented in the annals of modern India. While many other parts of India are still on the threshold of an egalitarian development, Kerala is already far ahead in terms of development indicators for women. What is unique about Kerala is its cultural and social heritage contributed by the practices of matrilineality and matrilocality. These practices strengthened the individual status of women in the society. Their privileges over men and property and in the family, under matrilocality were hallmarks of the higher status than that men enjoyed.

Anthropologists are delighted at the positive indicators of development which Kerala has achieved for society at large and women in particular. But today Kerala faces challenges of burgeoning consumerism caused by foreign remittances, increasing migration instinct arising out of lack of employment opportunities, an individualistic attitude as a result of educational exposure, and, a perceptible rise of male dominance which is trying to demarcate spaces for women. This has rather weakened the position of women in society.

Earlier, women in Kerala enjoyed an enviable social status which the women in any other part of the country could never enjoy. The breakdown of the joint family system to the nuclear family is cited as one of the major reasons for the transformation in the power structure. Nuclear family system gave more social dominance to the male. This had its sway in the political field too. It is rather surprising to note that women all over India who were in the forefront of the freedom struggle along with men, were denied the opportunities of a meaningful participation in the political power after independence. This state of affairs continues even after five decades of Independence. The number of women who take to political and social activities is rather low in Kerala despite the fact that they outnumber men in population and are more literate and educationally far ahead. A recent press report states that girls outnumber boys from high school onwards. It has also been pointed out that out of 141 MLA's there are only 8 women in the Kerala State Legislative Assembly; and out of 29 MP's there are only 2 women MP's from Kerala.[1] The Kerala society fertile for male dominance, does not provide a conducive atmosphere for women's participation in politics and administration. The new 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments ensure reservation of one-third seats for women in the 3-tier Panchayat administration and provide for a solution of a distressing situation. This in a way, marks the return of power to women in a compensatory form which was being slowly robbed away by male dominance in the political arena. However, the extent of power, that men folk in Kerala will pass over willingly to their women and how far these women will effectively sustain the impressive indicators to ensure equal political participation and how they will make this participation meaningful are matters yet to be seen.

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1. Surendran, P.K., "Kerala's Educated Women Give Husbands a Complex", The Times of India (Bangalore), 27 July, 1995

1.1 *Kerala: The Model State*

Kerala lies in the South - West corner of India bounded by the mountains of the Western Ghats in the East and washed by the Arabian Sea in the West. Nature is so bounteous that the land of 38,868 sq.km presents a scene of green and luscious vegetation. It is a region ideally suited for human habitation. Today the population of Kerala is 29,098,518 with a growth rate of 14.32 percent. The pleasant climate and the innumerable rivers and canals with perennial water criss-crossing the country contribute to the thick density of population of 749 per.sq.km.

Kerala is the only state in India to have a sex-ratio in favour of women. Women have their own contributions to make it the most literate state. Analysts have consistently found that Kerala stands on a better footing when compared with other Indian states in the matter of literacy, life expectancy and infant mortality. The table below is in itself self explanatory.

Table 1 : Demographic Particulars

Indicators	India	Kerala
Population growth	23.85%	14.32
Density of Population	273 Sq.km	749 Sq.km
Sex Ratio	927 females per 1000 males	1036 female per 1000 males
Literacy	52.19%	89.81%
Female	39.19%	86.17%
Male	64.20%	93.32%
Life expectancy	64 years	70-76 years
Infant mortality	Below 60 per 1000 live births	17 per 1000 live births

*** Source : Competition Success Year Book, 1995**

These demographic indicators are favourable to women. Sociologists who have studied Kerala refer to the 'Kerala Model' as one which offers 'lessons' for policy makers in other parts of the country.[2] Different aspects of Kerala's experience contributed to this phenomenon. The position of women is the single most important determinant. This change contributed to the unique demographic behaviour and the nature of society.

2. Kerala has been in the forefront in enacting many welfare legislations in the fields where women work in large numbers, for eg., as handloom weavers, construction workers, tailors, agricultural workers and as fisherwomen.

In the words of Robin Jeffrey, "In the years after 1920, a new assertive political culture supplanted old Kerala's ways of public conduct. Where many groups had once been servile, large numbers of people became demanding. Where once most people had dealings only with their families, relatives and patrons, they began to organise in far larger numbers over wider areas. Where once lower castes were excluded from particular areas near temples or the house of high caste, free movement and unregulated public contact became normal. So too did public discussions of most issues, including politics in the widest sense. After 1948, hotly contested democratic elections drove politicians and governments to try to provide services and commodities that a vocal, increasingly organised population demanded. In that population, moreover women had accepted roles as workers, salary earners and even grudgingly as politicians. The 'tea-shop'[3] which women labourers were almost as likely to frequent as men, symbolised the changed conditions. Here as important as the food was the company, the conversation and the newspaper".[4]

Government programmes encouraged parents to educate girls also and this improved the quality of life in family and in society at large. The age of marriage for women rose and fertility fell, at the same time health facilities improved, mortality declined and people saw a need for fewer children. The increased health awareness among people and more scientific and modern health programmes sponsored by the government improved public health and controlled contagious diseases. An improved understanding of their own health also helped them extract services (health and family planning including birth control information and devices) from government.

Overview of the State

Kerala is a land of contrasts. The contrast is stark as social elements of yesterday and today and ways of life centuries apart are found juxtaposed. The juxtaposition is indeed fascinating. It is unique, yet paradoxical. When women the world over were subjugated, Kerala could take pride in a society that treated her equally, gave her equal education, gave equal property rights and above all gave her the freedom to make the choice of marriage and family.

This tradition continued for 700 years until the British gained entry into this part of the country. The first signs of missionary zeal were evident. It was British hegemony that merged the isolated Kerala with the life of India. Social life began

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3. D. R. Mankekar, noted journalist, elevated the 'tea shop' and called them the 'coffee houses' - an institution where public opinion is moulded ... the focal point in the village.

4. Robin Jeffrey, *'Politics, Women and Well Being'* Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 186-200

to change under the impact of English education and Western ways of thought. This was particularly seen in the emerging patterns of marriage and family.

Right to hold lands was the prerogative of the upper classes. Most of the land in Kerala was owned by the Brahmins or chieftains (all *Nayars*) or aristocratic high caste families. The landlords were called *janmis* who were all powerful. They subletted their lands to *Nayar* tenants who in turn subletted it to other castes for tilling. It is in this context that social gradation was marked and the *janmis* (master) enforced his will on the tenants to create subservience (slave or *'adiyan'*)

The change in occupational patterns had a direct bearing on the caste system. The ordinary villager went out in search of jobs which emancipated him from bondage and also exposed his family to external influences.

Caste was the main support of feudal institutions. The caste system that prevailed in Kerala was different from the other parts of India. Apart from the common division into high and low castes as in the rest of India, castes were also divided on Patrilineal and Matrilineal lines. Practice of caste system revolved around three principles of Untouchability (touch taboo), unapproachability (approach taboo) and unseeability. A *Nambuthiri* who belonged to the high caste kept a distance of 6 ft. from a *Nair*, 24 ft. from a Tiya, 36 ft. from a *Kammalan* and 72 ft. from the *Nayadi*. A similar gradation existed among *Nairs* and *Ambalavasis* from the lower castes. The person touched by a lower caste underwent a number of purificatory ceremonies. The caste system was rigid because the lower castes were prohibited from entering temples. Their women were forbidden from wearing clothes which reached beyond the knee and above the waist. Certain ornaments, musical instruments, riding an elephant and living in tiled houses were also forbidden. Any dereliction from this would result in being beaten up. Thus intercaste subordination was universally accepted.

This rigidity was beginning to change from the early 20th century. Sri.Narayana Guru pioneered efforts to create a new social order with the message of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God'. "Sri.Narayana's strategy was not a mere nibbling at the fringe of the caste structure, but a direct onslaught on the very sanction of caste orthodoxy."[5]

When orthodox opinion hardened against untouchability, many threatened to leave the Hindu fold. Even Dr.Ambedkar who championed the cause of Harijans is said to have taken a decision to lead the Harijans for conversion to Islam only to save themselves from the segregational atrocities of the Hindu fold. Even the places of worship were shut against the Harijans. The then Maharaja of Travancore,

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5. Puthenkalam, *S.J., 'Marriage and Family in Kerala', : with Special Reference to matrilineal Castes,* Canada : Journal of Comparative Family Studies, University of Calgary, 1977. p. 22.

Sri.Chithira Thirunal, was bold enough to allow the Harijans to enter the temples through his historical proclamation of temple entry in the year 1936. This marked the end of the practice of untouchability in that part which constituted Travancore State.

The ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood imbibed and inspired by the English education were seen as the prime reason for arousing social consciousness. Thus "a movement from inherited achieved status began, a movement from the inter-dependence of castes to the competition of individuals, from traditional authority to modern bureaucracy".[6] An independent India inherited a Kerala devoid of the age old matrilineal system. Nevertheless this contributed to the unique culture which placed the women in a high position.

1.2 Matriliny: The unique experience of Kerala

Vasco-da-Gama landed at Calicut in 1498 and found Kerala divided into dozens of rival principalities. But the region had an ancient unity. According to Brahminical legend, the creation of Kerala resulted from the banishment from India of the God Parasurama.[7] The legend, attempts to justify some of the most important features of a traditional society in Kerala - the hold of the high caste Hindus on the land, the Matrilineal system of the *Nayars* and their relationship with the other castes.

Matrilineal system or the *marumakkatayam* rested on the pre- dominant rights women possessed in the family. Descent and succession to property were traced through females. The mother formed the stock of descent. Kinship as well as rights to property was traced through females and not through males. Women had always been recognised as having independent rights.

Under *Marumakkatayam* "Marriage was, in theory at any rate, a union by affection, an ideal towards the attainment of which civilised societies are still eagerly looking forward. Marriage in Malabar, for the woman as a party to the contract stood in the same position with man".[8] *Marumakkatayam* literally meant in heritance by sister's children as opposed to sons and daughters. The wives and children belonged to a different family and had no rights in the property left by the

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6. Robin Jeffrey *' Decline of Nair Dominance'*, Vikas Publishing House, 1976.

7. Parasurama reclaimed his land with a throw of an axe from Cape Comorin to Gokarna. The sea receded and Kerala was formed. To populate this land, he introduced a special race of Brahmins (*Nambudiris*) and give them absolute ownership of land and unique customs and a special race called *Nayars* to act as bodyguards. He bestowed on them the matrilineal system of family and inheritance.

8. Balakrishnan, P.V., *'Matrilineal system in Malabar,* Kannur : Satyavani Prakasham, 1981.

husband or father. This was based on the matrilocal joint family called the *tharavad*. All members of the *tharavad* descended from a common female ancestor but the management of *tharavad* affairs was bested in the eldest male member, the *karanavar*; the system was matrilineal not matriarchal. The property and assets were held in common by all members and no individual could claim his/her share of the joint property. The junior members enjoyed certain rights and remedies like

1. Right to succeed to the Management

2. Right to be maintained by the *Karanavar*

3. Right to object to improper administration of property

4. Right to bar an adoption

5. Right to get a share at any partition.

Each woman was visited by her husband at night. The male members of her own *tharavad* similarly went out at night to visit their wives. Marriages were contracted and ended with considerable ease. A man negotiated with a woman's *karnavar*, obtained the woman's consent and presented her with a cloth. This was called *sambandham* or union. Either the man or the woman could end the *Sambandham* (union) with little formality. Impartibility was an essential feature of the *marumak-katayam*, system. There could be no partition without the concurrence of all the members of a *tharavad* by which *tharavads* could claim very long lineage and ancestry.

End of Matriliny...

The social and political change resulted from the impact of a cash economy, western style of education, improved communication and a British inspired system of law on the complex social structure changed this Indian princely state. *Tharavads* like many family corporations had a natural tendency towards disintegration with the progress of social evolution. A *Nair* woman who lived with her people had a right to maintenance in her *Tharavad* property. But she needed many more things besides maintenance and the *Tharavad* was not legally bound to provide her with all of them. She looked to her husband for the satisfaction of many of these needs. As the century progressed, her reliance on her husband increased. Thus their relationship, formal under the old matrilineal organisation, became more personal.

The matrilineal family organisation gave rise to conflict between two loyalties, the matriarchal and the matrimonial. "The *Tharavad* huddled together as a family a number of distant relatives not necessarily drawn to each other by any bond of natural affection. It made home life impossible, for the father was a casual visitor,

and the mother and children were but units in a heterogeneous flock, dependent on a practically irresponsible guardian, who from the mere accident of his being the eldest of the flock, was expected to regard every member with impartial love and to prefer their interest to his own".[9] The Madras *Marukamakkatayam* Act of 1933 was "an Act to define and amend in certain respects the law relating to marriage, guardianships, interstate succession, family management and partition, applicable to the Marumakkattayam Law of inheritance". The *Madras Marumakkattayam Act,* 1933 did away with the matrilineal joint family. Every adult member became entitled to claim his or her share of properties of the *tharavad.* A wife was made the legal heir to all her husband's self-acquired property'.

At about the same time, there was a recognition of a public *Sambandham* as a legal marriage and the man became the legal guardian of his wife and children. Also by 1922 the process of subcaste fusion was almost complete. Growth of social assertiveness and political aspirations among the deprived classes hastened this process. Lower castes threatened to convert to Islam and Christianity and some to atheism and Karl Marx. The missionaries, the independence movement and the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) movement acted as catalysts. People wanted a change even in political governance.

Matrilineal system in Kerala served as a vital force in society uninterruptedly for centuries. Modern concepts of individualism, resistance, political and economic changes led to its withdrawal from the social plane, eventually leading to its decay.

1.3 Women and Party Dynamics

Political activity in Kerala is always very intense and lively. The fate of a government is largely determined by the people, who have a higher degree of political consciousness. "Though many people identify politics with political parties, politics has entered the day-to-day life of people including those who think that they have no politics".[10]

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9. This is a quote from the Malabar Marriage Commission's Report which was published towards the end of 1891. The deliberations of the Commission led to the passing of Act IV, 1896 entitled "An Act to provide a form of marriage for persons following the Marumakkatayam or Aliyasanthanam Law".

10. K. Sharadamoni, : *"Kerala: Society and Politics"*, International Congress on Kerala Studies, Thiruvananthapuram : Institute of Management in Government, p.41 (From Women's Policy Research Advocacy Unit Library, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore).

Yet, women are conspicous by their absence in Kerala politics except as voters. Only a miniscule number are elected to the Parliament and State Legislature. At the local level, there are a significant number of women in the decision making bodies. This is attributable to the reservation policy in local elections which mandatorily brings in women. Social background of these women who have taken up positions in the last local bodies is indeed impressive. The last District Council elections brought 474 woman members.[11] Out of the 372 woman interviewed, most of them read 3 newspapers a day. Widespread literacy combined with exposure to communication media implies that members are well-informed about public affairs. Inspite of an inherent, conducive environment for political growth of women, why they have failed to make an impact of their own in societal development and administration is a matter to be studied carefully.

One of the reasons cited for this unpleasant trend is that men have dominated the political scene and observers feel that "patriarchy has come back with a vengeance". Women shun politics condemning it as dirty and an expensive game run by men. Moreover the Party leadership is vested with a male who enjoys patronage, money and the selection of candidates for office. A political party will field a women only if it is assured of positive results. Most often women get a berth in the party only because of their prominent connections in the political world. An example was the former Minister of State in the Communist State Government of Kerala Smt.K.R.Gauri. But even her story proved that the communists too were reluctant to allow a woman into the highest level of the party. In the last elections, the party projected her as the prospective Chief Minister in their election campaigns. But after the elections, in which the party had secured a majority, it conveniently sidelined her.

This act invited the wrath of many people, as it was only a political strategy to attract women voters. Also the leftist parties had neglected mobilisation and organisation of women on their special issues in the past. Their lack of concern for organising women on special issues cannot be attributed to the male leadership of the parties, but to the fact that the leadership is adhering to the leftist idology.[12] But a noticeable fact is that these parties have mass bases among workers and peasants. Women are more visible at this level of the hierarchy.

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11. B.S. Khanna, *Panchayat Raj in India (Rural Local Self Government : National Perspective and State Studies)*, New Delhi : Deep and Deep Publications, 1994, p. 202

12. Chaya Datar, "The Left Parties and the Invisibility of Women : A Critique", *Teaching Politics*, vol. 10, Annual Number, 1984 (From Women's Policy Research Advocacy Unit Library, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore).

Kerala has always been affected by political instability. Between 1956 and 1994, the state witnessed 10 elections and 15 ministries. Political parties are taking refuge in caste/community denominations to stay in power. "In the choice of candidates, the voting strength of different caste/religious groups was always considered by all political parties. Now they have become independent forces, able to play the number game and with the ability to instil in an increasing number of people the desire to have a caste/religious identity.[13]

Added to the pressure of fighting a lone battle to gain entry, the woman is also faced with the competing forces of communalism. Robin Jeffrey observes that the pressures working against women's public political activity are as great in Kerala as elsewhere in India. Thus, out of choice, women prefer to do something else that will give them more security and stability. That is why we see a large number of women concentrated in the service sector, more so in the lower cadres. This, to many observers, gives the impression that people have drawn invisible spaces and demarcated mobility of women saying, "thus far and no further".

Men have become so domineering that, more often to counter competition they indulge in the ugly game of character assassination. They usually subject women to humiliation and ridicule. An incident narrated at the ISST seminar is a glaring example.[14] At a Panchayat meeting, one woman got up to say 'priority' should be given to the issues concerning women and the Malayalam equivalent of the word she used for priority was *'munthukam'* (*'Mun'* in a certain context means front and *'thukam'* means weight) One male member retorted lewdly, "even otherwise you have a lot of *munthukam*".

The retort was ridiculous in the sense that the male member was referring to the bodily features of the lady. The ridicule is so atrocious that one Panchayat President even put forth a proposition to measure the capability of the prospective elected women representatives. He stated that a woman should contest elections only, if she can climb a coconut tree. Such primitive attitudes still persists. Women distance themselves from this denigration in political life with its fall in public morality, corruption, infighting and intrigues, dishonesty and patronage, not to speak of money and muscle power.

Women, over the last two decades did not move towards raising any crucial political issues. They did not form a perspective of their own and their relation to the power

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13. ibid. no, 10, p. 42

14. Paper presented by Dr. Radha of the Institute of Management in Government, Thiruvananthapuram, at the Seminar organised by the Institute of Social Studies Trust, Bangalore, April 1995.

equations. The oncoming Panchayat elections are based on the reservation policy which will mandatorily bring in not less than 33.33% of women into the decision making bodies. The political parties have once again swung into action to cash in on the situation. Many political parties have taken up training programmes apart from several voluntary organisations like the Kerala Sahitya Shastra Parishad. They have recently initiated several training sessions for Panchayat members, particularly women. This may be a political strategy, but nevertheless it is going to bring in a change in the political scenario of the State.

The elections are overtly political with all parties encouraging women to further their interests. Finally she has been given a choice, but with the unique background and modern challenges, the women have an uphill task to judiciously prioritise their needs to further development of the society at large and the women in particular. Since there is already the mandate regarding the reservation percentage, one-third of the total number of elected members in the panchayat municipal administration will certainly be women. But that alone is not enough. The constitutional mandate in favour of women casts high responsibilities on them which inter-alia include purging the malodorous political field, withering down the intensity of corruption and making the administration beneficial and subserving to common good.

The new experiment of substantial participation of women in politics and administration should help create at least among them an awareness about the democratic process in our country. Almost all welfare activities including those relating to women and children which were hitherto being carried out by the state have now become the responsibilities of the panchayats under the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act 1994. A situation of taking unilateral policy decisions touching upon women behind their back will not occur any more .

Though the Panchayat Raj Act does give sufficient backing to the women to explore the political field which is hitherto dominated by menfolk, it is doubtful whether our society will show the maturity to accept them as policy makers and to provide them with necessary moral backing to make the concept of democracy meaningful. But it is hoped that the vigilant woman members will not betray the Constitutional aspirations reposed in them and projected through the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution.

The following tables show the number of women to be elected into the three tier Panchayat system in the coming elections.

Table 2(a) : Number of Women to be Elected to the Gram Panchayats

Name of Zilla	Total Seats	Women	SC	ST	SC Women	ST Women
Thiruvanan-thapuram	949	341	119	6	35	-
Kollam	848	302	114	1	39	-
Pathanamthitta	521	186	75	3	17	-
Aalapuzha	744	273	93	-	22	-
Kottayam	756	274	75	8	5	2
Idukki	494	181	76	25	17	6
Ernakulam	890	319	100	-	14	-
Trishur	1066	389	138	1	40	-
Palakkad	950	346	153	16	57	6
Malapuram	1110	398	107	2	12	-
Kozhicode	856	311	86	1	11	-
Wayanad	270	98	9	49	-	22
Kannur	856	309	69	13	-	1
Kasargod	410	151	42	11	5	3
Total	10720	3878	1256	136	274	40

Source: Directorate Of Panchayat Raj, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992

Table 2(b) : Number of Women to be Elected to the Block Panchayat

Name of Zilla	Total Seats	Women	SC	ST	SC Women	ST Women
Thiruvanan-thapuram	132	47	17	-	5	-
Kollam	134	49	18	-	5	-
Pathanamthitta	78	29	12	-	3	-
Aalapuzha	149	41	14	-	2	-
Kottayam	105	39	10	1	-	-
Idukki	72	26	11	4	3	-
Ernakulam	138	49	15	-	-	-
Trishur	161	60	19	-	2	-
Palakkad	132	46	22	3	9	1
Malapuram	162	59	15	-	1	-
Kozhicode	125	45	14	-	2	-
Wayanad	36	13	1	6	-	3
Kannur	106	38	7	2	-	-
Kasargod	53	20	4	1	-	-
Total	1583	564	179	17	32	4

Source: Directorate Of Panchayat Raj, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992

Table 2(c) : Number of Women to be Elected to the Zilla Panchayat

Name of Zilla	Total Seats	Women	SC	ST	SC Women	ST Women
Thiruvanan-thapuram	25	9	3	-	1	-
Kollam	25	9	3	-	1	-
Pathanamthitta	15	5	2	-	1	-
Aalapuzha	21	7	2	-	1	-
Kottayam	21	7	2	-	1	-
Idukki	15	5	2	1	1	-
Ernakulam	24	8	2	-	1	-
Trishur	25	9	3	-	1	-
Palakkad	25	9	4	-	2	1
Malapuram	25	9	2	-	1	-
Kozhicode	25	9	2	-	1	-
Wayanad	15	5	1	3	-	1
Kannur	24	8	1	-	-	-
Kasargod	15	5	1	-	-	-
Total	300	104	30	4	12	1

Source: Directorate Of Panchayat Raj, Thiruvananthapuram, 1994

1.4 *The Thorny Path to Decentralisation*

Kerala was one of the first states to initiate moves towards political and administrative decentralisation. The process, nevertheless, was one of intense activity in the evolution of the Kerala Panchayat Act 1994.

The Administrative Reforms Committee appointed by the State Government in 1957, headed by Sri.E.M.S. Namboodiripad had recommended strengthening of Panchayats. This was seen as a viable and basic unit of administration and development at the panchayat level. Reconstitution of taluk and block was envisaged to facilitate the combination of the revenue and development function at the taluk level. In the District, the Committee wanted the District Council to be advisory in function and that all development departments should work under it. The recommendations of the committee were introduced as the Kerala Panchayat Bill and the District Council Bill, but could not be enacted as law as the legislature was dissolved.

In 1960, the then new government introduced the Kerala Panchayat Union council and Zilla Panchayat Bill. Here the Block Panchayat was to be the basic unit of planning and development. They would have an elected Panchayat Union Council to carry out developmental activities. The District level would have an advisory Zilla Parishad. Again, this did not create an impact because the Government fell out of power.

In 1967, the Ministry headed by Sri.E.M.S. Namboodiripad introduced the Kerala Panchayat Raj Bill 1967. The Bill contemplated a two tier system - the Panchayat at the basic level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. The select council that studied this bill had recommended major modifications in the functions and power of the Zilla Parishad, to be called District Councils. The Bill could not become law as it lapsed in August 1970 when the legislative Assembly was dissolved.

The Achuta Menon Government in 1971, then introduced the Kerala District Administration Bill which had incorporated the Select Committee recommendations. Even this Bill lapsed as the government fell. However, an attempt to revive it was taken up in 1978 by the A.K.Antony Ministry. The structure resembled the 1971 Bill and with certain modifications. The Bill was passed in the legislature in 1979 and received Presidential assent on 18th May 1980. At the same time E.K.Nayanar's government came to power. They made no effort to implement the Act.

Every Bill put forth in the history of decentralisation in Kerala envisaged the two tiers which would have executive functions at the District and lower levels. The third tier was invisible as it would be only advisory in nature. The Kerala government commissioned a study of the defects of the 1979 Act headed by V.Ramachandran.

The report entitled "Report on the Measures to be taken for Democratic Decentralisation at the District and Lower Level" was submitted in 1988. Amendments were proposed to 37 sections and 33 schedules in the Act. The report also suggested reservations for SC & ST and 30% of the seats for women. Consequently elections were held to the District Council in 1990. For two and a half years District Councils were in existence and these bodies were dissolved.[15]

Kerala was often the scene of unstable political situations. As governments in power which wanted to initiate the process of local governance fell, and as they were reluctant to share power with the local bodies - the path to decentralisation was ridden with ambiguities and non-committal attitudes. At this juncture came the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, mandating the creation of Panchayats at three levels in all districts in the country. In March 1994, the State Government introduced the Kerala Panchayat Raj Bill 1994. The Bill was passed with substantial changes taking into consideration of about 3500 amendments suggested by the Legislative Assembly. The Kerala Panchayat Raj Act 1994 came into force on May 22, 1994 repealing the District Administration Act of 1979.

The new Act conformed to the mandatory provisions of the Constitution. It is proposed to increase the Gram Panchayats to 1093 from 1001 and 152 Block Panchayats to co-exist with rural development blocks and 14 District Panchayats in Kerala. The powers and functions of the Panchayat at each of these levels are listed in detail which include 126 items for the Gram Panchayat, 29 items for Block Panchayats and 80 items for district panchayats. Gram Sabhas are to be held regularly which will mobilise community efforts. The new Act will be seen in action only from September 1995 when elections to all three tiers will be held.

1.5 Gram Panchayats in Kerala

At present, Kerala has a one tier system of Panchayat. There are 1001 Gram Panchayats in the State covering 1219 villages and 206.82 lakh of rural population. Elections to these Panchayats were last held in 1987. The Panchayat had been entrusted with the responsibility for both obligatory civic and discretionary developmental functions. The obligatory civic functions relate to expansion and maintenance of local roads and works, lighting of streets, drainage and sanitation, provision of drinking water, prevention of epidemics, control of offensive and dangerous trades, maintenance and improvement of certain irrigation works. The discretionary functions relate to socio- economic development schemes, programmes and activities concerning education, public health, social welfare, agriculture,

15. None of the responsibilities which could have been entrusted with the District Councils was virtually given to them. The District Councils which came to power, full of sound and fury, were reduced to toothless organs. The reluctance to give up power in favour of the District Councils was rampant ever since the induction of the Councils.

animal husbandry, public works and village industries. Each Panchayat has set up five Standing Committees. The new Act stipulates that at least one member of the Social Justice Committee should be a woman.

The main sources of the income of the Panchayat are through taxes (compulsory and optional), statutory grants, non-statutory government grants and loans. On the basis of size of their respective income Panchayats had been classified as:

a) Special grade Panchayats having an income of more than Rs.1.75 lakh
b) Grade I Panchayats having an income between Rs.1 lakh to Rs.1.75 lakh
c) Grade II Panchayats having an income between Rs.50,000 to Rs.1 lakh
d) Grade III Panchayats having an income less than Rs.50,000

Table 3 : Zilla Panchayat Bifurcation in Kerala

Name of Zilla	No. of Taluk	No. of Blocks	Panchayat Grade Distribution				
			Special Grade	Grade I	Grade I	Grade III	Total
Thiruvanan thapuram	4	12	36	41	7	-	84
Kollam	5	13	45	25	1	-	71
Pathanamthitta	5	9	22	30	2	1	55
Aalapuzha	6	12	20	41	9	1	71
Kottayam	5	11	28	36	8	1	73
Idukki	4	8	17	22	11	1	51
Ernakulam	7	15	34	38	14	-	86
Trishur	5	17	49	40	9	-	98
Palakkad	5	12	20	39	30	2	91
Malapuram	4	14	18	28	47	2	95
Kozhicode	3	12	22	31	24	-	77
Wayanad	3	3	13	9	3	-	25
Kannur	3	9	18	40	25	2	85
Kasargod	2	4	6	15	16	-	37
Total	61	151	348	435	206	10	999

Source: Directorate Of Panchayat Raj, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992

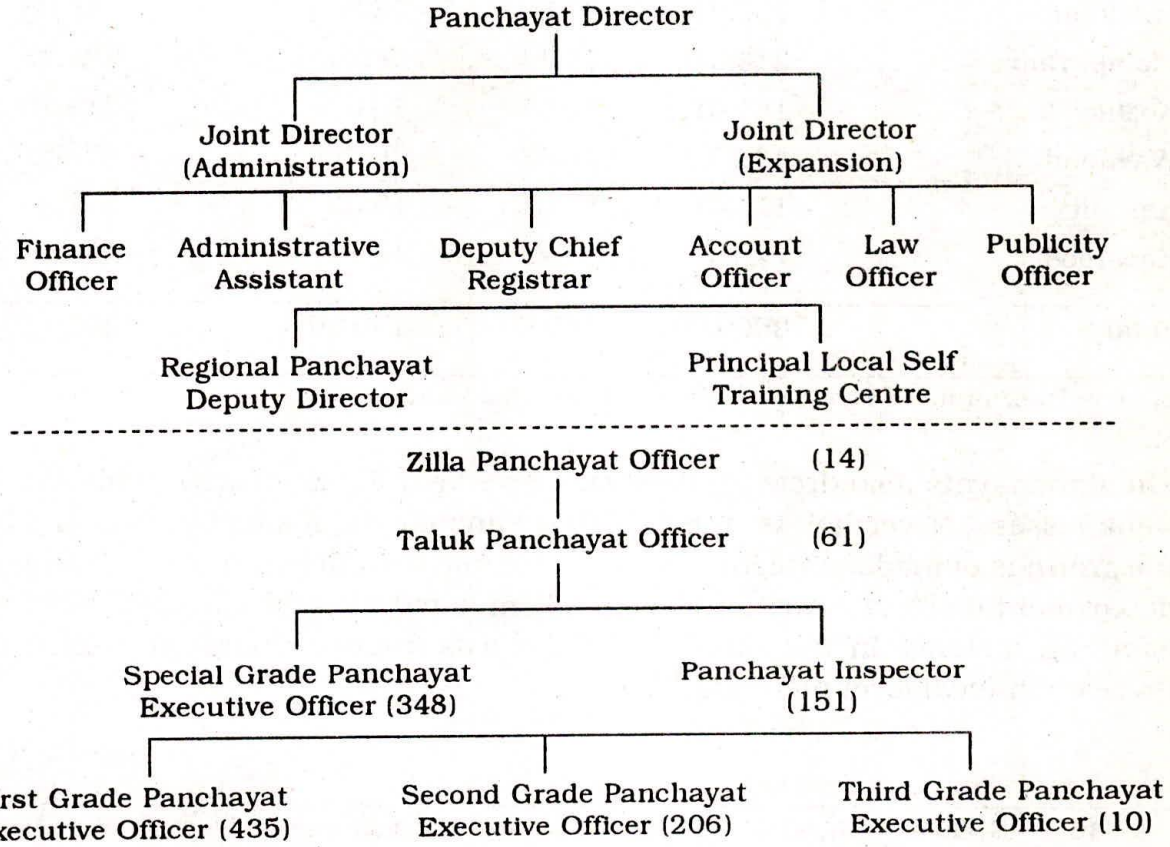
The government grants are distributed among Panchayats keeping in view this classification.

Table 4 : Panchayat Tax Grant

Name of Zilla	Total Collection	Amt. due to Panchayat	25% to Govt.	75% Panel Share	Panchayat Amt. 1994-95	Zilla Area	Exp. for 1 sq.km
Trivandrum	3713000	3493562	873390	2620172	2039.25	1529549	750.0
Kollam	5629000	5296326	1324082	3972244	2426.55	2318830	955.61
Pathanamthitta	6084000	5724436	1431109	4293327	2657.28	2506265	943.17
Aalapuzha	6338000	5963424	1490856	4472568	1250.94	2610898	2087.17
Kottayam	9930000	9343137	2335784	7007353	2153.91	4090596	1899.15
Idukki	6958000	6546782	1636696	4910086	5059.23	2866300	566.55
Ernakulam	10402000	9787242	2446810	7340432	2132.64	4285034	2009.26
Trishur	9035000	8501032	2125258	6375774	2901.54	3721908	1282.74
Palakkad	12762000	12007766	3001941	9005825	4369.51	5257216	1203.16
Malapuram	13399000	12607119	3151780	9455339	3399.23	5519620	1623.79
Kozhicode	9996000	9405235	2351310	7053925	2149.68	4117778	1871.99
Wayanad	6074000	5715027	1428757	4286270	2091.54	2502140	1196.31
Kannur	12895000	12132905	3033226	9099679	2796.05	5312001	1899.82
Kasargod	8161000	7678685	1919671	5759014	1904.94	3361865	1764.81
Total	121376000	114202678	28550670	85652008	37382.29	50000000	

There is an Executive Officer for all grades but together they are under the Executive Officer of the State Civil Service.

Table 5 : Officials in the Panchayat Set-up



Source : Directorate of Panchayat, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992

Here the Government exercised substantial degree of control as it closely monitored the functioning of the Panchayats. It could supercede or dissolve a Panchayat on specified grants.

In order to enable the Panchayats to take up schemes of local relevance on their own, a provision in the state budget is set up, as untied funds for Panchayats.

Table 6 : Zilla Level Untied Funds Sanctioned for Panchayats (in lakhs)

Name of Zilla	General Sector	Special Plan	SC/ST/OBC Plan	Total
Thiruvananthapuram	165.71	71.56	11.56	248.83
Kollam	128.94	66.64	2.58	198.16
Pathanamthitta	105.90	38.60	4.29	148.79
Aalapuzha	145.17	58.74	3.03	206.94
Kottayam	140.64	47.52	9.85	198.01
Idukki	100.91	31.49	24.85	157.25
Ernakulam	168.71	63.55	3.84	236.10
Trishur	189.11	84.73	5.84	279.68
Palakkad	190.21	85.88	12.54	288.63
Malapuram	210.04	72.14	9.27	291.45
Kozhicode	161.01	50.95	7.16	219.12
Wayanad	44.08	10.53	28.05	82.66
Kannur	172.41	35.95	13.00	221.36
Kasargod	77.16	31.72	14.14	123.92
Total	2000.00	750.00	150.00	2900.00

Source: Directorate Of Panchayat Raj, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992

The Panchayats also drew up their own Five Year Plans. These plans had several weaknesses. Nevertheless, the fact that Panchayats, instead of drawing back on the grounds of inadequate information base and insufficient technical support from departmental officials, went ahead and formulated their development plans was, in itself, an advance in the sense that there was intense desire on their part to be involved in local level planning.[16]

16. I.S. Gulati, *Panchayati Raj and Development*, Muvattupuzha : Msgr. Thomas Nedumkallel Memorial Committee Lecture , 1994

The State Government has also involved all the elected bodies in the state in the 8th Plan exercise. The new Kerala Panchayat Raj Act reserves not less than 33.33% of seats for women in all the three tiers of the Panchayats. Also it provides for a Gram Sabha. The Act also stipulates the mandatory setting up of the State Finance Commission, which will recommend and devolve the funds/financial power allocated by the State legislature. The new Act also stipulates the appointment of a State Election Commissioner for Superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls and conduct of elections to the Panchayats.

The District Council elections were last held in 1991. Members were elected directly to, from territorial constituencies on the basis of adult franchise. 10% was reserved for SC or their population whichever is higher and one seat for ST. For women it was not less than 30%. In the first elections, the actual number of successful candidates belonging to these classes was even higher than the reserved quota as several candidates had won in the general constituencies as well.

The unpleasant inclusion to this body was MLA and MPs who enjoy the dual membership of a person in executive and decision making bodies. He could nominate a member of his area. "This has not been received favourably since this may lead to over centralisation in the democratic decision making process and would be detrimental to the emergence of a vibrant local leadership".[17] Also this was a keenly contested election between Left Democratic Front and the United Democratic Front securing 321 and 150 seats out of 474 respectively. Also the District Collector who was designated as the Chief Executive Officer was provided with a Deputy Collector as Secretary nominated by the government. The District Councils were dissolved after two years. Reasons cited for this faltering progress to decentralisation were the unstable coalition governments and their lack of commitment to give up part of their powers, the overbearing attitude of the bureaucracy, inadequate co- ordination between the Panchayats and the Municipalities and the absence of Gram Sabha for grass-root participative democracy.

Several of these shortfalls are taken care of in the new Act. But the details of the Act are still under review and preparation. Elections to all the tiers are to be held in September as per the government's notification. The success of the new system is still debatable and how far the women will make a mark in the new system is yet to be seen.

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17. K.R. Sastry, "Kerala Panchayat Raj Act Without Substance", *Economic and Political Weekly,* vol. 30, no. 30, 29 July, 1995.

1.6 A Profile of Some Women Members (Based on Field Study conducted in June 1995)

Smt.Santhanam Valli, at 50, is the Mahila Samaj Union President at the Block Level in Vattiryoorkav Panchayat. There are 12 Blocks in Trivandrum with 32 Mahila Samajams. She is a lady of grit and determination. Her immense work stands witness to it. With a good knowledge about the various schemes, she has procured for her Block all the benefits that the Government has to offer. On her own initiative, she has set up an umbrella assembling unit and Mushroom cultivation for the poor women members of her jurisdiction (she has in her jurisdiction 4 Wards).

Today she cries out for more funds to sustain her unit. She says 'help me see these poor women economically independent'. She is of the opinion that, the Government is not serious about their commitments. Once elections are over, they turn a Nelson's eye to our problems. She is determined to make these women independent, for then their position within their family and in society will change. No more will they have to depend on their husbands for money. She fears a backlash because the women then will be left to fend for the family, yet, to her it seems better than being in the receiving end.

Smt.Ayesha Bibi, of Pothankod Panchayat is however enthusiastic to contest again. Her party is already preparing to field her. However, she would do it only if her husband consents. She is a very articulate woman, who, claims to have done much for her ward. But people are not ready to take her claims in their face value. The levels of education being high in the state, an articulate woman like her is still looked down by the people only because she has not completed her schooling. She is happy with the work she has done. She faces no inequality at the meeting venue as she proudly says that she is also respected and her views are given due weight. She was instrumental in making the first round of the Literacy Programme a success. She remembers with nostalgia the happiness in seeing the transition of many from darkness to light as she says 'Knowledge is Power'. She herself is well informed about Government policies and programmes through the media. She had contested for the first time and the response was very encouraging. People are extremely supportive of her. The success, she says, "depends on their continued support and patronage".

Smt.Savithri Amma, at 55, is of the opinion that the Gram Sabhas are a failure for she says, people's pre-occupations have become so important that community affairs have taken a backseat. She is from the Vattiyoorkavu Panchayat. The Party she represents, encouraged her in her elections. She was assured of the Rs 20,000 she spent on the election campaign by her party, but she has not received the amount as yet.

She is not happy about the fund utilisation. She cited the example of a contractor who cheats in connivance with the authorities giving the wrong estimates and taking up the work on the basis of wrong estimate and then sharing the profit with them.

There are several bureaucratic wrangles. Hence it takes time for the funds to materialise. She would not contest again as another woman should be given a chance. For this, the training programmes are a morale booster to encourage new people.

Smt.Indira Bai, (a B.Sc, B.Ed) of the Pothankod Panchayat who was elected a member, vehemently vows that she is not going to contest again. Her point of contention is that she cannot combine the roles of a teacher (by profession), a homemaker (by choice) and a Panchayat member (by preference). This is one of the ground realities that policy makers have failed to take cognizance of - that of providing support services. Unless elected women representatives are assured of an alternative, the nation will lose conscientious and competent leaders.

All these women are articulate and aware of their positions, and their limitations and the strengths in the new political set-up. But they are unaware of the prospects and challenges of the new Act. Most observers feel that there is an immediate need to build awareness of the new Act. The new Act should percolate down to all the members of the society. Only then will they be equipped to face the challenges of a new system.

Table 7 : Particulars of Panchayat Samithi Members

Name of Zilla	Total Ward	Election on held wards	Male Members	Female Members	Candidates SC	Candidates ST	SC/ST elected from gen. seats
Thiruvana-nthapuram	886	885	716	169	88	9	13
Kollam	805	804	654	150	74	-	3
Pathanamthitta	521	521	408	113	56	1	2
Aalapuzha	717	717	570	147	72	-	1
Kottayam	733	732	586	146	69	4	-
Idukki	480	780	377	103	36	17	2
Ernakulam	860	859	682	177	92	-	6
Trishur	1009	1009	807	202	115	-	17
Palakkad	894	894	708	186	85	10	4
Malapuram	999	998	808	190	99	-	4
Kozhicode	804	804	648	156	75	2	-
Wayanad	256	256	206	50	10	21	6
Kannur	848	848	675	173	77	8	-
Kasargod	369	369	295	74	28	9	-
Total	10181	10176	8140	2036	976	81	58

Source: Directorate Of Panchayat Raj, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992

Table 8 : Panchayat Establishment Grant

Name of Zilla	Grant
Thiruvananthapuram	19,23,663
Kollam	12,52,677
Pathanamthitta	5,61,757
Aalapuzha	41,95,615
Kottayam	22,50,143
Idukki	33,15,614
Ernakulam	18,67,591
Trishur	18,16,682
Palakkad	43,41,048
Malapuram	16,38,008
Kozhicode	17,62,006
Kannur	14,14,151
Kasargod	6,50,860
Total	2,69,89,815

Source: Directorate Of Panchayat Raj, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992

1.7 Conclusion

"Compared to other Indian states, Kerala has less of the social impediments like negative attitudes towards education of girls, use of children as cheap labour, excruciating poverty and malnutrition, which are used elsewhere in the country to hide the failure of the state to alter entrenched pedagogic culture".[18] But, behind this facade of greater growth and progress, lies the problem of "soaring unemployment, changes in agricultural practices, exodus of young and able bodied to other parts of India and abroad in search of jobs which gives rise to the problems of rising female-headed households and increasing female migration". The first signs of development without alternatives are evident. The increased life-expectancy, has today an 'alarming rate of elderly' waiting to be cared for. The joint family has nearly crumbled and the nuclear family has no time for them. Here too, the onus of taking care of the older people falls on the already overburdened women who have to combine triple roles. The nuclear family has made the people more self-centered affecting human bonds.

18. Krishna Kumar, "Battle Against Their Own Minds : Notes on a Literate Kerala", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 7, 12 February, 1994

"In the new stratification based on the possession of consumer goods, women are bigger losers because false prestige, rivalry and bickerings, opportunism, deceit and indifference takes the place of mutual help, solidarity and friendship".[19] Consumer culture has led to a paradoxical situation wherein "the employment structure in rural areas does not show any significant overall improvement but rural prosperity has increased, also among the casual workers. This is reflected in the higher than all India levels of per capita consumption which have grown and diversified on average as also for the bottom 30% of the population".[20]

Social mores have undergone dramatic changes. If the rate of divorce is on the rise among the middle and upper class, desertion is the common practice among the lower strata. Bargaining and huge transactions have become part of modern marriages in Kerala, replacing the earlier simple traditions of marriage.

Male dominance is markedly seen in the media too. It is the favourite pastime for some journalists and cartoonists to caricature women in a bad light, the point of reference often being the rise of feminism. Media also re-inforces this brewing dissent among many sections of the society.

This retrograde trend is due to globalisation and liberalisation which are putting pressure on the economy to change. The impact is largely felt by women. Matriliny as a system remains, but transformed. This transformation where the position of women is sliding down is enforcing patriarchy. This is unfavourable to the development of woman. She is slowly losing her earlier position of power that she enjoyed within the domestic domain and more so in the public domain.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution usher in new hopes and challenges about women's grassroot participation. Observers feel that if there is any fall in development indicators, Kerala can overcome it. The new experiment of one third reservation to women heralds the vision of a visible, vibrant 4.763 women at the grassroot decision-making levels who will lobby their issues. Also since Kerala lacks feminist organisations, the local bodies are seen as the pivot to bring about the much needed change. The party politics, being an important component of the development process cannot be sidelined at least for the time being. So, it will only be in the interest of women that they rise above party politics and further their cause. They will have to create avenues for forming collectives to attempt the discovery of new paradigms of development.

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19. K. Sharadamoni, "Women, Kerala and Some Development Issues", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 29, no. 9, 26 February, 1994

20. Mridul Eapen, "Rural Non-Agricultural Employment in Kerala : Some Emerging Tendencies", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 29, no. 20, 12 May, 1994

The Gram Sabha is seen as a platform for immediate appraisals and reforms. There is a danger of the Gram Sabha not becoming operational because of the overt presence of party politics. There is the possibility of political conflicts superceding the priorities of the village. It is here that the women can put pressure on the 'bottom up' development scene. Thus the political parties have a duty to further democracy in forums like the Gram Sabha.

Skills they have in plenty, yet they need to be more skillful in tackling male dominance. They will have to fight the invisible resistance built in the society. There is a need for the transformation of the power equations prevailing in the society. The women will have to counter threatened indignities and accept political office.

The effects of matriliny on the social fabric of Kerala was tremendous. As delineated in the earlier pages, the foundation of this development was undisputably the status of women. The power she enjoyed culturally and socially stands transformed today. After six decades of the fall of matriliny, women are today poised to take over power in a new form.

During these intervening years "the public domain was expanding, but the space therein was not shared equitably by all. Women were among the excluded. In a way women's and men's arenas were getting demarcated".[21] The demarcation dealt a blow to the women as she was trying to fit into a mould of an "ideal woman" to whom the hearth and home were of greater importance in the light of the breakdown of the joint family.

In the bargain, political participation of women in the scale envisaged was a casualty. In the light of this, several effects of development are slowing down and the maladies in the society are gaining volatile proportions.

Political participation of women will open up new vistas of development. One of the important result will be the empowerment of women. The elected women representatives are going to be catalysts of change. The women who will be elected in the coming months have a challenging and an onerous task ahead. The success of the Panchayati Raj Institutions largely depends on their collective participation. They are at a take-off point, where the basic indicators are positive. But will they consider genuine needs of the people and lobby for change? Will they fight the growing patriarchal political powers to stay in the game?

Only time will tell.

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21. K. Sharadamoni, "Delusions of Equality", *Madhyam,* vol.10, no. 1, 1995, p. 32

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Section 2

2.1 Presentation of Dr.S. Radha's paper at the ISST Seminar...

I am working in Trivandrum at the Institute of Management in Government. I will talk a little bit about attitudes in Kerala. Let me talk about the attitudes of the bureaucrat first. At a training programme for Block Development Officers, one bureaucrat felt that women should bear the lamp and show more light in darkness, but, he fears that reservation would bring them out ultimately against bureaucrats, against men and against the society itself. The bureaucrat said, "we are going to help women, but finally are they not going to bite us"?

Dr.Radha explained the attitude of the non-government organisation's towards women and Panchayat Raj Institutions . They think it is a special access for women. It has given a lot of help to women, but it does not receive proper receptance because the pot is turned downwards by culture, male domination inside and outside the family, and a whole lot of suppressive activities which exist in the society; and this too in a society which has had a matrilineal and matrilocal system. These women are going to be catalysts in the society and they are going to be change agents; they are going to work with men in society as partners in development.

Elections in Kerala are like a mirage. As you go near it, it is getting further away. That is why I say women are working upstream - that too in a society where indicators are very good for women.

Alternative gender indicators are required for Kerala because of the development process and the changes. Why do women have such good indicators? Sex ratio is in favour of women, though it is now dropping. The mean age of marriage for women is higher than the average of India as well as from the other states. Expectation of life at birth is higher and physical quality of life index is higher. But Kerala has the highest rate of suicide and that too often by young mothers. The rate is nearly eight per month. Realities are catching up with us - Dowry deaths are increasing.

Gram Panchayats exist from bygone days - since its inception maybe from 1 November, 1957. In Kerala, Gram Panchayats exist under the Kerala Panchayat Act of 1960 and District Administration Act of 1979. The State has only the Gram Panchayats in Kerala which consist of 7 to 15 directly elected members and indirectly elected President. Under my survey I have not met a single women President. There are only 1001 Gram Panchayats in the State, covering 1219 villages and 206.82 lakh rural population. On an average there are 1-2 villages per Gram Panchayat, covering 20,661 rural population. Elections in Panchayats were

held in 1987 and next elections are scheduled for September. This is what we have understood from the survey. We have met men and women in the Panchayats and the already elected members. As I said now, in Kerala we are working in a vacuum. We are learning from outgoing adjustors, because these Panchayat Raj Institutions are going to cause a very basic structural reform. The District Council elections was a real eye opener and a very good one because the number of women that came up were more than the one third representation given now. But that was dissolved. Will they come up again? And, who are the women who are going to come up? As I said we are learning from the past adjustors. We met the women and men from the society among the Panchayat people and the elected women and men members. Then we met the Speaker, Minister for Local Administration, Minister for Rural Development, Secretary State CPI(M)., Secretary KPCCI, Secretariat State Council, MLA women and men secretary, public opinion leaders, Former Chief Secretary, first women Chief Secretary - all to get opinion from both the women and men. And the question we addressed were:

1) Do you welcome the new approach to Panchayat Raj and gender issues?

2) Do you welcome the decision to reserve one third seats for women?

3) How far do you think women will discharge their duties?

4) What are the findings related to status of women?

In rural areas some were absolutely unaware of the impending Act. Then the existing women Panchayat members are mere puppets. I have given a case study also where one women was manipulated by her husband who was not in the Panchayat to take a opinion and give her ideas on disputes in the society. Women members were openly ridiculed. One women member in a Panchayat got up to say "priority should be given to this issue which relates to women's problems and the word she used was 'munthukam'". One male member got up and said, "even otherwise you have a lot of 'munthukam'". How is a women supposed to battle this?

In our training session they ask us how to tackle these questions. But with a little bit of humour they can manage effectively. One women came to a Panchayat meeting very late. She had to sit on a chair which was rocking. One male member started rocking it from behind. This irritated her. She said, "if you don't stop this rocking, I will fall asleep during the meeting". That solved the problem.

Women's Status

In our survey, we found that most women were unaware of the Panchayat Raj Act. Existing women members were mere puppets, and were ridiculed during the meetings. Women had no training in decision making. There is domination by male

members. Leading women activists are aware but not of the profound impact of the Act. Women leaders are not entrusted with money. The male President controls the money. Most men members say, "women come to the meetings only to claim T.A and D.A". Panchayat President's yardstick for women's qualification is in their ability to climb a coconut tree.

Bureaucrat's View

The bureaucrat's view of political participation is that there is corruption among Panchayat President and members. They are down right corrupt, and have no correct decision making ability. The Executive Officer's signature is required to pass the papers. The Executive Officer does not sign. A very qualified women teacher was not posted in a school because the Executive Officer didn't sign, allthrough the academic year. Executive Officers are not co-operating.

Also, the members are unaware of the link between quota and gender. They also felt that reservation of wards for women should always be a process of rotation without minority or majority.

There are two aspects - now the Panchayats deal only with the practical gender needs and not the strategic gender issues. Not one discussion has been held on rape. There are many questions coming out of issues in societies. Lots of families are breaking up.

Politician's point of view:

They say polarisation will actually diminish with Panchayat Raj Institutions's being implemented and I think there is a lot of difference between intent and implementation. It remains to be seen whether this is true or not because among our training Session, I have tried to form an Association, a Party free Association of women's Entrepreneurs.

Gram Sabha meetings should prove effective. If implemented, that is where we could have accountability. The Gram Sabha will give a lot of opportunity for women to bring up their issues.

Some women have complained to me saying, the meeting was made known to me very late. So women are being marginalised.

Women's Organisation

Women Elected leaders would have a tough job balancing priorities of Party and Women's Movement. It would look like they are walking on a tight rope and trying to balance themselves on the path of development.

Legal awareness regarding 'Rights of women' is imperative for women Panchayat Raj leaders.

In Kerala, we have started legal awareness campaigns only this month. None of the women knew what their rights were. Now a whole series of awareness programmes have been launched and this has been found imperative for women Panchayat members also.

At present...

A backlash has developed. Media is being used to portray a picture inappropriate to women. After Panchayat Raj Institutions have women in it, the woman is shown sitting, with her legs on top of the table, the radio blaring and with a newspaper in hand. The man is rocking the cradle which is tied to a grinding stone; so when he is grinding, he is rocking the cradle. This is what is happening in a literate state. The work of the women Panchayat Member is really a mountainous task.

Another leader opined that the money a party spends for an election campaign for a women candidate will not be retrieved. I do not know how the men are getting back their money. Are they resorting to corruption afterwards? Is that the attitude the Party is going to have?

So these are the backlashes. I could quote several examples that come up in the training sessions. I have included 3 case studies in my paper.

The last of the case studies is very relevant. A woman stood for elections last time and was threatened that she would be assaulted if she did not withdraw her name. She did not withdraw. But when they said, "your child will not return from school tomorrow", she became fearful and withdrew. She has completely given up her activities for women's development. This is an area where there is a lot of Muslim domination. A lot of awareness generation camps are being conducted.

2.2 *Discussion of the Paper...*

Leela Gulati: I think what Radha has done is to remove *"nazar"*. When something is very good, you say a lot of bad things. What is interesting is that these 10 years of schooling is accepted in Kerala even if you go to landless or agricultural labour households. Even in Tamil Nadu we have a large number of women who have taken part in literacy movements and even otherwise as workers. I feel that we are probably reading too much. I do see probably what you have said is true. But they probably do not represent the whole truth. Even if these were the attitudes I feel that it is possible with little intervention to change it in a very short time. I'm surprised that women have not taken a stronger stand.

The other thing is that it is not entirely a new thing to see women working in Kerala at the village level and at the Panchayats. The last point... I feel concerned about this picture that is drawn; if it is so, what corrective measures should be taken?

George Mathew: I'm grateful to Radha for these insightful comments. Kerala is a paradox. Although we can belittle some of the achievements, they are there - like the UNICEF report put one page on "The status of women in Kerala". Some of these are very interesting. It is curious that in 1987 the Government reserved 20% of seats for women in the Panchayat election. Women did not come in larger numbers than the number of reserved seats. Before that one or two were symbolically nominated. In 1990 for the District Council, there was 30% reservation for women. Even then, only 30% women got elected. That is the situation - but, the social background of the women who were elected was extremely high in terms of education and social awareness. And even studies show that Elected Women Representatives read more than three newspapers a day. When one woman was asked, "what is your caste?", she replied, "I won't say what my caste is. I'm a woman". That was the kind of level they have reached. But with all these social indicators, why does a woman not come up to leadership positions - in public life, in legislatures and in the Parliament? I have a feeling that with the matriarchal or matrilineal system we have had, patriarchy has come back with a vengeance. Even religions like Christianity and Islam have contributed to this. Modern education in co- operation with the patriarchal climate accentuate it and build role models. Women workers read. But, she will have a role model, and will be conscious on how she should behave. It is also interesting that in the service sector, and among teachers there are 25% more women than men and among office workers there are 25% more women. This can only mean that women are not allowed leadership positions, but can do other things.

A woman cannot even go to Sabarimala. When one lady collector went there all hell broke loose. The Gram Sabha is going to create a problem in the settlement pattern in Kerala. It is not going to work. The households are miles apart and I am not sure if women are going to come and participate. As you have mentioned that although there is party politics, when the common good of the locality comes, they co-operate. That is a good point.

Rameshwari Verma: In informal politics, everybody takes part including women. But when it comes to formal political process and decision making, women are not allowed.

Balaji Pandey: I am disturbed by what has been said because there has been so much development and indicators in Kerala are positive. Are development indicators now going to recede back? There is so much intervention by women

politicians and land reforms are very effective in West Bengal and Kerala. What are the efforts being made to check this?

Vina Mazumdar **:** The bureaucrat's observation that they are unaware of the connection, was marked when the Committee on Status of Women was doing its work. The members of the bureaucracy with whom we had to interact, had this constant refrain - when this country has been ruled by a woman for the last so many years, is there still a need for better status for women? They were very surprised when the report came out. The Committee was of the view that Mrs.Gandhi's becoming Prime minister had revolutionised women's status. So the connection between status of women and political power is something that bureaucracy understood very well. Now between early 70s and early 90s, if the perception of bureaucracy has changed so radically then I think it is an issue that needs to be probed. What are gender issues? This needs to be defined. My second point is an appeal to women's development. Development indicators using the sex-ratio was not to be used as a measure of development. That is what a lot of development specialists, including Human Development Report, has reduced these indicators to - sex-ratio, differences in literacy levels, etc. As far as the Committee on the Status of Women is concerned, we used it to merely demonstrate the differences in a country which had constitutional mandate that the State shall not discriminate. It was only a weapon against the State. Education and health was the State's responsibility. We are much more subordinated and if Kerala is today lacking that shape, some of the indicators of Kerala's development that are being used by all development specialists is partly to blame.

Neelam Gorhe: The media is at times critical of women's participation in political processes. Women are, at times, intolerant of this criticism. The role of the media in this process has to be analysed. Media has to be educated and plays like 'Amakar Soubhagyavati' help the cause of the women's movement.

The bureaucrats and the politicians have a tendency to provoke women activists by making chauvinistic statements. They would like to trap women into such discussions. Women, however, should learn to ignore this.

Abhijith Dasgupta : To balance political party interest and gender interest is what the Gram Panchayat members will be called upon to do in future. This has to be probed further.

Gita Sen: The Kerala phenomenon is both fascinating and puzzling, because those of us coming from outside have a long and sustained connection with Kerala. To me it seems that there is no denying all of the positive things for women in the Kerala experience. It seems to me that there are two implications from it which are striking. In fact a great deal of Kerala's positive performance from women's perspective can

be traced back to one historical characteristic. The matrilineality and matrilocality of key caste groups meant the absence of son preference in the scale one is accustomed to in the rest of the country. That of course has had a whole range of implications. That meant no killing girls, education of girls, no biases against girls and women that we are used to seeing in the rest of the country. But there is nothing more to it in Kerala for women than this - that when it comes to other aspects, crucially gender power, it does not extend beyond this. It means that, therefore, we are talking about institutions that may or may not work to transform the native power relations in the society between men and women in the society and between local bodies and larger Political Institutions. Fundamentally Kerala may not be that different from other states in the nature of transformation that are required. You come down basically to the same question of power which is still there. It seems to me in Kerala, which is highlighted in a much sharper way, there is no worrying about our girls dying at a faster rate, or about our boys being more literate than girls are and so on. All that has been taken out. But the fundamental issue of power still remains the same and that is the thing that strikes one in a powerful way.

Kavita Srivastav: Rajasthan may be so called 'backward' at least in terms of development indicators. In the sense of the term we are last and you are first. Rajasthan is fascinating, in terms of spaces for work - and this despite the feudal character, despite not having the kind of things happening in the National Movement. There are tremendous spaces of work in Rajasthan and the way women have been mobilised in Rajasthan in the last 10 years is terrific.

Development indicators do not impress me. If you take away the Kerala nurses from Rajasthan we will not have health services of the little variety we have. The nurses are really an oppressed group. In Rajasthan, on the contrary, women have spaces. Women traditionally have collectives. I have always wondered, what are these community spaces that the women have in a highly literate individualistic society like Kerala. The spaces you have in Kerala are so limited - there are vested interests like the Party.

Leela Gulati: I wanted to add to this matrilineality and matrilocality. I think some of them have been imposed by women themselves with this tremendous desire to mainstream. Both the media and the past history has played a role. I think there is a psychological dimension and a historical background, precisely because of matrilineality in Kerala.

S. Radha : I am not saying media has always been against women's participation. Madam Gauriamma's story has come out as a film. That is a role model. She says, "what you mean women had a good position in the matrilineal system? Even to bathe they had to ask their uncle for oil". That is the freedom we have had."

As regards the Gram Sabha ... the working of the Gram Sabha will depend on how it is going to materialise. We can't prophesise now. I myself do not know what are the efforts required to recede or stop the recession of development. As Leela Gulati said women are leaders at the grassroot level. Let's go into a typical Government office in Kerala... the Director is a male, CEO is a male. Where are the women? Women are typist and clerks. They are participating, though at the lower level.

About the girl child... there is no discrimination. But the son is addressed more affectionately - *Kutta*, and the daughter - *Edi Penne*. Even chances for going into higher studies are curbed. In well-off families no discrimination is shown, but middle class family will prefer to send their son inspite of the girl being good in academics or in other professional courses. There is no organisation among women in the traditional culture. Even if a women is beaten in broad daylight, nobody comes to her help. It has happened on several occasions. Kerala, I emphasis is a unique state. It is very difficult to understand. It is very paradoxical.

2.3 *Case Studies*

The following Case Studies were presented as part of the paper written by Dr. S. Radha of the Institute of Management in Government.

I Mute Partners in Social Development

Vattiyoorkavu Panchayat is about 20 km from the Capital city of Trivandrum. It is slowly developing and is much sought after haven for new settlements and new houses are springing up like mushrooms. In this locality there was a land dispute between two neighbours regarding the ownership of a track of land. This argument was taken to the Panchayat office. Sareena, a woman member of this Panchayat was entrusted to visit the locality, meet the concerned persons and evolve an amicable settlement. This ward is male dominated and Sareena was also of the character of a subordinate wife in the family. Even for decision in the family, she did not take the responsibility of asserting her views. Many times she herself had felt that the decisions taken at home were not the appropriate ones with regard to her children. Not even once had she raised her voice for the benefit of her children's future. Emergencies in the house had often been eased out with her pay. Her money was fully controlled by her husband. She was unaware of what were the items of expenditure from her husband's pay packet. She had never dared to ask how much he earned or what he did with the money. All expenditure in the house upto the 22nd day of the month was met from Sareena's pay. After this any additional item of expenditure was met by her husband on her request. This was known to her intimate friends. They had not empowered her also. Sareena also consulted her husband in all official matters. He helped her take decisions in this field also. But it was not a decision based on discussions between them. Whenever she brought a problem for help, her husband said do this - do that, she obeyed him without questioning him or suggesting an alternative at least for discussion sake. What she feared was, if her opinion displeased her husband, he would beat her or ill-treat her, and for the sake of her children she was nodding to everything he said. In the settlement of this dispute outside the family also when her husband was consulted he went and visited the place took a decision and dictated to her how to write the report. Though Sareena wanted to involve herself in the incident she did not do so, giving up the authority given to her as an Elected Member to do what is rightful for the people who trusted her.

In this case Sareena was a mere puppet member in the panchayat. She helped others with advice but when it came to crucial matters she withdrew and allowed her husband to dominate. When asked whether she agreed, she answered that anyway the problem was settled and that she was happy that she did not have to strain herself in arriving at a solution.

This incident of Sareena would definitely make people distressed because she is not actively using her right. She does not exhibit any leadership qualities also because she had not understood her proper role as a woman Panchayat leader.

There are many Sareenas like this. Many women have also often pointed out that the biggest problem to partake in political decision making was their own family. It would be interesting to discuss whether it would have been better off if Sareena was only a house wife and not pretending to help in social/ societal problems.

II Holding Hands

Kerala as a state is one of the most progressive and advanced in India, especially so far as women's status is concerned. In Kerala, Ernakulam District stands out as one of the most cosmopolitan and modern, becoming the commercial and industrial hub of the state. The new system of Panchayat Raj Institution with its emphasis on women representation was hailed as a landmark even in this district, as a step to further strengthen women's empowerment. In Kerala, in all of the 14 districts, there are more than a thousand panchayats. Kerala has opted for the one tier pattern of Panchayat Raj. In the Kerala Gram Panchayat elections, not only 33 percent of the seats, but over 43 percent of the seats have been captured by women. It is evident that the women are quite ready, capable and determined to lead panchayats to success. Mrinalini, aged 40, was a social worker, a member of the Mahila Samajam and the president of the Tripunithura block. She had good knowledge and experience in this area. After graduation from college, she had voluntarily opted for such kind of work, especially concentrating on developmental works, in rural areas for the benefit of women. She believed that under the new dispensation of Panchayats, there was immense potential for women to participate in decentralised governance and development. So far their involvement had been peripheral. She had found that women are more clear about the basic problems at the grassroot level. What is needed is to expose women to elementary knowledge and basic principles of democratic development. Therefore simply and easily communicable training modules should be prepared for them. She had utmost faith in training programmes which were required to sensitise women about the various provisions of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. Mrinalini went about the region explaining about the Panchayats and making rural women aware of the numerous challenges that lay ahead of them, were they to find themselves elected to Panchayats either as Members or as Presidents. According to Mrinalini, women are not able to participate effectively in the political process due to the following reasons -

a) assetlessness

b) illiteracy

c) ignorance

Land plays an important role in the power structure in rural India. The ground reality is that women have no control over it. Without land ownership they are not safe even in their own households. According to Mrinalini, if land is transferred in their favour they can sustain their livelihood properly and organise themselves to participate in village or block level affairs through Panchayats. Mrinalini, was determined that the households of women in that region would not be ruined by the drunken habits of their husbands. Once women acquired some position and power, they would be strong enough to fight it out. The fact that the Panchayats will have a minimum number of women who will use their strength for mobilising women at large and keep liquor out, Mrinalini was convinced that by proper education, women could rise to a position to curb the growth of obstructionist and retrograde forces.

Mrinalini was overwhelmed that in her Panchayat there was a very helpful woman member - Vijayamma who had involved herself in local women's issues, guiding women to approach the proper persons and people to redress their grievances. Mrinalini also had a friend Daisy, a woman with a flair for handicrafts and a clear knowledge of what to do. Daisy was also wanting to engage young girls who had failed S.S.L.C. and were idle at home. Daisy started a micro unit producing embroidered bags, mats, hats, purses etc., of dried pineapple leaves. When the colour combinations were striking and the pattern exotic, the items were found to be really beautiful. Daisy converted a shed in her house, put benches and employed thirty girls to help her, paying a minimum of Rs.200/- per month. Daisy knew that if she had a loan she could help the girls more and boost her business also. But the Bank Manager was always rejecting her project proposal on one reason or other. Daisy told her difficulties to Mrinalini. Mrinalini met the Manager and spoke to him to let Daisy have one small chance. The Manager refused flatly stating that Daisy did not even look stylishly dressed and came barefoot to the Bank. Mrinalini was helping Daisy also with writing the proposal in English and also all other correspondences. With Mrinalini's help Daisy organised a small exhibition of her products and as this was a time when many foreigners were invited to the unit, it was found that all the items were sold out. Mrinalini explained all this to the Bank Manager who refused again. Mrinalini finally approached Vijayamma who spoke very vehemently to the Manager. Vijayamma also had Daisy's unit publicised through a T.V. Programme. After this, the Manager relented and Daisy got the much needed loan, expanded her unit. Now Daisy has a stall permanently reserved in the Delhi trade fare. Thanks to the helping hands of Mrinalini and Vijayamma, Daisy is now being offered loans from the Branch Manager!

III To be or not to be !

In contrast to the conditions prevailing in Ernakulam District, in the remote areas of Malappuram District, in and around Tiruvangadi Taluk, the place seems untouched by the changes taking place in the outside world. This is an area where the majority of the population is made up of Muslims. They are not modern in outlook, and cling on to old ways and practices. There are Panchayats in these areas but they are dominated by men. Women lead a secluded life, far from the madding crowd. Feminist ideas are unheard of in this region. Women wear the purdah, live in dark houses and their whole lives revolve around their menfolk. The latter are quite dominant and domineering. They have fixed ideas about the status of women. Women are still considered as chattel, with no will or mind of their own. Into this midst came Neena, a social worker and a dedicated champion of womens' rights. She was shocked to find such an archaic and outdated situation in real life. She decided to seek further and study the whole situation. Putting up at a modest hotel a little far away from the village, which in itself was frowned upon by the inhabitants, Neena tried to get to grips with the problem. During the day she went out to the village, going into the houses and talking to the womenfolk of all ages, specially when the men were out working in the fields. She discovered that women slaved out their lives, making food, fetching fuel and fodder. Neena realised that if modern amenities were provided, the gruelling work of the women would be eased a little. But she also knew that the male dominated society would oppose her tooth and nail. With every passing day her presence and questioning were irritating the menfolk who were becoming openly critical and hostile. Neena began to realise the futility of the situation. What chance had women in this male entrenched village? They could not compete in elections; they could not participate in power sharing. They could not leave their houses without their husbands, brothers or father's permission. Neena knew that she was battling against heavy odds. She would try and educate the younger women, make them realise their disadvantages and help them to overcome their difficulties. But the more she tried, the more hostile became the menfolk. She began to get irritated and then became afraid of their menacing attitudes. It was a Herculean task to empower women who are backward because of their low literacy, ill health, lack of consciousness and poor living conditions generally found in rural India. In a male dominated society women are not allowed to freely cast their vote. Their choice is limited to the choice of the husband. Since they are subservient to the males in the social hierarchy, the reservation of seats would serve little purpose.

Neena now knew that she needed a little political support to empower women here. She approached the woman Panchayat member in the Ward, Sreemathi, to help her. Neena stated frankly that she only wanted to educate the Muslim women. Sreemathi listened to Neena carefully but expressed her helplessness in the matter. Sreemathi was a homeo-doctor previously and she told her story to Neena. When Sreemathi

was practicing one day, two Muslim men came as patients and threatened her to withdraw her name from the elections. When she refused they said that she would be 'accidently' maimed by them the next day. She ignored this and stood for election. Nothing happened and she is now the woman member. But, the same *goondas* again approached her and said, if ever she interfered in their community's problems then they would kill her children on the way to school any day. This threat made her very frightful for being a Hindu. If she interfered in Muslim matters, a communal strife would also definitely ensue, for there were many with vested interest to evoke one. With her eyes fixed on her own twisting fingers, Sreemathi presented the very picture of powerlessness. Neena now had come to a dead end valley. Whom could she turn for support? Should she break the wall in front? or turn back helpless, feeling beaten down in her efforts.

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WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT RAJ
A STUDY IN WEST BENGAL

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Section 1
Women in Panchayat Raj : an empirical study in the state of West Bengal

Introduction

Panchayat Raj is considered to be a real democratic apparatus which encourages active political participation of the vast majority of the weaker and poorer sections of rural India in the decision making process. The goal behind its introduction has been to achieve democratic decentralisation, to create a platform for ensuring a genuine political control from below. This statutory Panchayat elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage through secret ballot was to replace the rule by the traditional village elite and inscribe in its place the rule of the representatives from all the sections of the village society. These representatives would come from the grassroot level, who are expected to know the problems and the 'felt needs' of the ruralite. The Panchayat Raj would act as a local self government ruled by villagers themselves having similar power like other governmental bodies enabling the proper and timely implementation of the decisions taken.

The necessity of decentralisation of political power was always felt in the vast populated country like India inhabited by almost 90 crores people in 25 states comprising 5 1/2 lakhs of villages and thousands of cities and towns. Democracy always targets at betterment of the citizens which could only be possible with the understanding of the social reality in totality. So one needs to penetrate at the grassroot level to unveil even the smallest possible reality. Moreover, the elected local representatives of the government mostly stay closer to common people who are the backbone of the nation. As a result they should be encouraged to participate consciously in the decision making process to turn it into a true democracy. So introduction of the PR system was as near to reality as possible.

True democracy also calls for assessing the suggestions made by the common people. A platform, therefore is always necessary where common people could express their ideas. Local self government assures such a stable base for these people. The very term 'local' implies, there are some functions of the Government which are local in nature and cannot be performed from a distant place.

Non recognition of the democratically elected government at the local level has done a lot of harm to the country as many separatist tendencies have surfaced in different parts of India. The absence of viable democratic institutions at the local level that could act as a cushion for absorbing discontent of the people, might be mainly responsible for it.

Prior to the PR system, the sub-state space of governance had been occupied by bureaucracy with District Magistrate and Collector as the presiding deity.

1.1 The Act of 1957

It was the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee which in late 50s made a significant dent in the area reserved for bureaucracy by introducing two-tier Gram Panchayat and Anchal Panchayat. Besides a new concept called the Gram Sabha was introduced.

1.2 The Act of 1963

In 1963 the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act was passed to provide for the restructuring of the village level government with a view to encourage such government to participate in developmental activities. It was felt that the participation of people in planning and development would enable proper decentralisation of democracy. Under this two corporate bodies were created - Anchalik Parishad at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. There was no direct election to any of these bodies.

By 1964, 19,602 Gram Panchayats and 2,926 Anchalik Parishad and a Zilla Parishad in each of the 15 districts were constituted. Despite such sincere initiatives the PRIs remained isolated from the masses.

1.3 The Act of 1973

The entire perspective, however, changed quickly under a new Panchayat Act of 1973. A three-tier structure to be known as Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad was made popular. Howbeit, after the legislation of West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973, it could not take a proper shape. The first election to the three tiers of Panchayats under this Act was held in 1978 when the Left Front Ministry decided likewise and nearly 60,000 elected representatives of rural West Bengal took charge of the system.

1.4 Characteristics of the Panchayats Under the Present Left Front Government

First, these Panchayat institutions are of a different nature, quantitatively. While the first generation Panchayats of the early 60s were intended to be non political in nature and were expected to implement certain specified development schemes, the Panchayats that were brought in West Bengal in 1978 were openly political and designed to share a wide range of governmental functions with people's participation. This step was taken against the backdrop of Ashoka Mehta Committee of 1978. Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh also adopted similar system. The second generation Panchayats as they are called, were a bold step towards establishing democratic

institutions, at the sub-state level in order to share some of the government functions - plan and non plan.

Second, even among the latter generation Panchayats, West Bengal had a novelty. In a society dominated by extreme forms of economic and social inequality, adult franchise, per se, could not develop capable leaders. West Bengal PR system uprooted the monopolistic and dominating control of the rural elite. Over the years the Panchayats have achieved an important objective. New people are brought into politics who have been given on- the-job exposure to the art of self governance from the grassroot levels upwards. Thus Panchayats served as nurseries for new entrants and have now created a rich pool of experienced leaders.

Third, the system made a two-pronged interventions - Panchayats and Land Reforms with three main objectives. First, to identify the ceiling-surplus lands and to hand them over to the state; second to distribute ceiling- surplus lands to the landless labourers ; and third, to ensure registration of *Bargadars* (share croppers) through a crash programme 'Operation Barga'.

Fourth, from 1978 Panchayat elections have been held regularly at an interval of five years, In fact the strategy of land reforms, regular election coupled with devolution of power and functions to the Panchayats were the main causes behind the emergence of a new breed of leadership, the one which is significantly different from earlier ones. The dominance of landed gentry, as a result, was put to an end. The present generation leaders are young, belonging to small peasantry class or to the class of marginal farmers or to professional middle class and also in large number of instances the beneficiaries of land reform. This gave a pro-poor character to the PRI's(Panchayat Raj Institutions).

Again, West Bengal stands apart from other sates in another way. In a country where rural society is characterised by extreme forms of inequality developing from uneven pattern of land ownership along with the forbearing presence of feudal and semi feudal customs, it is very difficult to establish democratic institutions with a truly representative character. However, with the Panchayats and land reforms, West Bengal has been able to reinforce such democracy.

In West Bengal, the planning process has been decentralised since the first year of the 7th 5-year plan. It has a 3 tier machinery - State Planning Board at the State level, District Planning and Coordination Council (with the District Planning Committees as its executive arm) at the district level Block Planning Committee at the block level. The Panchayats of West Bengal are statutorily linked with the planning process. The Sabhadhipati of Zilla Parishad is the Chairman of the District Planning Committee at the district level. Sabhadhipati of Panchayat Samiti is the Chairman

of the Block Planning Committee of which all the *Pradhans* within the block area are members.

The State Planning Board gives an indication about the quantum of funds likely to be available for a district out of different departments' plan budget, special programmes like JRY, IRDP etc., amount to untied fund under the district plan scheme and projected fund to be made available by the financial institution. On the basis of this indication, the District Planning Committee prepares its plan, keeping in view the fund that will be available from the above mentioned local sources.

The Gram Panchayats, after assessing the local resources available and the felt needs and aspirations of the people, carry out the exercise of preparing plans which are integrated at the block level by the Block Planning commission. The District Planning Commission, thereafter, integrate all block, muncipal and sectoral plans prepared by the department officers and arrives at a district plan. District plans prepared by all district form an integral plan. District plans prepared by all district form an integral part of the State Plan. This form of decentralised planning, as claimed by the Left Front Government, has been adopted by West Bengal much prior to any other state in India which ensure immense power to the local self Government.

1.5 Inadequacies of the Panchayat system in West Bengal prior to the 73rd Amendment Act

Nevertheless, to set up Panchayats is one thing, but what is more important is to give life to Panchayats. As it is stated in our constitution, necessary power should be given to Panchayats and make them really functional, effective and be more successful local self governing units. In pursuance of that Constitutional provision, all the state governments (except Mizoram and Nagaland) had passed law for setting up Village Panchayats and also instituted them. Still the functioning in the last 40 years was far from impressive. Even the zeal and energy with which the Panchayats of West Bengal started itself soon faded after 1983 when the second Panchayat was elected. And with the coming of the third Panchayat in 1988 it seemed to have all but disappeared. The innovative spirit of the early years was hardly to be seen. The Panchayats became overtly engrossed in routine work. The fixation on Jawahar Rozgar Yojna programme became all pervasive. The leaders amongst the elected functionaries were not clear about the objectives of the Panchayats. Being overburdened with work assigned to them by Panchayats, many felt that Panchayats were agencies primarily to implement schemes of the Central Government. The concept of Panchayats being institutions of self government was missing or dimly perceived.

The Panchayats were structurally weak. Also it was felt that if no programmes, capable of enthusing Panchayat functionaries of mobilising people, were to be implemented, they would turn out to be empty vessels.

Another drawback of the PR (Panchayat Raj) system in West Bengal was the conspicuous absence of women in the Panchayat bodies and mainly in the decision making process of PR. In view of the above defect, the PR system could not live up to the expectation of the people as well as the founder fathers of the Constitution. This was considered apalling when development ensures expulsion of any sort of differences, be it economic, social, political or anything else. In our society the gender difference is a major problem one faces daily. Even today proportionately women are less than men. As per the 1991 census for every 1000 men there are 927 women in India and 917 in West Bengal. At the end of 20th century women are still the major victims of unequal distribution pattern in our society. Consequently they are neglected and receive less care, nutrition, medical help, education, respect and other kinds of opportunities.

According to the 1991 census out of 68,077,965 people in West Bengal, 35,510,633 are males and 32,567,332 are women. The rate of literacy is also low among women. Out of 32,609,397 literate persons. 20,091,36 are males and 12,517,561 are only women. The following tabular representation of the percentage distribution of the working force by main activity in West Bengal highlights the stark difference between male and women workers in cultivation, non-household manufacturing, trade and commerce and in transport, storage and communications.

Category	Persons	Male	Female
Cultivators	28.40	30.15	16.23
Agricultural Labourers	24.56	22.65	37.88
Plantations, Forestry, etc.	2.76	2.30	5.87
Mining and Quarrying	0.78	0.84	0.34
(a) Household manufacturing	3.90	2.84	11.33
(b) Non-household manufacturing	12.06	12.62	8.17
Construction	1.85	2.06	0.41
Trade and Commerce	10.72	11.82	3.08
Transport, Storage and Communication	4.22	4.74	0.57
Other Service	10.70	9.98	16.72
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Note : Figures represent percentage in respect of total main workers.

Yet development entails maximum utilisation of both material and human resources. The compulsive importance of women's role is long recognised. Every nation

should consider equitable access of women to land, water, other natural resources, inputs and services and equal opportunity to employ their skills. Collective action and participation of women at every level should be encouraged for all around development of the nation.

So, it was felt that the Constitution itself should provide the basic and essential features of PR institutions to give certainty, continuity and financial and administrative strength to them. It was thought that a new part should be added to the Constitution regarding Panchayats. Apprehending amendments at the centre, West Bengal amended the State Acts, just a couple of months before the 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution which was ratified by the requisite number of people in State Legislature and came to effect from April 20, 1993. The State Act included all those which the 73rd Amendment Act provided for. Special emphasis was placed on the election of women incorporate certain provisions; some on the insistence of the Central Government. At present the 1994 Panchayat Act is in force since 22nd April 1994.

Section 2

2.1 *Main provisions under the 73rd Amendment Act*

According to the 73rd Amendment, Panchayats are institutions of self government to which State Legislature are requested, by law, to endow "powers and authority which are necessary to enable them to function as (such)". However, it also implies that "such law may contain provisions for the devolution of power and responsibility upon Panchayats at the appropriate level" with respect to-

a. the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice;

b. the implementation of schemes and economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the 11th Schedule (Article 23 [G], which contains 29 items, all in the field of development (Bidhi Nirdeshika, Panchayat Directorate, West Bengal; written in Bengali).

As per the specifications of the provisions, it is entirely within the competence of the State Legislatures to decide what power and authority the Panchayat should have in order to function as credible institutions of self government.

The principles laid down by the 73rd Amendment are quite specific. First and foremost, it provided for a Gram Sabha in every village. All the persons registered as voters in the election relating to the village will be members of Gram Sabha where powers and functions at the village level will be specified.

Second, there will be a three tier Panchayat structure, one at the village level, another at the intermediate level and the third at the district level. However, if a district has a population of twenty lakh or less, it is for the state to decide whether there should be a Panchayat at the intermediate levels or not.

The composition of Panchayat was also dealt in detail. The ratio between the population and the territorial area of a Panchayat and number of seats must be, to the extent possible, uniform throughout the state. The same goes for territorial constituencies also. All seats at all levels will be filled by members directly elected by the voters of the constituency concerned. The chairpersons at the village level Panchayats will be members of intermediate level, and in a district without intermediate level they will be members of the district level. The chairpersons of intermediate level will be members of district level Panchayats. The members of Lok Sabha and State Assembly could play a definite role directly in the intermediate and district level Panchayats. All the members, whether directly elected or nominated, and the chairpersons shall have the right to vote in the Panchayats.

Another most important provision of the Amendment Act is with regard to reservation of SC and ST in relation to their population in the area concerned. One third of the total number of the offices of chairpersons should be reserved for women. When the constitution was being drafted, the question of reservation for women was discussed. However, this could not take proper shape due to rejection by women members of the Constituent Assembly demanding for total equality (Mazumdar,n.d.)

Still, enactment of many State Government Panchayat Act provided a clause that in absence of elected women in these bodies, nomination of one or two women should be made compulsory. Such provision was denigrated to mere tokenism in most states. The lack of attention of women's educational, economic, health and other needs was severely condemned by the experts of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971-74).

2.2 *Reasons for reservation of women in Panchayat*

The CSWI debated the issue at length and sought to make such women genuine representatives of women's concerns. It, therefore, advocated statutory women's Panchayats with powers and resources to respond to rural women's critical needs of literacy, legal rights, health, new earning opportunities, wage equality etc.

The President and the Secretary of the Women's Panchayats could, ex-officio, occupy the two reserved seats on the main Panchayats, making nomination unnecessary.

The recommendation was not implemented. However, the issue of rural women's empowerment became the major concern of the officials and scholars, voluntary organisations working at the grassroots, and some international agencies. The 6th five year acknowledged that without economic independence and equal access to education and family planning, women's equality would remain a myth. Often their responsibilities in household chores prevent them from having much spare time. Cultural barriers also restrict them from interacting and participating with men

folk, (Mukherjee, 1994). This led to the introduction of the scheme of development of women and children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) with the dual objective of enhancing their social strength and participation capacities. From 1985 all the anti-poverty programmes for rural areas had a mandatory provision that at least 30% beneficiaries must be women, which was raised to 40% in the 8th plan.

Women's organisations have all along advocated the need to promote and harness the potential resources of 'women' in nation building activities. In 1988 the Draft National Perspective Plan for Women advocated 30% reservation for women in all elected bodies from Panchayats to Parliament. This was rejected later by the critique of NPP. However, a strong recommendation was made for reservation in all local self

Government bodies to be filled by election. The most interesting fact was that it took due precaution to ensure the representation of the poorer section of women, especially those belonging to SC and ST in order to :

i. ensure genuine leadership from below

ii. initiate effective participation by the most neglected and marginalised group of women in the political process.

73rd Amendment of the Constitution, thus represents the outcome of a debate stretching over several decades on women's representation. It is a response to women's movement.

To return to the point of departure, the other provisions of the said Amendment Act is duration of Panchayats at any level which is held is to be 5 years. In case of dissolution, election must be held before the expiry of a period of six months from the date of dissolution. If the Panchayat dissolves after two/three years since election, fresh election is to be held. Otherwise, if the remainder period is less than six months, no election should be held for the remaining period.

The Constitution further states financial matters. The 73rd Amendment Act explicitly lays down that the Governor of the State shall have to appoint a Finance Commission to review the financial position of the Panchayats. The Commission shall be constituted at the expiry of every fifth year whose duties would be to recommend :

i. to the Governor the principles which would govern the distribution of resources from all taxes, duties tolls and fees between the State and Panchayats,

ii. how grants-in-aid from the state consolidated fund should be made to the Panchayats, and,

iii. on any other matter which may be referred to it by the Governor, for maintaining sound financial position of the Panchayats.

The Governor of the state is then required to pay attention on the kind of action taken thereon, and before the Legislature of the State. All the expenditure must be accounted for which signifies that Panchayats are required to maintain accounts and audit thereof. The higher bodies of the Panchayats like Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti are liable to provide grants or financial help to the Gram Panchayats from time to time.

Democracy calls for proper conduct of elections and 73rd Amendment categorically provides for such election. It urges for preparation of electoral rolls, with the help

of State Election Commission. The Commissioner's duty would be determined by the Governor who could be removed only in the way a High Court Judge is removed i.e., by impeachment. Laws will be made in each state for all matters relating to elections to Panchayats.

West Bengal State Act incorporated all the above provisions laid down by 73rd Amendment Act. However, in this connection it must be mentioned that certain provisions were already present, as far as the Panchayat is concerned, and implemented by the State Act of West Bengal prior to the 73rd Amendment. One of them, was the implementation of decentralised Panchayat system which was started from 1985.

Apart from the above mentioned feature, West Bengal Government had also championed the reservation of seats for women and SC/ST during 1992, a prior step taken apprehending the 73rd amendment act of Constitution.

In order to give a feminist perspective, West Bengal Panchayat Act 1992 had accepted the reservation of seats for women. However, the seats of the office bearers were not reserved for women as insisted by the Central Government, Government of West Bengal had a reason for it. They felt that if the elected woman office bearer belonged to a party who was not in majority then it would be extremely difficult for the person to administer and make the others listen to her. Nevertheless, on the insistence of the Central Government the Government of West Bengal in the latest Act included that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of the office bearers like *Pradhan*, Upapradhan *Sabhapati*, *Sahakari Sabhapati*, Sabhadhipati and *Sahakari* Sabhadhipati would be reserved for women also. This provision of the Act would come into effect from the next election to be held in 1998.

Another provision for women which is indirectly connected to PR system is the reservation of 40% of the IRDP loans for women and 30% of the work opportunities created under JRY would be reserved for women. Panchayats are entrusted with the responsibility of selecting the deserving candidates.

2.3 *A Critical Analysis of the 73rd Amendment Act*

The Amendment Act itself has received a wide range of comments covering political, economic, administrative and other aspects. Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, in the year 1993 enunciated a detailed study to asses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis of Panchayat Raj situation in the country.

Let us begin with strengths. It is believed by all that with the constitutional status which is accorded to Panchayat bodies will check the state from tampering with the life of these institutions as practiced earlier. This will enable the Panchayat bodies to function truly as rural local self-government responding to and mobilising better

people's participation. Making "Gram Sabha" the soul of Panchayat, states, will enhance this participation in various development programmes.

The provision of a three-tier structure is expected to bring uniformity in the structural pattern throughout the country and will strengthen planning process at the grassroot level.

Another positive effect of the said Amendment Act is, periodicity of elections which will ensure durability of and building up confidence in, PR institutions. The tendency for dissolution of these bodies on some ground or the other will also be curbed.

Other provisions of election process will also contribute in accelerating democratic process at the grassroots levels. Election of all members of Panchayat at every level by the people will give every citizen an opportunity to exercise his franchise to elect four to five representatives at various levels of Panchayats to boost peoples initiatives. It will create a feeling of oneness in the system and will open formal means of communication. Direct election to these bodies will also bring about 24,00,000 people at various levels in these bodies. Thus, a large number of people will be directly involved in the art of self- government, political education and political socialisation.

Moreover, each individual will have to choose his association in one tier. Hence like the previous system, one person could not be a chairperson at the village, block and district levels simultaneously. The 73rd Amendment Act has restricted the monopoly of one person to hold office at various levels. Consequently, opportunities will be available to a large number of persons.

Another important aspect of the Act is the political empowerment of women by providing one third reservation of seats. This means about seven to eight lakh electorates will be sharing the activities and contributing directly in the development process. This paves the way for a neglected sector of the society to participate in main stream politics. Similarly the other disadvantaged group of SCs/STs has been given the opportunity to enter into the system through reservation in these bodies.

Though the powers, authority and responsibility are of course vested in the legislature of State who would decide the functions of Panchayats, the legislature will implement the programmes of development and social justice including the subjects provided in the Eleventh Schedule to the constitution. If all the 29 items are entrusted to the Panchayats, it will emerge as a strong local government eventually, thereby introducing positive correlation between effective decentralisation strategies and better performance.

Previously the Panchayats always suffered from lack of financial resources. This is also being taken care of by 73rd Amendment Act. The Constitution of Finance

Commission to review financial position every fifth year will help them to sustain economically through the provision of designated taxes, duties, tolls and fees.

Over and above, the provision to vest powers regarding all matters relating to elections of Panchayats in a State Election Commission will ensure regular and fair elections to the PR bodies. It will reduce frequent litigation on flimsy grounds and will avoid unnecessary delay in electoral process.

In spite of these positive line of action expected to be set in by the Amendment some weaknesses and threats have been forecast. The Gram Sabha which has been an important organ of the PR bodies is not aware of the specific powers and functions. It is not clear as to what would be its quorum, how frequently it would meet, what are its exact responsibilities. It will, however, be the responsibility of the local leadership, (Singh, 1993) to make this body function effectively.

The functioning of each level of Panchayats have not been spelt out in detail, as well. The 29 items as listed in the Eleventh Schedule do not give idea whatsoever as to which level will be responsible for a particular set of functions. This has to be determined by the individual State Government thereby decreasing the chance of uniformity in substance and functions. Article 243 (b) states that it is upon the discretion of the State Government to decide the functions of the different levels of Panchayats. It is apprehended that State Government is in a position to take advantage of this measure. It should have not transferred additional functions (beyond those specified in the Constitution), to the Councils despite constitutional backup should be referred to in this context.

The present practice of institutional relationship between the PRIs and State Government was one of dominance of the State Government. The powers and functions of PRI's are not properly decentralised. And if development planning process is to be decentralised down the district level, this should go hand in hand with the Government of India reducing the centrally sponsored plan Scheme and allowing State Governments to function freely in their allotted spheres. As the planning process stands now, most of the funds are tied down sectorally and even project and scheme wise and under Minimum Need Programme, centrally sponsored schemes, central schemes. After that whatever little remains untied are stated to be distributed over the spill-over works and should be accompanied by suitable devolution of financial resources between them.

There is a need to increase the Panchayat's area of discretion in planning their own funds and in ensuring that the sectoral schemes and other departmental programmes are coordinated and integrated by them.

Again, apart from directly elected member, the composition of Panchayats is vested in the hands of State Legislative. The chairperson of lower level must be allowed to

become members in the higher level body in ex-officio capacity to maintain an organic link. Otherwise the three tiers will function in isolation and the interest of lower bodies will be under represented and unrepresented.

Another crucial threat may develop from the MP's and MLA's who are included in these bodies. A number of committees have suggested and conflicts will increase. Three types of conflicts may emerge according to Mukherjee (1995). One, the conflict between local level politicians and National Level Politicians on the other, two, the conflict between bureaucracy and local level politicians and three, the conflict between the vested interest and the local level politicians. The first type of conflict may arise as these Legislatures, given Article 243(G), will be rendered economically powerless and the locus of power will shift to the chairpersons of the Panchayats. The MP's and MLA's, then would have to vacate political space for the local level politicians which will be a painful process for them.

Secondly, Democratic decentralisation in terms of the 73rd Amendment, would also reduce unrestrained authority and power currently enjoyed by the bureaucracy, more so in view of proposed Article 243(H), if the Act which authorise power to assign the Panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, tolls, fees and provides for making grants-in-aid to the Panchayats from Consolidated Fund of the grants.

The final conflict relates to conflict between vested interest and the local level institutions. One chairperson of the Panchayat would be much nearer to the scene of action and would be much better placed to monitor the implementation of programmes, deployment and end use of resources and thus the vested interests will be inconveniences dishonest contractors, unscrupulous businessmen, ir-responsible teachers, health care workers government functionaries, indigent tax collectors would oppose to local level democratic decentralisation.

The Amendment Act shows that the financial autonomy of the Panchayats hang on the single thread of their own resources from taxes, duties, toll and appropriated by PRIs but with conditions and limits regarding the usages. Thus, the scope for PRIs to function as units of self-government is extremely circumscribed.

An important aspect of Panchayats is completely missing. This is about the power to adjudicate on disputes which arise in the village itself. The idea of dispensing justice locally and cheaply is absent. The Act does not provide for Nyaya Panchayat at village level.

However, everything depends upon the State Government as to how meaningful they are going to make this Amendment.

Section 3

3.1 *Representation of Women in the Three-Tiers of Panchayat in West Bengal*

Despite a number of shortcomings, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act on Panchayat Raj, inflicted hopes among the weaker sections of Indian society. In West Bengal challenges had been accepted by all the political parties to gear up women candidates to enter politics at the lower level in the spirit of self governance as committed citizens. Any study of women Panchayat members should throw light, even briefly, on the election process and the kind of response it evoked from women.

It goes without saying that in West Bengal, like any other states, people are likely to experience a major social change; a change whose main actors are women. Women are mainly responsible to bring about the change successfully. In the 1993 election, there were 71,000 elected seats in the three-tier reserved solely for women. One would be pleased to note that more than 67,000 women participated, under different political umbrella, in the elections. In other words, at least two women on an average, contested for a particular post. The following table illustrates the number of women candidates elected in three-tiers :

Tier	No. of reserved seats	No. of Women candidates	Average No. of candidate/seat
GP	21489	60.664	2.82
PS	3182	9,241	2.90
ZP	224	873	3.90

Source : Panchayat Election Study forthcoming issue ISS, Delhi.

The analysis of the Panchayat Election study high-lighted that compared to the data pertaining to the general seats, representation of more than 2 women candidates for each reserved seat is not insignificant. In fact, considering the striking absence of women before 1993, the present election statistics portrayed a hopeful picture. Out of 24,895 seats which were reserved for women, only 561 seats were not contested by any candidate. As per the forthcoming publication of ISS, this figure meant only 2.25% of the reserved seats were not contested for, which was not very alarming. Side by side, when the percentage for total general uncontested seats was calculated, it amounted to 2.69% a figure more than that of the uncontested reserved seats. The above two figures highlight one important criterion. The percentage figure of uncontested reserved seats (2.25%), is below the average, i.e., 2.69%. One can therefore, safely infer that 'women' in general were not the reason for the absence of any prospective candidate. There might have been some other factors also which were responsible for the absence of candidates.

The 'felt' presence of the women candidates in West Bengal became more obvious from the number of women office bearers in the 1993 Panchayat bodies. The representations of the office bearers at all the three Panchayat levels in all the districts of West Bengal and the *Karmadhyakshas* in Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad are self explanatory from the following table.

Table : 1.1 Office bearers in Gram Panchayat in the State of West Bengal

Name of district	Pradhan			Upapradhan		
	Total	Women	P.C. of Women	Total	Women	P.C. of Women
Darjeeling	21	-	-	21	3	14.29
Purulia	70	8	11.43	84	27	32.14
South 24 Parganas	312	8	2.56	312	40	12.82
North 24 Parganas	214	10	2.67	214	42	19.63
Jalpaiguri	125	6	4.80	125	20	16.00
Nadia	187	2	1.07	187	17	9.09
Midnapore	514	57	11.09	514	88	17.12
Malda	147	10	6.80	147	28	19.05
Howrah	157	3	1.91	157	26	16.56
Hooghly	210	20	9.52	210	62	29.52
Coochbehar	87	3	3.52	87	18	20.69
Burdwan	278	22	7.91	278	62	22.30
Bankura	190	30	15.79	190	45	23.68
Murshidabad	255	1	0.39	255	32	12.55
Birbhum	169	5	2.96	169	42	24.85
Uttar Dinajpur	99	2	2.02	99	8	8.08
Dakshin Dinajpur	65	1	1.54	65	3	4.62

Source : Directorate of Panchayat, Govt. of West Bengal, Calcutta.

As per 'Panchayat Raj (1992)', written in Bengali, out of 2866 Gram Panchayats in West Bengal, 16 had women *Pradhans* and 12 Gram Panchayats were under women *Upa-Pradhans*. Four districts namely Coochbehar, Malda, Murshidabad and Howrah did not have any women *Pradhans* or *Upa-Pradhans*. It is quite visible from the above table that the present scenario is more promising than the previous one as the only district which cannot claim to have a women *Pradhan* is Darjeeling. In the rest of the districts, at least one chair of *Pradhan* and one chair of Upapradhan is held by a women member of the Panchayat. This very context could be regarded as a step ahead in integrating women actively in politics and specially in decision making role. As the situation stands, Bankura, Purulia and Midnapore are three districts which are more forward as 15.69%., 11.43% and 11.09% respectively, of

the seats of *Pradhans* are occupied by women. In Purulia again, 32.14% of the seats are under women *Upa-Pradhans*. As far as seats of *Upa-Pradhans* are concerned, Hooghly, Coochbehar, Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum have exhibited a positive spirit because more than 20% seats of the *Upa-Pradhans* are occupied by women. No matter how insignificant the achievement might be, the inclusion of women members in the decision making areas is a kind of achievement compared to the previous composition of Gram Panchayats in West Bengal.

Table 1.2 : Women Representatives in Panchayat Samitis of West Bengal.

	Sabhapati			Sahakari Sabhapati			Karmadhyakashas of Panchyat Samitis		
Name of the district	Total	Women	P.C. of Women	Total	Women	P.C. of Women	Total	Women	P.C. of Women
Darjeeling	4	1	25	4	-	-	40	14	35.00
Purulia	7	-	-	7	1	14.29	81	31	38.27
24 Pgs (S)	29	2	6.90	29	7	24.1	290	42	4.48
24 Pgs (N)	22	-	-	22	9	40.91	196	37	24.48
Jalpaiguri	13	-	-	13	2	15.38	unknown		
Nadia 17	-	-	17	4	23.53	170	26	15.29	
Midnapore	54	1	1.85	54	19	35.19	536	94	17.54
Malda 15	1	6.67	15	5	40	150	35	23.33	
Howrah	13	1	7.69	13	1	7.69	100	16	16
Hooghly	18	1	5.56	18	8	44.44	180	37	20.56
Coochbehar	12	-	-	12	2	16.67	120	22	18.33
Burdwan	31	-	-	31	7	22.58	310	54	17.42
Bankura	22	1	4.54	22	7	3.18	218	41	18.81
Murshidabad	26	1	3.85	26	3	11.54	260	44	16.92
Birbhum	19	-	-	19	7	36.84	162	29	17.90
Uttar Dinajpur	9	-	-	9	2	22.22	88	11	12.5
Dakshin Dinajpur	7	-	-	7	2	28.57	63	14	22.22

Source : Directorate of Panchayat, Govt. of West Bengal, Calcutta.

Table 1.2 highlights that in the higher echelons of the Panchayat, women members are not so visible as in the Panchayat Samities, men mostly hold the Chair of *Sabhapati*. Darjeeling, South 24 Parganas, Midnapore, Malda, Howrah, Hooghly, Bankura, Murshidabad are the primary districts where at least one woman *Sabhapati* is present.

Nonetheless, the present situation is less dismal than the previous years. Prior to 1993 elections, there was no woman *Sabhapati* and only one *Sahakari Sabhapati*

in Panchayat Samities of West Bengal. There were also only eight women *Karmadhyakshas* before 1993.

A paragraph must be devoted to the assessment of the present structure of the standing committees of the Panchayat Samiti *Karmadhyakshas* is the most authoritative person in any standing committee who has the power to decide about everything. Except in Jalpaiguri, South 24 Parganas and North Dinajpur, 15% of the standing committees in every district claim to be running under women *Karmadhyakshas* as Table 1.2 highlights. No data was available from Jalpaiguri regarding *Karmadhyakshas*. Purulia and Darjeeling have set examples as 38.27% and 25% of the Panchayat Samities have women *Karmadhyakshas*.

Table 1.3 : Representatives of women fold in the decision making positions in the Zilla Parishads of West Bengal.

	Sabhapati			Sahakari Sabhapati			Karmadhyakashas of Panchyat Samitis		
Name of the district	Total	Women	P.C. of Women	Total	Women	P.C. of Women	Total	Women	P.C. of Women
Darjeeling	1	-	-	1	-	-	6	2	33.33
Purulia	-	-	-	-	-	Not known		3	-
24 Pgs (S)	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	1	10
24 Pgs (N)	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	1	11.11
Jalpaiguri	1	-	-	-	-	Not known		1	-
Nadia 1	-	-	1	-	-	10	2	20	
Midnapore	1	-	-	1	1	100	10	3	30
Malda 1	-	-	1	1	100	10	2	20	
Howrah	1	-	-	1	1	100	10	1	10
Hooghly	1	-	-	1	-	-	10	3	20
Coochbehar	1	-	-	1	-	-	10	5	50
Burdwan	1	-	-	1	-	-	10	5	50
Bankura	1	-	-	1	-	-	10	3	30
Murshidabad	1	-	-	1	-	-	10	4	40
Birbhum	1	-	-	1	-	-	9	1	11.11
Uttar Dinajpur	1	-	-	1	-	-	6	4	66.67
Dakshin Dinajpur	1	-	-	1	-	-	9	3	33.33

As revealed by the above table, there are no women Sabhadhipati and only two *Sahakari* Sabhadhipati reinstating the fact that it is still difficult to break the glass ceiling by women. However, one can add that situation has improved after 1993 election as reasonable number of women (44 in all) members were made *Karmadhyakshas* of the standing committees of Zilla Parishad. Previously, there were

only 13 *Karmadhyakshas* in the Zilla Parishad. After the latest election, women *Karmadhyakshas* are absent only in Purulia and Jalpaiguri. On the other hand, in North Dinajpur, 66.6% of the *Karmadhyakshas* are women followed by 50% in Burdwan and Coochbehar.

The analysis of the above data is felt necessary to underline the fact that 1993 election has brought in more women in the decision making role which gives an indication that women are capable and ready to lead our Panchayats to success.

Gram Panchayat Elections, 1993

Districts	Total No.of members	Women Members
Howrah	3177	1120
North 24-Parganas	4332	1537
South 23-Paranas	5997	2117
Murshidabad	5245	1862
Nadia	37764	1339
Burdwan	5409	1913
Bankura	3419	1207
Midnapore	9043	3193
Purulia	2745	968
Birbhum	2992	1052
Hooghly	4176	1468
Jalpaiguri	2190	782
Coochbehar	2418	853
Malda	2813	938
Uttar Dinajpur	2028	718
Dakshin Dinajpur	1262	441
Siliguri-Mahakuma Parishad	387	135
Total :	61397	21643

Finally, attention must be focused on the general election data pertaining to GP's(Gram Panchayats). In most cases, more than 33.33% (1/3rd the total Panchayat seats), seats are occupied by women. The reason can be explained with the help of an example. Suppose in a Block Panchayat there are 9 seats, then obviously 3 seats will be reserved for women. But in case there are 10 seats, then

as per the Amendment Act, 33.33 seats should be reserved for women. This is surely not possible.

Under such circumstances 34% seats were kept reserved for women. In this way 73rd Amendment Act guarantees active participation of women in the decision making process. This would give them an opportunity to raise their grievances and other related social and economic problems in a formal forum as Bhargava and Vidya (1992) states, a political process is necessary for improvement of women in all spheres of life. The representation of women in political institution is expected to encourage other women to slowly break the age old barriers imposed on them by the social structure ensuing political power on an equal footing with men.

As stated by Mazumdar (1993), a sea change in the status of housewives in the country side will be expected and ordinary women will be expected o become more assertive after all these initiative taken by the present Government. The question, therefore, arises as to whether the reservation formula which is imposed from above will yield a grassroot social revolution; whether the newly elected women will reasonably put a stiff resistance to the vested rural male interest entrenched for 15 years. These housewives leaving the rigid confines of their homes to participate in administrative matters. This might create teething troubles as women will try to take policy decisions or implement them. To fathom the present day status of the women members, after the completion of one year of their tenure of service, an extensive file study in the districts of West Bengal is necessary. Detailed probing into the opinions, attitudes and perception of the women members regarding Panchayat is logical as there is a global realisation of problems arising from social divides based on gender and poverty (Narayanan, 1994).

3.2 *Training given to the women Panchayat members.*

The Government of West Bengal also took special initiative to provide encouragement to the newly elected candidates specially those who are fresh entrants to the Panchayat system.

In the above background, the State Government took the decision to impart systematic training to all the elected members to enable them to acquire appropriate attitude, knowledge and skill in addressing issues or problems they have been facing in their work situation.

The training curriculum as per the Directorate of Panchayats, West Bengal, was designed under five modules : (a) Role of Panchayat as a unit of local self-government in three tier federal structure and as a promoter of rural development and social justice; (b) Study of problems and issues related to people below the poverty line in rural areas, illiteracy, gender bias, unemployment and under-employment, health and sanitation, population inflation and environmental pollution with the objective

of sensitizing the opinion leaders of the Panchayats on the issues; (c) The spectrum of current programme for poverty alleviation of the target group and the role of Panchayats in planning and implementation of the said Rural Development activities; (d) Development and people's participation; (e) Planning for villages/block/district comprising objective setting, preparation of resource inventory, identification of problem areas, determining strategy, and integration of existing development programmes.

Target group of the training comprised members elected to Gram Panchayats as well as members elected to Panchayat Samities from the Gram Panchayat areas, who are ex-officio members of the Gram Panchayat. However, the office bearers of the three tiers of Panchayats and *Karmadhyakshas* of the standing committee were not included in the training programme.

Subsequent training for these office bearers and specially for women office bearers and women Zilla Parishad members was organised in January and February '95 at the State Institute of Panchayat, Kalyani, West Bengal. The curriculum of the two-day training included discussion on the role and importance of women in the PR system of India followed by series of amendments relating to West Bengal Panchayat Acts. The women participants were also made to understand the laws of Panchayat System in West Bengal and also the duties and responsibilities vested to the three tiers of Panchayats in West Bengal. Emphasis was placed on the different projects under the Panchayats specially those which involve the upliftment of children and women. The training also sought to expand the awareness of the participants regarding the grassroot planning and development and the recent changes induced in the process. Finally, this political training included another aspect into the curriculum viz., the legal rights of women as citizens of India.

Over and above the training courses, the training literature for Gram Panchayat members was developed by the Government of West Bengal after elaborate discussions with officers of concerned Departments, UNICEF, Institute of Health & Public Hygiene. Five training booklets under Panchayats training series were published till now which are :

1. Introduction to Panchayats
2. Village Level Planning and Development
3. Universal Education and Role of Panchayat
4. Public Health & Panchayat
5. Jawahar Rozgar Yojna and IRDP.

Books on other two tiers have already gone to the press.

Section 4

4.1 Methodology of the Study

The Study was designed to assess the experiences of the women members pertaining to the duties and responsibilities of Panchayats.

The study, therefore, focused on different aspects which were likely to have an influence on the role played by the women members of the Panchayats.

These issues are :

1. *Family Dynamics :* Constraints of playing dual role at home and Panchayat, encouragement provided by the family to women respondents when they decided to contest elections and also later on in fulfilling their duties as members: confidence exhibited by these representatives in running the Panchayat despite being subjugated by Patriarchy.

2. Juxtaposition of the representatives from economic point of view: Whether these members are gainfully engaged in any occupation outside home and their awareness regarding economic benefit of being a Panchayat member.

3. Community and social environment: Receptivity of the community i.e. how far the society is conducive to the these women members, awareness of the respondents regarding social problems, movements etc.

4. Involvement of women members in Panchayats: their physical presence in the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat meeting and consequent involvement with meetings: their perception of their contribution towards community development.

5. Political awareness and perception of meaningful participation as 'Women; in the political scenario.

6. Leadership qualities of the Panchayat members: respondent confidence in carrying out Panchayat work; perception about the required qualities of a leader and differences, thereby, experienced by the respondents by virtue of being 'Women'.

7. Impression of the respondents regarding the system itself i;e; Panchayat Raj: Comparison of the present system with the earlier status quo of PRIs, awareness of the respondents, regarding the sources of funds, functions of the Panchayats and role of Panchayat administrator.

Coverage: Four districts from West Bengal were covered by this study. These are, Birbhum, Dinajpur, (both north and South districts were covered), and Murshidabad. A total of 50 women members were interviewed out of which 4 were *Pradhans* and 7 were *Upa-Pradhans*. 9 Gram Panchayats from Birbhum and Dinajpur (comprising north and south) 9 Gram Panchayat from Murshidabad were selected for the study.

The selection of the fields was purposive. Attempt has been made by the study to highlight the social reality in a Hindu dominated area i;e;, Birbhum, Muslim dominated area like Murshidabad and in the area dominated by scheduled caste or scheduled tribes namely Dinajpur, In other words the present study has made an effort to fathom whether there exist any difference on the basis of the community. Purposive sampling was adopted for the study.

Sample Description : The composition of the sample according to age, family structure, marital status, education of occupation is as follows:

Age Group	Total No. of Women
19-28	14
29-38	23
39-48	10
49	3
Total :	50

Family Structure	Total No. of Women
joint	24
Nuclear	26
Total :	50

Martial Status	Total
Married	42
Widow	4
Unmarried	4
Total :	50

Level of Education	Total
Literate	9
Primary	8
Class 5 - 9	12
Madhyamik	11
Higher Secondary	5
Graduate	5
Total	50

Occupation	Total
Agricultural Labourer	2
Own Cultivation	4
Household Work	33
Teacher/Private, Tutor	3
Sewing	3
Social Work	3
Shop Owner	2
Total	50

Technique of date collection : With the help of a structured questionnaire, the 50 respondents were interviewed in their villages.

Period of Survey : The study was conducted in January and February 1995.

4.2 *Findings of the Study*

4.2.i *Family Dynamics*

A number of newspaper articles have focused on the active co-operation of the family members of the women candidates to the Panchayat during the time of the elections. Brief interviews by reporters with these candidates highlighted the spark of freedom which was visible in the eyes of some of these women candidates who were participating in the political process for the first time. Their husbands, fathers-in-law and brothers were the main crusaders for their cause who extended full support to these women. In some cases, the candidates concerned were well wished by their neighbours also; providing encouragement at every turn. This made some reporters comment "a new form of leadership is being introduced by the reservation policy".

The present field study, however, did not portray such a positive picture. After completion of more than one year of their tenureship, only 16 women out of 50 interviewed stated without hesitation that they were being still fully supported by their family members which enabled them to perform their Panchayat duties properly. The family members of these 32% women had accepted their absence from the house. However it needs to be pointed out that amongst these 16 fortunate members, four were widows and another person enjoyed freedom because she was unmarried. It was usually expected that unmarried and widowed women had less work load. However, 9 from amongst the 16 women expressed that there had been significant change in their work load relating to housework. Right from cooking to cleaning utensils, washing clothes, keeping the house clean etc., they get help from their husband, children, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law. On the other hand, majority of these 16 women do not face any change in their daily routine.

On the other extreme, were the women who, all the time, experience stiff resistance from their family members in fulfilling their duties as elected Panchayat members. Overburdened by housework and other social stigma, restriction of movement, and lack of self confidence, 8 respondents of the present study were unable to meet up to their dreams of participating actively in politics. They were mere puppets in the hands of their husbands who usually exploit the political power of their wives and 'rule'them.

The position of the rest of the 26 women were even worse. They were apparently allowed to attend the Panchayat meetings physically but in fulfilling the duties of the Panchayats in name only. These women expressed that either they were guided by party men or their husbands in enacting Panchayat responsibilities. To quote one, *"all the work is done by them. Everything is done by my husband. He supervises the repair and maintenance of the roads"*. The position of these women was worse as they

were not physically restricted from movement. They are allowed to visit the villagers and act as if they wield power, but they are not rescued by their husbands from such duties. Only 3 women felt that the family members compromised in case they were unable to meet with all exigencies of the household work.

	Less Workload			No change in Workload			Total
	D	M	B	D	M	B	
Support from family members enabling them o fulfil PR duties	1	4	4	-	3	4	16
Apparent support but actual work done by the family members	2	-	-	9	5	9	26
No. support at all	-	-	-	6	-	2	8

Notes : D = Dinajpur
M = Murshidabad
B = Birbhum

However, the women members of Birbhum of Birbhum district enjoyed maximum freedom in this respect followed by partial freedom of the women of Murshidabad. The position of the women of Dinajpur Vis-a Vis the family responsibilities was the worst. They were less articulate politically also. So one major obstacle in women's participation in Panchayat is time. H.S. Mukherjee (1944:210) states "right from early morning to late night, they take care of their children, sweep and clean their homes, walk long distances to fetch water, fodder and fuel wood, send children to school, take care of livestock, and the elders and cook and distribute food, help in farm activities and do all kinds of miscellaneous things which are important:. And, to quote Mazumdar (1993) article in The Telegraph *"Ego disallows most males from actively involving themselves in household chores. As a result many women Panchayat Members will have to add their political work on top of considerable domestic burden".*

4.2.ii Economic Position

The economic position of the women respondents was also looked into. The questionnaire focused on whether the respondents were gainfully engaged in any work and their perception as to whether it helps in Panchayat work. It was also assessed whether the women were economically independent in the sense they have

control over their earnings to measure their economic status. Over and above, the economic benefit of being a Panchayat member was also analysed.

After the analysis of date, it was clarified that an overwhelming majority of the respondents were not engaged in any outside work. Only 9 women members had an earning of their own by being employed as agricultural labourer, engaged in sewing.

What was found significant is that 14 out of 50 respondents consider that a gainfully engaged woman can be an active worker of the Panchayat. In fact economic independence helps in Panchayat work because these 28% women felt that mentally and financially they were much better off than their other women counterparts. One of these members also contributed to the Panchayat fund from time to time. Moreover, extra income permitted them to travel to different places by rickshaw. Otherwise, they had to depend on their husbands to take them to the Panchayat office on cycles or to walk the whole way. Under such circumstances it becomes difficult to attend the Gram Panchayat meetings on time. One woman member stated a very interesting fact. Her extra income had provided her ample time to be actively involved with Panchayat work.

As it is, these women were overburdened with household work. In addition, other activities would deter them from whatever Panchayat meeting they could attend. However, what was most grave is the fact that 16 of these respondents could not express any idea as to whether gainful employment helped them in Panchayat work. These women failed to express their opinions as they stated they had very little idea about Panchayat Raj as a concept. This reflects their lack of involvement with Panchayats.

When attention was focused on the awareness of these women regarding the economic benefit of being a member, the apathy of these women became more significant. Out of 50 respondents 38 of them (76%) did not receive a regular sitting fees which they were entitled to. Out of these 38, three had not received any money at all, not even the tiffin fees which each member was supposed to get on attending a meeting of the Panchayat. Again, 12 amongst these 38 women received only tiffin fees of Rs. 20/- per meeting. The rest of the 23 respondents either received a lumpsum of Rs. 80/- to Rs. 160/- once or twice or over a few meetings.

The position of the 12 other women was definitely better than their exploited 'sisters', as they received sitting fees regularly, However, 5 out of these 12 women were confident that Panchayats provided them the rightful amount every month. The other 7 interviewees stated that though they got a petty amount from the Panchayat, the payment was regular. But these seven women had to contribute out of their income from Panchayat to the party who provided them support during the elections.

The fact which must be stressed here is that not a single respondent felt that the fees they got from the Panchayat could meet their needs. The amount was not sufficient in every respect. They clould not forego the other activities which earned them money, just because they were Panchayat member.

The respondents were also asked whether they enjoyed sufficient economic gains or any other kind of gain. In response to the question, 17 members commented on the different kinds of benefits they had been able to exploit because of being a member of the Panchayat body. The following table highlights the kind of benefits they could reap :

1.	Experienced mental satisfaction	-	6
2.	Gained respect of the villagers	-	6
3.	Gained confidence to help others	-	1
4.	More exposure to the society	-	1
5.	Can contribute money to the family and meet children's school fees		
6.	Bought a pond	-	1
7.	A benefit no doubt but could not specify.	-	1

Before concluding this section, it needs to be mentioned that whatever meagre income these women had (even the tiffin fees of Rs. 20/- per meeting), only 7 women had the freedom to decide how to spend their income without any resistance from other family members. In general, it was visible that even after being a Panchayat member, these women were not enjoying any economic gain and had not been able to reap any gain.

	Gainfully Engaged			Not engaged gainfully			Total
	D	M	B	D	M	B	
Employment helps in expediting PR duties	2	2	5	3	-	2	14
Employment creates problem	1	4	-	4	3	8	20
Could not express any opinion	-	-	-	8	3	5	16
			Total				50

	Dinajpur	Murshidabad	Birbhum	Total
Sitting fees received	-	3	9	12
Sitting fees not received regularly	18	9	11	38
		Total		50

As the tables indicate, the inhabitants of Murshidabad and Birbhum were fortunate. Roy (1993) in the article in Ananda Bazar Patrika, corroborated the findings of the study. Most women members are either 'wives' or 'daughters' of poverty striken families. At least this is the hard truth of the Gram Panchayat members.

4.2.iii Community and Social Environment

In a traditional rural society, politics is regarded as 'unwomanly' as Sen (1994:61) comments, the attitude of traditional men prevents women from participating actively in the body politics. They are victims of various types of social control. Society has rarely provided them with an opportunity for self actualisation. It is therefore necessary to infer the receptivity of the community and how far the society is conducive to their participation. An attempt is also made to assess the awareness of the respondents about their own society.

The impression generated by the 50 respondents highlighted that in most cases, it was the party to which the women candidates belonged which encouraged them to contest the elections and participate in the political process. 32 of the 50 women members who were interviewed stated that the party men took the initiative to put in the nomination paper during the time of election. In other words 64% were influenced, cajoled and encouraged by the party members to stand for Panchayat elections. However, it was not the party only. The family members always stood by the side of these 32 respondents to guide them accordingly. In most of these families, the husbands adopted an active role in supporting the women members during their election time.

Villagers also provided the necessary motivation and in the case of 12 women respondents, the nomination paper was submitted by these said villagers. On the other hand, the nomination paper of two women interviewees were submitted by their brothers and one by the father-in-law. But what attracted attention was that in the case three women, the nomination paper was placed by themselves on their own decision.

The above analysis clarifies a fact. One can comment that initially women were accepted more easily than expected as in most cases the husbands or fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, brothers, uncles and even mothers-in-law, sometimes influenced women to stand in elections. Apparently it would seem that the community in which they lived has acknowledged their presence in the decision making process. But surely they did not have a free rein over everything. Once they came into power, the party men did not create a very congenial environment. All the women whose nomination papers were submitted by their respective political parties, as Basu (1993) in the Statesman expressed, were puppets in the hands of their political bosses. To quote one of Basu's interviewees when she was asked *"who is superior, the party or the Panchayat ?", "The party !"* she replied. This woman member's opinion is corroborated by the women members who have to abide by the party's directives. In response to the question as to *"Why did the party help you contest elections?"*, these respondents equivocally expressed, *"For the party's benefit"*.

The condition of women who were inspired by their husbands or other male family members was no better. As appeared from the interviews the society was not given free access in as far as Panchayat work was concerned. Their men still call the shots as Dam (1993) puts it. Their subverted role which has no space for independent thought or action impose them to follow their men. Only three women expressed a positive change of their subservient status as they stated that the decision to contest elections was their own. They were not coaxed, or cajoled or influenced or even forced by any other persons. And the community always stood beside them.

Certain factors appeared to have helped the party men the family members to influence these women easily. Apart from three women. the rest of the 47 respondents stated that this was their first attempt at contesting elections. They had never showed any keenness to participate in the political process earlier.

Moreover, though the women members from Birbhum district spoke more confidently, none of the members seemed very articulate about the primary reason as to why they developed an inclination to enter the political scene. Only some women from Birbhum could specify that they expected their direct participation in politics to enable them help the villages and specially the women. The rest could not explain what they meant by *"to gain our own benefit"*.

It also appeared from the interview that women respondents were not aware of social problems and movements. Their knowledge regarding the social movements seemed to have been restricted to women's molestation. Only two women could specify and give concrete answers when probed about the social movement. One of these women members mentioned the Narmada movement and Gandhiji's Satyagraha while the other considered the literacy campaign as a social movement. Twenty of these members, however, commented that they did not have any idea whatsoever about

social movements. The ignorance of these women is an added advantage for party men to guide women for party benefit.

The society itself does not seem very responsive, as very, few respondents stated that there were some active women's organisation or NGOs working in the region. Nine women answered that there were some women's organisations trying to help the rural women become self reliant. Women's organisations in Panchayat they can effort to uplift the life of desolate women through the DWCRA scheme. However only two members out of nine said that they were members of these organisations and that they had dedicated their life to the cause of women's empowerment. Other seven women expressed doubts in the sincerity of the women's organisation. NGO's have not been able to reach the grassroot people in large numbers. This also acts in favour of the party men. Due to lack of sincere spokespersons for the women, who could protest against the unreasonable actions against women? The power wielders could channelise the ignorant women to strengthen party's cause. The society is still not mature enough to stand up for women. However, the situation in Murshidabad and Birbhum is far better than Dinajpur.

4.2.iv Involvement of Women Panchayat members

The present field based study has also made an attempt to gather insights about the actual contributions made by these 50 women as Panchayat members during last one-and-a-half years. Involvement for the present purpose is measured in two ways :

1. their physical presence in Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat meetings; whether they note down the minutes of the meetings; whether records of their attendance are kept; how the sitting arrangements are made at the meetings.

2. their contribution towards the overall community development i.e., maintenance and repairs, roads, light, water supply, drainage system etc.

Analysis of data highlighted that the physical presence of the member in Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat could be categorised under three divisions :

a. High level of participation, i.e. when the member has attended all the meetings of Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabhas barring may be two or three.

b. Average attendance when they participated in more than 50% of such meetings.

c. Poor attendance when they have attended less than 50%. This section also includes those women members who have stated that no Gram Sabha was

organised in their villages and also those respondents who could not clarify how many such meetings they have attended.

Level of Participation	Total No. of women	PC of women
High	28	56%
Average	8	16%
Poor	14	28%

However, 13 out of the 28 women who regularly attended the meeting confessed that the meetings were not always held at their convenience. They face problems in attending such meetings. In spite of such problems their involvement, according to them was quite significant. These 56% women regularly took down notes and recorded minutes of the meetings. Very few exhibited lack of confidence in keeping track of the meetings in writing. Still, this minuscule minority of women take help from their husbands or brothers in case they have to refer to the previous meetings.

The latter half, that is the rest of the 44% of women expressed lack confidence in as far as written evidence of the meetings are concerned. Some were bold enough to highlight their lack of confidence. However, only the women categorised under the 'poor' group (28%), lacked involvement in expediting Panchayat duties. It could not be understood whether they were being compelled to take a back seat or that they themselves lacked dedication.

As far as their contribution to community development was concerned, most of these women claimed to have played an active role in tubewell construction maintenance of roads, school buildings, drainage system and water supply. Some women Panchayat members had tried sincerely to work towards women's empowerment by taking initiative in providing loan to rural women, protesting aginst injustices like child marriage and molestation alongwith helping villagers in general. This degree of involvement was by 30 women members, i.e. 60% of the interviewees. It is clear from the study that womenfolk are now ready to participate in Panchayats for the betterment of humankind. This works against the myth that women are not capable of taking active part in any kind of developmental work. Given suitable opportunities, they might even take better care of larger interests of the village. The offending agent in this case is the male resistance that they have to put up with. In fact, the latter 40% of the women corroborated that men discount the presence of women in Panchayat. Men feel insecure to share power with women. So quite often these women were not allowed to work in the villages. They were not always informed about the functions of the Panchayat as the *Pradhans*, party men and their husbands did not allow them to join the network.

4.2.v Political awareness and perception of meaningful participation as 'women'

Participation in the political scene also necessitates awareness of the political field. Political awareness of the respondents was also probed into. Enquiry was made as to how these women members come to know about the 1/3 reservation of Panchayat seats for women and how they keep in touch with the political field and so on. Mass media did not seem to play any vital role in the lives of the women interviewed, as only 10 i.e. 2% of them stated that they depended on the newspaper, television and radio as well, apart from the villagers and their family. Majority of them, therefore, had to rely on villagers and family members for information. They had to accept the way men folk interpret them.

In response to the question as to how women members became aware of the reservation policy introduced by the 73rd Amendment Act, two women claimed that they heard it on the radio. The rest (48 i.e., 96%) were told by party men, who had influenced the respective husbands to motivate their women for election. Villagers in some cases provided the required inspiration. This lack of awareness, perhaps, inhibits women from getting involved with Panchayats.

Few questions were also included in the questionnaire to ascertain the perception of women members about their meaningful participation in Panchayats. Special emphasis was placed on the 'woman' criterion. Therefore, context of discrimination between male and women Panchayat members was brought within the purview. The context stressed on the degree of participation of men and women, whether women verbally participated in the meetings, whether their decisions were received open heartedly by their male counterparts, whether the women were also members of any Standing Committee, whether these women have been able to solve women related issues, as well as how often villagers consulted them about their problems.

With regard to verbal participation in the meetings, 3 types of opinions came out from the interview, which were :

1. Each and every member participates equally = 22

2. Women do not participate and men take more opportunity = 9.

3. Women lack confidence and are scared to speak out = 19.

The above tabulation highlights that more women (44%) expressed that they participated equally with men and did not feel any apparent difference because of their gender. On the other hand, 9 women (18%), gave a contrasting viewpoint. What however, seemed more significant was that 19(38%), women lacked confidence in expressing their opinions during the meetings. As Mukherjee (1994) pointed out

perhaps "the cultural inhibition accompanying women's participation often pose major problems for joint sessions of men and women held in villages. It can constrain the women from expressing frank opinion on many matters."

Verbal participation in meetings	Dinajpur	Murshidabad	Birbhum	Total
Each and every member participates equally	-	8	14	22
Women do not participate and men take advantage	7	1	1	9
Women lack confidence and are scared to speak out	11	3	5	19
		Total		50

A very pertinent question was added in the questionnaire relating to the acceptance of women's decisions by men folk. Out of the 50, 16 women (32%) felt that men mostly did not give importance to women's decisions. No detailed information regarding this issue could be collected as about 10% of the women appeared to be unaware of the men's reaction regarding the issue under consideration signifying lack of perception about meaningful participation as women.

Amongst the respondents interviewed, 21 (42%) of them stated that they were members of different kinds of Standing Committees. However, majority of them did not mention the committees of which they were members. In this context it should be mentioned that only 2 women in Dinajpur were members of the Standing Committees. In West Bengal there are 10 standing Committees under the Panchayats :

i. *Artha, Sanstha, Unnayan O Parikalpana Sthayee Samiti* (Finance, Establishment, Development and Planning Standing Committee).

ii. Bon *O Bhumisanskar Sthayee Samiti* (Forest and Land Reforms Standing Committee).

iii. *Krishi, Sech O Samabay Sthayee Samiti* (Agriculture, Irrigation and Cooperative Standing Committee).

iv. Purta, Karya O Paribahan Sthayee Samiti (Public Works and Transport Standing Committee).

v. Janaswasthay O Paribesh Sthayee Samiti (Public Health & Environment Standing Committee).

vi. *Siksha Sanskriti Tathya O Kria Sthayee Samiti* (Education, Culture, Information & Sports Standing Committee).

vii. *Khudra, Shilpa, Tran O Jana Kalyan Sthayee Samiti* (Cottage & Small Scale Industries, Relief & Social Welfare Standing Committee).

viii. *Matsya O Pranisampad Bikash Sthayee Samiti* (Fisheries & Animal Resources Standing Committee).

ix. *Khadya O Sarbarata Sthayee Samiti* (Food & Supplies Standing Committee).

x. *Bidyut O Achira Charit Sthayee Samiti* (Power & Non Conventional Energy Resources Standing Committee).

Besides this there is a *Samanmay Samiti* (Coordination Committee) headed by the Chairperson of either the Zilla Parishad or the Panchayat Samiti. This Samiti coordinates the function between a Standing Committee and the Panchayat body and also between different Standing Committees and monitors the activities of the lower tier Panchayat bodies for which funds are allotted by the higher tier Panchayat bodies for execution of schemes.

One of the most significant aspects was the acceptance of these members by villagers. Interviewees stressed on 'before-after' situation. It was noted that 29 (58%) women were approached by villagers for advice only after they were elected as Panchayat members. However, out of these 29, about 15 (51.75%) women expressed that only women came to consult the elected women Panchayat members. It appears from the above analysis that the women were not easily accepted as members. Men still did not trust them and rely on them. They had no faith in 51.75% of the respondents interviewed.

On the other hand, 12 women exhibited confidence when they stated that their 'advice' was sought even before they became elected members of the Panchayat. These 12 (24%) women were trusted by their fellow villagers and were not ignored. Nine women were less specific regarding this issue. Either they expressed that they were very indecisive and unsure or are compelled to maintain a low profile because of party men, family members and in some cases the *Pradhans* of Gram Panchayats.

The above analysis illustrates very clearly that the men folk still hesitate to accept their women counterparts as their equals.

Meaningful participation also calls for a systematic training of the said members whereby they would be able to expedite their responsibilities properly. A very

interesting fact was revealed from these interviews. Majority of the women (barring 7 of them), attended training programmes organised for their benefit. It must be mentioned here that not every member understood the content of the training workshop as 24 (48%) of them clearly reported their inability to understand the Panchayat Raj. So much so, 2 of these women replied "no idea" as soon as they were asked about the content of the training programme which they stated they had attended. The situation highlights that the training given to these women was not comprehensible by all.

4.2.vi Perception of leadership of Panchayats

Leadership is a group process which enables individuals to initiate activities for achieving the common objectives of the group or community. This calls for joint effort of each and every member stimulating each other, supplementing abilities and resources and evolving an effective organisational and hierarchical pattern.

The present study laid importance on the leadership pattern also. At the Gram Panchayat level, it is the *Pradhan* who is considered to be the pivot of the system and regular meetings.

An attempt was made to assess the opinions of the women members regarding the leadership qualities of a '*Pradhan*' and whether any difference was felt by them between a male *Pradhan* and a female *Pradhan* and in reception from the Government officials. Another question was added in the questionnaire to discern whether women *Pradhans* were more sincere to the cause of women's empowerment.

Three types of opinions were highlighted by the 50 respondents pertaining to the issue of difference between male and female *Pradhans* which are :

		Dinajpur	Murshidabad	Birbhum	Total
1.	No difference is felt by the respondents	-	8	11	19
2.	Only the Govt. officials respond less to women otherwise no difference from the male members	3	4	5	12
3.	Difference in attitude is felt from the Govt. officials & male members	15	-	4	19
	TOTAL				50

The above tabulated representation clearly signifies that more number of women felt a difference in attitude of others when the *Pradhan* was a woman. (Only 19 women had not succumbed to the age-old differences in treatment based on 'gender' factor). The man depended more on the decisions and suggestions put forward by

fellow men rather than on women. To quote some respondents : *"We do not get any importance from them (men) officially.*

To quote Pal (1994) *"They - women members are victims of gender bias"*. These women were bogged down with this particular character of the society that they themselves considered that men can take better decisions amongst the two. The result was that they displayed a lack of confidence in themselves.

Rest of the women apparently did not find any difference between a male and female *Pradhan*. These 38% of respondents felt that women *Pradhans* can also put across their point of views.

However, a significant aspect must be discussed here which clarifies as to why the confidence in women *Pradhans* was not showed by all. These 50 respondents were asked to describe the necessary qualities of a *Pradhan*. About 50% of these women were not eloquent in describing the qualities required of an able *Pradhan*. Some only mentioned honesty and integrity, some laid stress on ability to build interpersonal relationships with villagers, and some considered a *Pradhan* should be a 'Good Samaritan' first but could not explain what exactly the person was supposed to do.

24 of these women, however, were very specific regarding what is to be expected from a leader of the Gram Panchayat. A leader, according to them must possess more than one quality. He/She should be educated, honest, patient, responsible, devoted to her/his cause, bold, strong and soft natured as well whereby she could build good support with the villagers and serve them truly.

Emphasis on the 'gender' issue by the present paper was also clear from the question as to whether the women *Pradhan* can be more supportive of women related problems. A very significant majority of these members, i.e. 50% (30 out of 50), felt that women were more sincere and active cheer leaders of women. It appeared that these women believed that women were intrinsically as such, no inferior to men in basic intelligence as well as in managerial capabilities. It is they who generally run the households. *"Given suitable opportunities', according to Prasad (1994), "they might even take better care of the larger interest of village. The involvement of women in rural development and management is expected to result in change in focus to rural administration".*

The impression perhaps, that could be formed about the rest of the 40% of the women was, these women were socialised to believe that men could only act as trouble shooters.

4.2.vii Impressions about Panchayat Raj

It is vital for every society to strike at the ignorance of the general mass by dissemination of information and raising general as well as political awareness among the toiling rural people and specially rural women who are doubtly exploited : first as being illiterate, ignorant and poorly informed than urbanites and secondly by virtue of being women.

What is most basic in this case is to gather ideas regarding women's awareness of the society and how well informed they are. Once the reality is highlighted, necessary steps to eradicate the problems would be planned accordingly. As a result, the present study made special effort to measure the impression and knowledge of the women members regarding Panchayat Raj.

This section sought information on the following issues :

i. whether the women members concerned considered the present Panchayat system to be better than the previous one;

ii. whether inclusion of women in the planning process of the Panchayat body has been able to strengthen the said institution;

iii. awareness of the women regarding source of finance of Gram Panchayats, how it is utilised and justification in endowing the PR system, with greater control over the finance;

iv. their perception about the role of PR system in implementing women's empowerment, and

v. whether the political scenario in West Bengal is different with the inclusion of women.

Majority of the respondents interviewed (62%), expressed that the new form of Panchayats introduced by the 73rd Amendment Act was much more advanced as a local self government unit as it assured participation of both genders (3 from Dinajpur, 11 from Murshidabad and 18 from Birbhum). However, one cannot ignore the frustration of the rest of the 38% women who felt that the previous Panchayats worked more sincerely. Nevertheless, the present questionnaire could not grasp the reason behind lack of faith of the women members in the present system of Panchayats.

Despite such a dismal picture presented by the women, one interesting thing became clear from the study. All the women except four, unanimously added that the reservation policy induced by the 73rd Amendment Act, demanding reservation of

1/3 seats in the Panchayat body for women, would definitely change the present Panchayat Raj System towards betterment. Women by nature are kind hearted, just and honest. Induction of women into the system would gradually destroy corruption and nepotism which characterises the present day Panchayats. Since their origin women have been planning and managing sources quite successfully. This special ability could well be utilised in Panchayat work.

However, when these same women were asked how the money could be utilised by them for rural women's empowerment, they responded very vaguely signifying lack of proper knowledge about Panchayat Raj system.

Another dissatisfactory fact was revealed after the analysis of data. Few women (28%), had complete knowledge regarding the different schemes under the Panchayat Raj or the source from where Panchayats specially Gram Panchayats can get money. These 14 women had a clear conception of the sources of funds being Central Government, State Government, Taxation, different schemes etc., while 11 women Panchayat members were aware of schemes like JRY, IRDP, SRPP and so on.

Quite a significant percentage of these women. i.e. 42% were not aware of the schemes specially introduced for women under the Panchayat Raj (PR) system. The repeatedly stated "No idea" and could not suggest what other types of schemes could be introduced for women's upliftment.

However, from the statements of the rest of the members, which constituted 58% of those interviewed, it was clear, that given a chance these women are quite ready, capable and determined to lead Panchayats to success. They emphasised on schemes which would ensure self reliance and enable rural women to earn money through home based gainful occupation, so when they were asked to relate new schemes for women, they harped on loans which would provide support to those women who had adopted sewing, tailoring, preparing pressed rice, preparing 'bidi' and small handicrafts as their gainful engagement.

The confidence of the women Panchayat members who were brought under the preview of the body, became prominent when 21 of them (42%), suggested that women were equally capable to play the role of an administrator in any political body like their opposite counterparts and 9 (18%) emphatically stated that women excelled more as administrators being more tolerant, honest, loyal, and more dedicated to women's upliftment.

Though the latter 40% stated otherwise and claimed that men were better administrators they never held 'biological' difference between men and women to be the main reason for it. Rather, they considered the society in which these women

live the major discouraging factor for women to adapt the role of the administrator. Certain difficulties are always associated with women.

At every step these women faced the problems relating to geographical mobility, cultural inhibition, male dominance and subjugation and exploitation of party men, which held them back from fully participating in the decision making process of the PR system.

	Dinajpur	Murshidabad	Bribhum	Total
Women capable of championing women's cause equally	1	7	13	21
Women more tolerant, honest etc. as Administrators.	4	-	5	9
Men are better Administrators.	13	5	2	20
		TOTAL		50

Section 5

5.1 *Conclusion*

The impression gathered from the analysis of the study revealed that women's participation in the decentralised governance and development with a few exceptions had been peripheral. The traditional outlook in rural areas, lack of education and awareness and access to information are the primary reasons for the tilt of the balance of power against women.

The women respondents still faced stiff resistance from the men folk both at home and outside. Their workload relating to household chores had not been reduced. Quite naturally these women toil day and night to cope with both the worlds. Inspite of the fact that some women members enjoyed the support of the family members during the time of election, support did not extend to housework also.

Assetlessness and lack of personal income did not allow them to participate to the fullest extent in politics. Assets assure control of power and without it sustenance of livelihood becomes difficult thereby holding people back from organising themselves to participate in village or block or Zilla affairs through Panchayats. Majority of the women interviewed are not engaged gainfully and perpetually occupy the bottom step of the social ladder. Membership in Panchayat also did not prove to be fruitful as they hardly gained any economic benefit. As appeared from the interviews, they were not paid any sitting fees regularly. Even if some did not get their rightful fees, it was either very meagre or irregular. The political party under whose ticket they fought the election always deducted money from their fees for party funds.

So, lack of awareness - economically, socially and politically appeared to have curtailed women's participation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI's). They were opportunistically utilised by their husbands, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, brothers on one hand and political party on the other for their own benefit. Quite a significant percent of the women interviewed asserted that they had to act according to the party's decisions. They experienced reasonable reception from the society itself, only to function as per the whims of the power holders.

Apart from the minuscule few, these women had no previous experience in public life. As a result, in spite of being physically present in the Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings they hardly gave any suggestions nor did they take initiatives to extend their view points. However, many expressed the willingness and confidence to work for rural women. Given the right opportunity, they felt they could solve problems women face all the time. Though the respondents could not explain with concrete examples as to how they could strive for rural women's empowerment, the feeling generated by them was positive in nature.

They are considered by many to have a better sense of time management, to be better communicators, better in human relations and have greater understanding of planning, executing and controlling activities. They possess all the necessary qualities, of a leader, similar to men. and differences in leadership depends on personal traits rather than on gender. Yet the women did face gender bias from the male members, senior government officers and to some extent from women themselves who were socialised to accept male supremacy.

Absence of involvement in community development might be due to the ignorance of democratic processes and values, working of democratic institutions, concept and relevance of PR particularly of the importance of the present Panchayat Raj Act and one-third reservation of seats for women, various poverty alleviation programmes and policies for women and other sections. Very few respondents had a clear conception about these programmes, sources of fund, different agencies which can promote support financially.

A paragraph or two must be added on the comparative assessment of the four districts where the present study was carried out, namely Birbhum, Murshidabad and Dinajpur both north and south. Women members of Birbhum were found to be politically more mature and were inclined to be actively involved in the PRI's. Perhaps, such confidence was the result of the support of the family as well as their community. Despite heavy workload, women members of Birbhum found time to participate in Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat meetings. Though the respondents of Murshidabad were not as fortunate they were supported by their family in contrast to the majority of the women members of Dinajpur.

The inhabitants of Birbhum and Murshidabad expressed greater awareness about the economic benefit of being a member in the PR System. This was because these members received sitting fees regularly, however meagre it might be despite the contribution they had to make to the party fund.

Involvement of the women Panchayat members of Birbhum and Murshidabad was also highlighted by the political awareness about the PR system as expressed by these women who appeared to have a clearer perception of meaningful participation. These women felt, after their experience with the Panchayats for more than one year, women in general were equally capable of performing Panchayat duties as they were honest, hard working, sincere, and tolerant in nature. They also stated to have faced less discrimination from male members as well as governmental bodies. However, the respondents from Birbhum could voice more about the system and had more knowledge about the sources of finance for the Gram Panchayats and what more could be done for the rural women of Bengal.

From the above assessment it becomes clear that the respondents of Dinajpur were in the worst situation. Primarily because they were less informed about the PRIs being more ignorant politically. What was more important was that their society seemed to have taken less initiative in making them politically articulate nor had it tried to create a congenial environment for them. As a result, these women expressed less confidence as members of Panchayats and stated that in most cases they were compelled by their husbands or, party men to join the PRI's.

To conclude, like Joshi (1994) : *"Hence in the immediate future the rural women have to take up the cudgels and reap full advantage of the opportunities given to participate in rural affairs through the medium of PRI's.* So, what is needed is the will to strengthen political empowerment which could be achieved through a combination of multiple strategies and programmes (Kumar : 1994)

First and foremost it is necessary to sensitise those in power about the issue of women's development and rights. Attitudinal change of administrative machinery is the primary task of nation builders to accelerate development. This should accompany generations of awareness among women where Government should take the lead. NGO's, women's organisations and movements can adopt various strategies for educating women on women related issues. They are to play a positive role providing information, skill and resources for evolving and establishing to grassroot women's organisations. People in general and women in particular have to be made fully conscious of their rights and responsibilities under the new system which calls for political mobilisation. To exploit the resources in the name of Women' Literacy Campaign should be included in the agenda of awareness generation.

Women should also be encouraged to participate in public affairs and in dealing with external agencies. Therefore, orientation-cum-training programmes must be introduced where government of West Bengal has already taken the initiative and trying sincerely to track them politically. The programme should aim at changing the patriarchal orientation in men and male institutions (Kumar, 1994).

There is an urgent need for a resource centre also to provide help to the women members of Panchayats with educative and informative materials on different issues. This could also serve as a common meeting place for women for interactions and exchange of ideas.

However, as stated repeatedly by all and reflected from the present study, women cannot participate properly because of the extreme work load. It is therefore, necessary to provide certain support services to women members of Panchayats for strengthening political empowerment. In other words, involvement, dedication and commitment of Government, NGO's and people themselves are most essential elements needed for PRI's to function properly.

5.2 *DD's Support to Women in Panchayat Raj*

Development Dialogue, the NGO based in West Bengal had expressed a feeling of empathy towards the women in Panchayat Raj. In response to this, the said NGO had organised a three day training workshop for the *Pradhans* and elected women members of Gram Panchayats, under DWCRA. The objective of the training programme held in October 11-14, 1993 were :

1. to provide the participants with a clear conception of the situation of women and children in the small society,

2. to impart training about the need for organisation and group dynamics in the above respect,

3. to get a clear idea about the DWCRA programme and its linkage with other development programmes concerning women and children and how this could be better coordinated,

4. to understand clearly the role of Panchayat members in effective implementation of DWCRA programme.

The programme was attended by 15 male pradhans and 15 women members of the Gram Panchayat.

All the 15 women members of the Gram Panchayat were newly elected and did not have any experience of the functioning of Panchayats unlike the *Pradhans* who had earlier experience of working either as *Pradhans*, Upa-pradhans or as members. The training programme, therefore, was designed to serve the heterogeneity both in regard to sex and experience.

After the introduction, the participants were made to express their expectations followed by the discussion on objectives of the training in greater detail.

The training programme had incorporated an unconventional aspect whereby men and women were being trained together with a hierarchical barrier and difference in experience and exposure. The women members were either escorted by their husbands or the *Pradhan* from their village and were very respectful towards them. Conscious efforts were made by the members of DD to make them feel comfortable and at ease and to participate effectively.

All the women being new and inexperienced were shy to talk in the class as the *Pradhans* were also present. However, as the programme proceeded these women became more articulate and participated more freely.

The activities envisaged under DWCRA were also discussed where the weak and strong points identified for women were explained, namely :

a. To enhance the collective strength of women through organisation of groups.

b. To enhance their level of awareness.

c. To improve their skills in the existing work and to acquire new skills.

d. To be informed about economic and other programmes so that they can avail of these facilities stretched on to the elaborate explanation of TRYSEM, JRY, ICDS, Adult Education, Health & Family Welfare and the concept of poverty, inequality of income, inadequacy of resources, inequality in access to resources were also in the agenda of the training programme. The deplorable situation of women and children of the families below the poverty line was explained to the participants. To understand the concept of a group, leadership was also introduced to the participants who were made aware of DWCRA being an instrument for bringing improvement in the economic state of women.

The role of Panchayat members was also given attention to alongwith the responsibility of women members in the absence of the *Pradhans*.

The session was quite interactive and generated a lot of discussions which evoked many questions like :

1. What were the motivations for them to get organised;

2. How could they overcome social and familial barriers to come out of their home and work together;

3. Did they still face any resistance from the family members particularly husbands regarding their mobility which is required for participation in the training programme, procuring inputs etc.;

4. How they adjusted their work between occupational demands and household demands;

5. Did they feel handicapped for not being literate;

6. What kind of child care facilities are arranged by them;

7. Are other women in the neighbourhood interested in joining this sort of programme and what are their attitudes towards it.

8. Do they think that they can manage their affairs even if DD withdraws.

The answers to these questions were brief. What could be inferred from their conversations was that it was much easier to overcome the social restrictions and the resistance of the husband due to their enhanced economic contribution. The women participants also informed us that in view of the need of being literate, they were attending literacy classes for one hour when they were in the work shed. They expressed satisfaction over the child care arrangements and non-formal education. Over and above, they also expressed confidence that if they continue like this with the learning process and participate with DD in sharing their responsibilities they will be able to stand on their own feet in the near future.

The Session concluded with a happy note as the participants felt it as a levelling one. The impression given by women members was that women's programmes would be strengthened with the mutual help and support from each other.

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Women, Decentralisation and the Left Parties : A Comment

- UMA Resource Centre

West Bengal has a history of party politics permeating to the lowest level of political governance. It has been ruled by the coalition led by the Communist Party of India for the past 18 years. This is one of the longest runs by any left party in the country. When Marxism and Leninism had collapsed the world over, Calcutta continues to have an undamaged statue of Lenin.

What catapulted the CPI(M) to fame was their stability, land reforms and agrarian reconstruction and the initiation of the three-tier Panchayat Systems. By 1990-91, the State Government was handing over 50% of the plan budget to the Panchayat.

One of the reasons cited for the success of socialism in Bengal is the fact that in spite of proclaiming 'dictatorship of the proletariat', they operate their political strategies within the parameters of the constitution and resemble any other democratic party. Their strategy till date has been one of mass mobilization in rural areas and in recent years through large scale direct recruitment to the party cadre.

"Thus along with conscientization, articulation and mobilization of the rural poor, vesting of democratic rights becomes an integral component of the strategy of political engineering".[1]

They have ensured the necessity of Panchayat Raj Institutions as a supplement to Parliamentary democracy to bring about development. The size of the population and the widespread poverty of the State warrants the Panchayats to become effective as *"nodules for collecting information about grassroot needs and requirements and transmit it up"*.

In this scheme of things where the party has a strong political structure which is male dominated, where do the women of the State come in? They were classically outside the system for all these years. This is because the left parties have neglected the mobilisation and organisation of women in the past. This disconcern is attributed to a certain mindset of the leadership. However with the passage of 73rd and 74th Amendments, the left parties have been compelled to give political space for women. This could well lead to a change in the left party ideology.

The first change was seen in Kultikri. Kultikri, is the only functioning All-Women Panchayat in Bengal today. The 13 member Women Panchayat was elected to office in 1993. Kultikri is situated in Thargram subdivision of Midnapore District in West Bengal. This is one among the many obscure, insignificant, drought prone village dominated by the tribals.

The 13 women who are Panchayat members including the Adyaksha and the Upadhyaksha were selected by the CPI(M). Over the two years they have performed well. They have availed of all the schemes and given it to the beneficiaries, renovated schools and ponds, and created cultivable land for poor families. 25 percent of the village is illiterate. Kultikri has taken a leading role in the district's literacy campaign.

The Panchayat has to do a lot more to mitigate the suffering of its population. Environmental degradation is a major concern. In spite of land reforms and agricultural re-construction that Bengal had pioneered, it is found that Kultikri's inhabitants, who are largely poor have yet to receive vested lands.

But people outside Kultikri, like the BDO Purnachandra Sheet rang a bell of bureaucratic high-handedness when he said "It should get all possible help and special projects while no lapses should be tolerated".[3]

It is clear that the Kultikri all women Panchayat exists only by left party diktat. As such, it is very different from the all women Panchayats of Maharashtra which are not a response to a single over-riding political presence. Rather, these panchayats of Maharashtra have come into being for a variety of reasons.

In an attempt to understand the links between the gender and leftist ideology, Chaya Datar writes as follows:

"We must look at Sheila Rowbothom's experience of Feminist party as an 'insider'. She makes a critique of the theory of organising which stems from Marxist theory of revolution. This will help us analyse the assumptions behind the left parties' position on women's movement.

Dogmatic Approach to History:- The left parties failed to respond to the women's question because they forgot that theory gets developed only through the dialectical process of dipping theory into experiences.

Manipulative Approach to History:- Left does not approach history in its complexities, but analyses history with the help of 'slots' , 'definitions' and 'categories'. If the category to understand certain phenomenon does not exist then that reality is ignored. Invisibility of women's question could be explained through this attitude.

Authoritarian Approach to the Movements:- Revolution is considered as 'science'. The theory is asserted as 'above' experience. This becomes a basis for emphasis on the intervening role of the party.

Subsequent Approach to the Class:- Vanguard concept of party and class provides 'in theory' a means of channelling for the greatest effect, all the elements in the struggle - economic, as well as social and cultural. In reality all the varieties of oppression are overgeneralised and considered as static. No attempts to change relations within party is possible, because party is supposed to be holding correct ideas. Party gets identified with the people at the top.

Democratic Centralist Approach to the Cadre:- Because of the centralist tendency within the party decision making process, leadership cannot be challenged by any new groups.

Dehumanised Approach to the Consciousness:- No quality of relationship as a part of a new society is discussed.

Further critiquing the above approach, the author postulates that what Sheila Rowbothom has to say mainly is that the way left parties have organised themselves, prevents them to go back to the original theory of society and revolution, and review them in the light of new developments on a number of fronts, one of them being women's front. Today women's component is absent from the left parties' politics, because it is absent from their theory of society. Women are 'invisible' everywhere. When they see women's movement in concrete, they call it a bourgeois movement and ignore it. The fault lies not in Marx's greatest theory of society, but the way people treat it dogmatically. Marx's greatest contribution is his method of materialist conception and dialectical treatment to history. By using this method certain lacunae can be filled or reconceptualisation of historical process can be developed.

Invisibility of women and their activity starts from the conceptual premises of human society. Production for Marxists is production of 'things' and not production of 'human life as a whole' which involves procreation as well as 'bringing up' children and 'looking after' grown ups. Women also carry out usual production activity, but under different production relations which is ignored too. Thus by neglecting women's special activity as well as usual activity, 'Production activity' is assumed as a man's premise and then everything else follows logically. Theory itself has serious blind spots. It claims to be holistic, and deals at the tendential level and hence it cannot be pardoned for ignoring such a vital activity, as procreation, which is conscious human activity and not a biologistic activity. Women carry out their activities within the domain of the family institution, where men dominate. Prohibition for participating in other activities, outside the family, relates them to the total hierarchical system. I call this male domination 'patriarchy', not only as a part of family institution, but as a part of total class rule.

I would say that in both cases women's movement was always seen as a byproduct, or as the result of mainstream political movement and not as the essential, indispensable part of the process of revolution, which contributed to the success of revolution. The mainstream movements were so strong and turbulent that women found themselves engulfed and thrown up on the waves, and men had to approve their contribution without hesitation. Thus participation of women in politics has definitely affected their status in the new society in some degrees and in certain areas of life. But still a lot of problems remain. The most important manifestation of these problems is that very few women are occupying decision making positions in those societies. Women's movement as such has no independent, autonomous status, from which 'base' women can voice their demands, discuss the government policies, and pressurise it. The movement seems to be stagnating.

The reasons seem to be two-fold: firstly, the women's organisations had grown either as a part of party-wings or with the blessings of party, and hence they remained susceptible to and dominated by the party policies on women; and secondly, women in the party never tried to develop a theory of women's movement, which would have helped to consolidate the movement and be a guiding path in future.

The consciousness for power and consciousness against exploitation, can emerge most strongly among people who are working directly opposite to capital, in a collective manner, using modern technology, is broadly the contention. Naturally all those who do not get opportunity to work under these conditions cannot acquire consciousness, giving them power to become leaders. Women stand at the lowest rung of this ladder. They are the most atomised, especially in the capitalist society, in the cities, where nuclear families have emerged. Their work is also not productive from the point of view of capital, and hence it is not paid, due to which they lack economic independence. It seems that too much importance is given to the experience at work place, that all the hopes are placed on the consciousness becoming revolutionary out of that experience and that all other areas of the life of men and almost the whole life of women get ignored. The man's life is divided between being exploited at the workplace, and being dominant at home, exploiting his wife. Not only that, but patriarchal ideology which men share with other men from other classes helps them acquire gender identity for themselves in the society. Women's movement in the west has pointed out this lacuna, raising the slogan of 'personal is political, and political is personal'. Thus the maxim that all the live experiences in life give rise to the conscious being and determine its actions, is the important principle put forth by women's movement.

The process of elimination of women which starts at the level of conceptualisation of the premise for human society, gets completed at its culminating instance i.e. political instance. Women have no place in the revolutionary process. If at all they dare to participate, they will be treated as a reserve army, guarding the rearfront,

and also as, handicapped men. Women's special consciousness about their specific experiences have got no place in the party politics. Women require special concessions, such as good workers. Women should not be working in second shift, because they should be available to perform their duties at home. Thus issues of women workers are taken in a limited perspective.

The party structured in a hierarchical manner cannot accommodate women. On the other hand, women's movements in the West have tried to develop different organisational form where individuals are not promoted as leaders but the collective leadership is stressed. They detest a centralised structure which tends to get bureaucratic. The question is, how we can make it a process emerging from below, rather than from above".[4]

The current induction of women into the party is welcomed by both CPM leaders and bureaucracy. Critics point out that the party had no alternative. Nominating women was just a way - and probably the only way to get rid of corrupt elements without arousing protests and dissent within the party. In principle, no man could actually oppose giving power to women.[5]

Thus decentralisation and the reservation for women in the local bodies adds an interesting dimension to the situation in Bengal. Circumstances have propelled the left parties to create spaces for women in their drive to decentralisation. Can gender now hold its own within the class struggle?

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Women and Panchayats:
The Tamilnadu Experience

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1995

It is difficult to present a paper on the experience with women in Panchayats in Tamilnadu. It is also difficult to elaborate on the prospects of future intervention to enhance the political role of women. For one, Tamilnadu has a very weak tradition of Panchayat Raj. The last elections were held in 1986, but Panchayats were subsequently dissolved and there have been no elections for almost ten years. Even the rules that must follow State legislation have not yet been framed. There is an obvious determination to postpone elections as far as it is constitutionally and politically feasible.

Indeed, if we go through the whole history of post independence Tamilnadu, the number of years when elected Panchayats existed here constitute only a small fraction of the total. There is hope that the 73rd and 74th Amendments will change this dismal scenario, even though right now the loop hole in the law by which there is no deadline for constituting the Panchayats for the first time has been used as delaying tactics. As state after state finally hold their elections, it seems inevitable that even this imperious government will have to hold elections.

In this background what we have set out to do is to take a close look at the knowledge and attitudes of rural women in 3 backward districts of Tamilnadu (Ramanathapuram, Kamarajar and Villupuram Ramaswamy Padayatchi districts), and at their perception of problems and prospects that the Panchayat Raj Institutions represent.

The study design...

It is not easy to assess the attitudes of women to Panchayats when there is so little direct experience of the same. We therefore chose to use structured questionnaires to gather some part of the data, but relied mainly on group discussions with women in the course of 3 workshops:

1. on Panchayat Raj law and local felt needs

2. on health and sanitation and

3. on agriculture and related problems.

The invitees to the workshops were largely women who had been active in the literacy movement and/or were active in local women's organisations, or else in some way or other active in the social life of the village. This definitely creates some sort of bias as the views of such women cannot be said to be truly representative of all the women in the village. However, as these women are more vocal and active, and have already been or are likely to be Panchayat members, this information is useful to understand the future potential of women in Panchayats. Moreover, by comparing this data with that obtained from the structured questionnaires, which were

distributed to a much wider section of women, we can make out how representative their views are.

Knowledge about Panchayat laws...

It is unfortunate, but the fact of the matter is women are not aware of either the old laws or the new ones. Even the more active women are not aware of the fact that there are reservations for women. The widespread cynicism about the possibility of any Panchayat elections being held may be one reason for such a lack of knowledge.

This is not to say that they have not heard of Panchayats or their functions. In Ramanathapuram district for example, out of the 225 women interviewed, 160 women knew that an institution like the Panchayat existed, and they had some basic understanding of its main features. About 164 of them knew of the recent Amendments, 149 women knew about elected Panchayats, and knew the name of their last elected Panchayat leaders. Only 33 had not voted, and overwhelmingly they wanted elections for Panchayats.

But beyond this, when asked to explain how many votes each village woman casts, or to list the main functions of Panchayats, or even to state the gains to women from the 73rd Amendment, responses were not forthcoming. There was a great deal of interest in all the camps when the laws were explained. The potential powers that could be wielded was recognised without having to elaborate upon it.

Participation in Panchayats...

In the past, in Tamilnadu, the law provided for 2 women to be nominated to Panchayats if none had been elected. It appeared from discussion that this had made little impact as most women could not even recollect who had been nominated, and what the nominees had done. We are cautious however that as much time has elapsed since the elected Panchayats were functional people may have forgotten what role women had played, within their limited scope as nominees.

However, our composite data shows that 92.44 percent of women felt that women must stand for elections, that reservations for women are needed, and that women can and even must contest and become chairpersons of Panchayats as well. Nor did women feel that they would be unable to play their role sufficiently well. A good number of our respondents and participants (94.22%) even felt they could perform better. Some were convinced women would be less corrupt and most thought they would be more sincere.

Again, surprisingly, they did not think that the men would be able to browbeat them, or prevent them from speaking up. It is difficult to understand this response for it does not match with either the traditional view of women's self image and her

voicelessness, or with the participation of women in other social decision making as it stands now. Could it be that the atmosphere of an all women workshop emboldened women to express their wishes as if they were realities? Or is it likely that at least in Tamilnadu with a higher educational level for women, higher participation of women in village level government employee role (noon meal workers, Anganwadi/Balwadi workers, health and ANM workers, teachers etc.) there is a change amongst women and men about the perception of women's ability to occupy decision making positions and to exert authority? It must be remembered that a number of our women were from these very sections, or as chairpersons of local Madhar Sangams (Mahila Samithis), or as literacy activists, had experience in interacting with officers, as well as in mobilising local men and women.

Though women were more ambivalent about the question of whether the men would accept their role without opposition, a majority of them were confident that they would get support at home. Nor is this a mere artefact of our selection of active women for these workshops. The structured questionnaire administered to a much larger section of women showed the same pattern.

What women expect...

When women are just asked 'What do you expect Panchayats to do? What problems can they solve?', there is a lot of stereo-typing and cliches in their responses. Again and again there was reference to lacunae in local rural infrastructure. Sometimes it was the lights and latrines, and sometimes it was the road, or the bus. Often it was about ration shops and drinking water. Each time the predictable solution cited was the 'government' should move to provide the respective facilities. But beyond this, the women were seldom able to spontaneously articulate any new demand, or initiate any new vision of what Panchayats can do.

Though there were problems in plenty in health, in educational facilities, in terms of gender and caste oppression, these were never expressed as such. Though one is familiar with a somewhat dimissive characterisation of the lack or demand for health or education as owing to a lack of felt needs by the rural people, how does one account for the fact that there were no demands even for improvements in agriculture or credit facilities, or for ways to improve income.

Further discussion with the women made it evident that these were pressing problems, and there were many more such problems. But it had obviously not struck them that many of these problems were related to Panchayats, or that there were any solutions to them. Hence it was very clear that unless women were given much more information on specific problems and what could be done, the true potential of Panchayats and women's participation in it would not emerge. We addressed this issue in two camps - one on health and sanitation and the other on agriculture.

Health and Sanitation...

The immediate demand of women is of course for provision of good health services, and where drinking water is not available, a bore well with hand pump. The local PHCs appear well staffed but are under-utilised for a variety of reasons. In contrast the district hospitals are overcrowded.

There is a fairly good awareness of what curative services they ought to receive from the PHCs but very little about preventive services and their need.

We transacted a set of 15 booklets on health in the workshop. The first booklet is an introductory one on determinants of health and disease called "Why do we become sick". The next 3 booklets deal with waterborne diseases and a variety of steps that can be taken at the individual or the village level to check their spread. A comprehensive though brief account of how total rural sanitation can be achieved is elaborated on in one of these 3 booklets. The next 7 booklets deal with various aspects of women's health, seen as part of women's rights. And the last 4 deal with the four chief preventable causes of child mortality.

After discussing these booklets, a survey of the health problems in a village was organised. And in the evening the group sat together to consolidate its findings. The messages of the booklets were much clearer now.

It was obvious that waterborne diseases were rampant and that faeces could contaminate drinking water in a number of ways.

It was also obvious that maternal & infant mortality were preventable to a great extent. Interestingly, the survey showed a very high percentage of still births and abortions (about 1 in 2 pregnancies) but we could do little to probe this further.

After this entire exercise, women's approach and demand began to change. The issues they started raising suddenly became different.

How can the available drinking water be purified and protected? Can we get all people to try out soak pits? Will the health worker come and help us? How much do latrines cost? Can they be built cheaper? Won't leach pits contaminate ground water? Will the government be willing to build latrines for everybody? Why are the latrines already built through earlier government programmes not being used? So will building of more latrines help?

Now the women were not sure whether they would be able to voice such health demands. Even if they could voice them, they were not sure if people would agree. They were not sure of co-operation to implement such new ideas. Then they demanded to know whether a village where all this had been achieved could be

visited as a demonstration to convince the doubters. We could not offer to show them any such village. Nevertheless, most women agreed that though carrying out the entire list of necessary tasks of this nature was difficult, it was certainly possible to address some of them. And these sessions certainly did give them a lot of possibilities of what could be done if elected.

Agriculture...

Another focus of our discussion - carried on in different sessions - was on intervention in agriculture and animal husbandry. In the district of Ramanathapuram, a newly registered society for women called *'Maharram'* - an offshoot of the literacy movement has managed to distribute 2500 cows under the IRDP loan scheme and organise over 350 credit co-operatives and about 60 milk co-operatives.

In Kandamangalam taluk of Villupuram R.P. (VRP) district, a farmer's network called *'Kalanjiyam'* has been set up by the Pondicherry Science Forum. This body is involved in studying problems in agriculture, and devising participatory action plans. A workshop held with farmers, and subsequent discussions with women identified a whole set of major problems that had not been mentioned when the people were merely asked what their problems were.

The major problems that emerged could be listed as follows:

a. declining water table and non availability of water for agriculture.

b. declining yields despite applying higher doses of chemicals.

c. resistance of pests to pesticides.

d. difficulty in obtaining credit.

e. rising cost of inputs.

f. inability to get a remunerative price at the market.

g. low yields of milk from cattle.

h. poor availability of fodder and the time required to collect it.

We discussed what could be done for these major problems collectively. Except in the area of water management, there was little clarity on whether we had anything substantial to offer towards a Panchayat level intervention. It took a long time to arrive at why there was a crisis in water, and it is still debatable whether the group gained any conviction that it is possible to reverse the changes that had taken place.

However, considerable interest was aroused, and keenness to learn about places where such problems had been tackled was expressed. Participants were skeptical about getting all the people to agree to any system of joint water management, and expressed their own lack of confidence in their ability to organise any joint action even on small issues where they were absolutely convinced. But if someone else initiated it - they would be willing to participate.

Gender issues ...

In our first camp we had mooted the possibility of elected Panchayat women being able to address the problem of women. If 'problems of women' were understood as ration shops, drinking water, roads, lights etc - this was universally acceptable. But if 'problems of women' meant addressing wife beating or male alcoholism or indebtedness or provision of day care centres - then there was considerable hesitation and lack of cohesiveness. Not that the women disputed that elected Panchayat women should take up such causes - they had little idea of how to go about it and whether it would be fruitful.

What inputs will elected women representatives need?

After this entire exercise lasting over 6 months, the Pondicherry Science Forum has been able to evolve some understanding of the major training inputs that are needed to evolve a new local women's leadership.

a. One important, immediate priority still seems to be just information. One needs mechanisms to collect and disseminate information at various levels. Today, even for those who are keen, there is very little information available and accessible on Panchayat laws, on the causes of various problems faced by people especially women and on options available to redress them.

b. Another important necessity is to create models - replicable models. Such models where the levels of investment in terms of financial resources and other external inputs are not excessively high. It seems that most women are not likely to take up and work for effective changes simply because they do not see the possibility of change at all. Suggestions advanced as ways of reforming existing realities are frequently turned down as not feasible, as people will not agree or co-operate.

c. What of confidence and personality building exercises? More inputs are of course welcome, but it is essential to look at this question in context.

The fact to be noted is that where the views that women wish to voice are acceptable to and fall within existing village culture, they may not perhaps be

lacking in the confidence or ability to voice them. They are doing so in a number of ways.

However in a lot of areas there is a difference between the needs as perceived by people, and 'genuine' needs which do not get articulated properly. Thus people may be demanding more doctors and drugs whereas their real need may be for better drainage and waste disposal and more hygienic latrines.

Or very often, we encounter demands for government to dig deeper bore-wells, where hydrogeologists would tell us the only scope is to augment water harvesting structures.

When such issues arise, and women are personally convinced about the rightness of their stand, they need inputs and support to be able to uphold a minority position in the face of opposition. Even today, the single most grave danger is that elected women or those seeking positions are likely to adopt populist stances. Being able to cope with a hostile majority, and voicing a minority position to which one is committed; or even putting forward a fresh creative alternative without getting isolated - is perhaps to the women's groups the central issue of personality development. If the elected women surrender to populist pressures and are unable to differentiate stated aspiration from genuine needs, then a lot of potential for change would be totally lost.

d. This need to be able to stand up for a different position from the existing cultural norms acquires special significance in the context of women's issues. Given the prevailing cultural attitudes of women, one can put it that women have 'consented' to being oppressed. Disrupting this manufactured consent, and questioning accepted cultural standards are very difficult processes indeed. Gender sensitization necessarily must constitute a major component of the inputs we need to give, but should not fail to take into account the hard reality of women's lives and what they are up against. It is only then that we can make adequate use of the opportunity for women's emancipation provided by the reservation of one-third of seats. Gender sensitization itself then becomes part of a larger part of building the capabilities of people to question to critically analyse, to be creative and confident and to aspire for a new understanding of a democratic society.

e. The role of NGO's in providing vertical linkages between women in various committees, various levels and various places may be considered another crucial necessity. This is necessary to build confidence in women, to share experiences of success and failures and to create the necessary critical mass to initiate change. NGO's also need to play a primary role in major mobilisational campaigns (as for example the Total Literacy Campaign variety) that can create a climate that welcomes and hopes for change to occur. Only when such

a favourable climate is created, will there be enough openness to new ideas, and a willingness to look seriously at what the elected, trained and sensitized women are saying.

The centuries old inertia of our villages does not lift easily, and only a multi-dimensional approach can hope to make an impact. But undoubtedly the 33% reservation for women has opened up an altogether new avenue for initiating the process of change.

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WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT RAJ IN ORISSA: A STUDY FROM THE FIELD

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Since this paper was written in early 1995 the Panchayat Raj situation in the state of Orissa has undergone radical and unexpected changes with the dissolution of the Panchayat Raj Institutions by the newly elected Congress Government. This one act speaks volumes for the fragility of the Panchayat Raj Institutions and the vulnerability of the disadvantaged groups, especially women serving in them. The main question raised is about the lack of accountability of the State and Central politicians to the Constitution and its mandates.

UMA Resource Centre

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Section 1

Introduction

The institution of Panchayat Raj in India is as old as Indian civilisation. It was Gandhiji, who realised that democracy could not be complete unless Panchayat Raj institutions were invested with adequate powers, so that the villagers could have real sense of *Swarajya*. The insistence of Gandhiji resulted in the introduction of Article 40 in Part iv (Directive Principles of State Policy) which states "The State shall take steps to organise village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-governments". However, the Panchayat Raj Institutions were constituted in several states which have passed through many vicissitudes and could not live up to expectations till now. Since then various committees have been set up by the government, time and again, to suggest a modified scheme of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Even after its existence for about four decades, it could not acquire the status and dignity of a viable unit of self-government and responsive people's body. Several factors are responsible for this, such as absence of regular and periodic elections within a stipulated period, prolonged supercessions, variations in structure, insufficient representation of weaker sections like schedule caste/schedule tribes and women, inadequate devolution of powers, lack of financial resources etc.

1.1 Historical Background of Women's Political Participation

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI's) - the grassroots units of self government have been proclaimed as the vehicle of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Effective and meaningful functioning of these bodies depends on active involvement, contribution and participation of its citizens, both male and female. The provisions related to representation of women in the Panchayats constitute the most revolutionary feature of the new system. Women in India have been denied their due share in public decision-making bodies, even though there were some exceptions. They were also excluded from the traditional caste Panchayats which still survive in many parts of the country.

The global concern for women's political participation was apparent in 1975 when the UN declared the decade 1975-85 as the International Decade for Women. This forced governments' to shift the emphasis of women's programmes from welfare to development. It is surprising to note that there has hardly been any mention of this subject in the National Plan of Action for Women drawn up in 1976. Perhaps for the Government of India and the UN at that time, the issues of health, education and employment for women had a higher priority than their political participation. However, subsequent national documents prepared at the time of the Nairobi Conference of 1985 and the forward-looking strategies after Nairobi Conference,

recognised the importance of this theme and gave emphasis to women's participation in politics through reservation in all elections.

In India, the attainment of Independence followed by the establishment of a Republic in 1950, brought to women the promise of adult franchise and complete equality of opportunity in all spheres. This equality is inseparable from active political participation. Without active and continuous participation of women at all levels of government, equality in all spheres can not be achieved. Further, national development will be more effective, if every citizen irrespective of being man and woman has an active share in all the activities.

The policy of "development through planning" that has been adopted since 1957 has recognised the importance of providing rural infrastructure for development. The approach paper of the Eighth Five Year(1993-1998) has laid emphasis on making development a people's movement. The institutional strategies have been formulated in the plan to strengthen the people's institution at the district, block and village level so that the people can be the real actors in the task of national construction.

When Panchayat Raj was introduced in India very few women contested or got elected. The committees which recommended the creation of Panchayat Raj Institutions did not say much about the role of women in these bodies. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee while recommending a three tier Panchayat System for the country did not consider the significance of women's participation. It recommended that in the constitution of Panchayats, provisions may be made for the co-option of two women members "who are interested to work among women and children". It seemed to have considered the participation of women in Panchayats against the backdrop of implementation of women and children development programmes. The role of women in decision-making process was not given importance.

Following recommendation of this committee, women joined Panchayat Raj Institutions in many states as co-opted members rather than elected ones. The principles of co-option/nomination did not produce the desired result. It resulted in sheer patronage of dominant socio-economic and political groups with women members owing allegiance to them. They had no political experience to actively participate in proceedings of Panchayat Raj Institutions or take up issues related to women and children. Thus, their contribution in decision-making process has been inconsequential.

For the first time in 1974, the Committee on the "Status of Women in India" (CSWI) recommended the establishment of statutory women's Panchayat at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration for women and children development programmes. It was conceived as a measure

to breakthrough the traditional attitudes that inhibit most women from articulating their problems and participating actively in the local bodies. Like the Panchayats, women would be directly elected to these bodies and would have the right to send their representative to the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad.

The Ashok Mehta Committee Report 1978 laid stress on the need for recognising and strengthening women's role in the decision making processes of Panchayat Raj. The committee recommended the reservation of two seats for women in Panchayats.

It may be mentioned that in the light of these developments certain states have made provisions for reservation of seats for women. The states of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Orissa are worth mentioning in this regard. However it was realised that this much reservation is not sufficient for their development.

To secure effective participation of women in the decision-making process at National, State and local levels by the Government, the National Perspective Plan for Women made several recommendations at the sectoral level. The recommendations of the committee are as follows:-

a. There should be reservation of 30 percent of seats for women at all levels from village Panchayat to Zilla Parishad.

b. There should also be reservation of 30 percent of the executive heads of all bodies from Gram Panchayats to Zilla Parishads for women.

c. A more effective step would be to declare a certain percentage of constituencies in the lower tier of Panchayat Raj as exclusively women's constituencies and all executive positions in a certain number of territorial jurisdictions reserved for women candidates.

The policy was reiterated in the Eighth plan document. It was in pursuance of this National Policy that the 64th Amendment to the Constitution incorporated such a provision. But the 64th Amendment Bill could not be enacted because of the country-wide protest and failure of the ruling party to gather required support in both the Houses of Parliament. However, the Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, 1993 has reserved 33 percent seats for women in Panchayats.

Besides participation in the general elections, contesting elections is a very important dimension of participation and is through the political party. As far as political parties are concerned although at election time promises are made of granting 15-20 percent seats to women, no party has been able to reduce the membership of the Gram Panchayat by fixing the maximum at 25 members, as earlier there was no restriction on time. In 1964 second Amendment was made to the Act of 1948.

The Orissa Legislative Assembly, in the meanwhile, passed the Orissa Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act in 1959 and the Act received the Presidents' assent on January 15, 1960. The provisions of the new Zilla Parishad Act were implemented and as per provisions of the Act, Panchayat Samitis were established. The village Panchayat became the lowest unit of the three-tier Panchayat Raj system.

Since 1990, the State Government has taken steps to revive the 3 tier Panchayat Raj system and to make it broad based. Accordingly the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act 1964 and the Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act 1959 were amended in 1991, 1992 and 1993. The Orissa Zilla Parishad Act 1961 was also amended in 1991 to constitute Zilla Parishads at District level.

With a view to revitalising the democratic polity and in pursuit of its policy of empowerment of the people, the Government held elections in 1992 under the new dispensation of Panchayat Raj (Amendment Act) 1991 throughout the State to reconstitute Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samiti after a lapse of 13 years. Elections were non-party based. There is three tier Panchayat Raj system in Orissa; Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti to block level and Zilla Parishad at district level. Elections for Zilla Parishad has not been conducted so far. Reconstitution of the Panchayat Raj Institutions would ensure the direct participation and greater involvement of the people on the process of development. No society can progress without effective participation and greater involvement of the people in the process of development. Realising this the State Government has taken several measures to bring women to the forefront in public affairs. A significant feature of the reconstituted Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Urban local bodies is the reservation made for women members. The Orissa Gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1992, included the provisions that in every Gram Panchayat if a Sarpanch, elected or nominated was not a woman, the office of the Naib-Sarpanch in that Gram Panchayat should be given to a woman. A similar Amendment was brought in for the post of chairpersons of the Panchayat Samitis. It is interesting to note here that 28,068 women have been elected to various positions in Panchayat Raj Institutions including 14 women elected as Sarpanchs, 1841 elected as members of Panchayat Samiti, 14 elected as Chairpersons and 302 elected as Vice-Chairpersons of Panchayat Samitis and 5237 have been elected as Naib-Sarpanchs.

Table 1 : Total members in Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti level

Position	General	SC	ST	women
Chairman	248	6	43	17
Vice-Chairman	7	1	4	302
Samiti-Member	1961	585	876	1841
Sarpanch	4286	248	714	14
Naib-Sarpanch	10	3	5	5237
Ward-Member	40318	5210	4717	26217

Source : Panchayat Raj Department, Government of Orissa 1992.

In the 1975 Panchayat elections there were 1962 Sarpanchs out of which 20 were women and 103 of the total 56,720 Ward-members were women. But in 1984 the number of women Sarpanchs declined i.e., from 20 and 11, there were 125 women Ward-members.

1.2 Critique of the Orissa Panchayat Act

The functions of each level of Panchayats have not been spelt out in any detail. Even though 29 subjects have been listed in the eleventh schedule of the Constitution, the exact functions in relation to their transfer to Panchayats have not been mentioned clearly.

The present practice of institutional relationship between Panchayat Raj Institutions and the State Government was one of dominance of State Governments. Even after getting Constitutional status, if Panchayat Raj Institution's powers and functions are not properly decentralised, then how can they effectively contribute to the development process?

Whatever plan is formulated by these bodies, it often ends up as a statement of needs. When funds for meeting local requirements are not forthcoming, they lose interest in preparation of these plans. The amended Act shows that the financial autonomy of the Panchayats hang on the single thread of their own resources from taxes, duties, tolls and fees authorized by the State Legislature to be levied, collected and appropriated by them (PRI's). The taxes, duties, tolls and fees levied and collected by the State Governments, which may be assigned to the Panchayats are contemplated to be done so, with conditions and limits regarding the usages. Thus, the scope for Panchayat Raj Institutions to function as units of self-government is extremely circumscribed.

Though the Amendment Act essentially seeks to empower Panchayat Raj Institutions in the right direction, one important aspect of Panchayats is missing. This is about the power to adjudicate on disputes which arise in the village itself, though the idea of dispensing justice locally, cheaply and expeditiously is completely absent.

Panchayat has remained as the agency for implementation of some of the Government's plan and schemes for economic development. As the planning process stands now, most of the funds are tied down sectorally.

The Gram Sabha has been given a statutory recognition which includes all the voters of Gram Panchayats. It has been made the soul of Panchayat Raj bodies without any specific size, power and functions. Gram Sabha is provided with the right to discuss some or all subjects relating to annual statement of accounts, administrative report of the previous financial year, proposals for the next years, and issues raised in previous meeting. The same section further clarifies that Panchayats will discuss the suggestions made in the Gram Sabha meeting. By implication the Gram Sabha has been transformed into an advisory body, the objections raised or suggestions made are in no way binding upon Panchayats.

There are some other ways by which the general body Gram Sabha is rendered ineffective. The required quorum in Gram Sabha will be one tenth but of an adjourned meeting no quorum is required. But when it comes to the powers of members of Gram Sabha for requisitioning a meeting it makes a provision for one third members submitting it in writing.

Orissa is the first State in the country to reserve 30 percent of the seats for women in Panchayat Raj elections. The same ratio is also applicable for Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. A woman ward-member can directly be elected from the reserved seats. But there is no provision for reservation for Panchayat Chairperson (Sarpanch). In the Block level a chairperson is elected by Samiti members who are directly elected by the people. But in the indirect election it is difficult for women to make it. This being so it is hardly possible for a woman to become a chairperson who weilds much power in local bodies both urban and rural. There is a provision for direct election to the post of chairperson of Zilla Parishad but it does not have any reservation for women. Hence it is difficult on the part of a woman to get elected, unless backed by an important political party.

Orissa Government has made it mandatory that additional vice-chairperson posts of local bodies will be reserved for women. But this post being ceremonial does not fulfill the political aspirations of women in decision making process. For the first time women in Orissa to some extent have got the right to be elected, but in actual practice their political participation is very limited. The State Act has not made any provision for reservation for women in standing committees at Panchayat Samiti level and functional committee at the Gram Panchayat level.

Section 2

2.1 *Methodology of the Study*

ISED had conducted a survey of women leaders of Panchayat Raj bodies i.e., ward-members, Sarpanchs, Naib-Sarpanchs and Samiti members of Gram Panchayats in five districts: Bolangir, Phulbani, Angul, Keonjhar and Cuttack. These districts were selected to cover major regions of the State. Cuttack was selected to represent the coastal region, Phulbani as southern tribal district, Angul for central Orissa, Bolangir to represent western region and Keonjhar as north Orissa district. Again the Block was chosen on the basis of concentration of all categories of people i.e., scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and general. In Keonjhar, two Panchayats were selected - one having tribal concentration and another having all categories of population with a woman Sarpanch.

The field work was carried out with the aid of structured schedules covering aspects like their socio-economic background, preparedness for election, awareness level, performance level etc. The field survey was supplemented by observation.

The objectives of the study were:

To understand women's preparedness for election

To study the obstacles and impediments to their meaningful participation

To know the financial position of the Panchayat and financial devolution in Panchayat.

2.2 *Socio-economic Background of the Respondents*

The study covers 32 women elected representatives, out of which 29 women were from Gram Panchayats. (i.e., 22 ward-members, 6 Naib-Sarpanchs and one Sarpanch) and 3 women from Panchayat Samiti level. The study tried to establish linkages between the socio- economic background of the women representatives and their participation level. This linkage is essential to examine the performance level, awareness level and their participation in the Panchayat Raj system of the State.

Table 2: Age and Caste wise Distribution of Women Members

	25-30	31-36	36-40	above 40	Total
Ward members ( )*					
SC	1 (16.6)	-	1 (16.6)	4 (66.7)	6(27.3)
ST	1 (10)	1 (10)	3 (30)	5 (50)	10 (45.4)
General	1 (16.6)	1 (16.6)	-	4 (66.7)	6 (27.3)
Total	3 (13.6)	2 (9.1)	4 (18.1)	13 (59.1)	22 (68.7)
Sarpanch/Naib Sarpanch					
SC	1 (50)	-	-	1 (50)	2 (2.6)
ST	-	-	1 (100)	-	1 (14.3)
General	-	-	1 (25)	3 (75)	4 (57.1)
Total	1 (14.3)	-	2 (28.5)	4 (57.1)	7 (21.9)
Samiti Members					
SC	-	-	1	-	1 (33.3)
ST	-	-	-	1	1 (33.3)
General	1	-	-	-	1 (33.3)
Total	1	-	1	1	3 (6.4)
Grand Total	5 (15.6)	2 (6.3)	7 (21.9)	18 (56.2)	32

()* Figure in parenthesis is in percentage

Table - 2 tries to establish the relationship of age and participation level of the members. Out of 32 sample respondents 56.2 percent are in the age group of above 40. In case of ward-members, and Naib-Sarpanch and Sarpanch the percentage found in this age group is 59.1 and 57.1 respectively. It is so because when no women were found to come forward to be the members the villagers asked the aged women to nominate themselves for the above position. Again social stigmas and social sanctions may be the factors which restrict the young women (those who are either in the early years of their marriage or in the threshold of marriage) to participate. Out of total respondents (32) 28.1 percentage belongs to scheduled

caste, 37.5 percent belongs to scheduled tribe and 34.4 percent are form general caste. In case of Naib-Sarpanch and Sarpanch 57.1 percent of them belong to general caste. It may be because higher posts are synonymous with higher socio-economic status. In case of posts like Naib-Sarpanch and Sarpanch the upper caste women have an advantage over the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women.

In the tribal areas it was found that most of the women representatives were in the age of above forty and they said that they have become members because nobody came forward when these wards were declared as reserved seats for women. The community members decided to nominate their names. Their opinion was that next time they will not be members as only the male members were taking part in discussions and they felt that they have no role in Panchayat functioning. When questions were asked while collecting information regarding Panchayat functioning and the role of women, most of them remained silent.

Table 3 : Distribution of Women Members by their Educational Standard

( )*	Illiterate - rate	L P	U P	M E	Higher Secondary	Total
Ward Member	7 (31.8)	6 (27.3)	6 (27.3)	3 (13.6)	-	22
Sarpanch /Naib Sarpanch	1 (14.3)	1 (14.3)	1 (14.3)	2 (28.6)	2 (28.5)	7
Samiti Members	- (66.7)	- (33.3)	-	2	1	3
total	8 (25)	7 (21.9)	7 (21.9)	7 (21.9)	3 (9.3)	32

( ) * Figure in parenthesis is in percentages

It can be observed from the above table that illiteracy is found more in case of ward-members in comparison to other positions in the Panchayat, which constitutes 31.8 percent against 68.2 percent literate women ward-members. From among the total number of ward members only 13.6 percent have completed the Middle Elementary School Education and in case of Naib-Sarpanchs and Sarpanchs 28.5 percent have been educated up to higher secondary level and only 14.3 percent of them are illiterate. In Samiti level all the three sample respondents are literate and

66.7 percent of them have completed Middle Elementary School and the rest have completed high school level education. The activities of Sarpanchs and Naib-Sarpanchs demands the members to be literate and during the course of the field survey it was observed by the investigator that the women ward-members learned to sign their name in order to become members.

Table 4 : Marital Status of Members

(.) *	Married	Unmarried	Widow	Total
Ward Member	18(81)	-	14(18.1)	22
Sarpanch/ Naib Sarpanch	5(71.4)	1(14.3)	1(14.3)	7
Samiti Members	3(100)	-	-	3
Total	26(81.3)	1(3.1)	5(15.6)	32

( ) * Figure in parenthesis is in percentage

The table shows that out of total sample respondents 81.3 percent are married, 15.6 percent are widows and only one woman representative is unmarried constituting 3.1. percent. It was observed that participation of unmarried women in this system is very poor due to the prevalence of social taboos. The widow percentage is high in case of ward members i.e., 18.1 percent.

Table 5 : Land Holding Position of the family of Women Members

()*	Landless Farmers	Marginal Farmers	Small Farmers	Big Farmers	Total
Ward Member	6(27.3)	8(36.3)	6(27.3)	2(9.1)	22
Sarpanch Naib Sarpanch	-	1(14.3)	5(71.4)	1(14.3)	7
Samiti Members		1(33.3)	2(66.7)	3	
Total	6(18.7)	9(28.1)	12(37.5)	5(15.6)	32

()* Figure in parenthesis is in percentages

Table-5 shows that out of the total number of representatives surveyed 18.7 percent belong to the landless category, 28.7 percent belong to marginal farmers groups, 37.5 percent are from small farmers groups whereas only 15.6 percent are from big farmers groups. Out of a total number of women ward-members only 9.1 percent are from big farmers groups, against 27.3 percent who belong to the landless category. From among Sarpanch and Naib-Sarpanchs 71.4 percent belong to small farmers groups against 14.3 percent from big farmers category and the rest the small farmers category. No one among Sarpanchs/Naib-Sarpanchs and Samiti members belong to landless categories. It may be attributed to the fact that the economic status of the candidate has a direct bearing on these posts. As usual, representation to the higher posts are influenced by the economic condition of the members.

Table 6 : Income Wise Distribution of Women Members

()*	5000-10000	11000-15000	16000-20000	above 20000	Total
Ward Members	9(40.9)	7(31.8)	2(9.1)	4(18.1)	22
Sarpanch Naib Sarpanch	1(14.3)	2(28.6)	2(28.5)	2(28.5)	7
Samiti-Members	2(66.7)	-	1(33.3)	3	
Total	10(31.2)	11(34.4)	4(12.5)	7(21.9)	32

( )* Figure in parenthesis is in percentage

The table shows that out of total members surveyed 31.2 percent belong to the lower income group i.e, Rs.5000-10,000 and 34.4 percent of members have an income of 11.000 to 15,000. In case of ward-members, nearly three fourths of the respondents earn an yearly income less than Rs.15,000 and only 9.1 percent are in the income group of Rs.16,000-20,000/ The table also shows that members belonging to the upper position in the Panchayat hierarchy are generally from higher income groups.

Table 7 : Occupational Distribution of Women Members

()*	household work	Wage Labour	Service	Total
Ward - member	11(50)	8(36.4)	3(13.6)	22
Sarpanch/ Naib Sarpanch	6(85.7)	1(14.3)	-	7
Samiti Members	13(100)	-	-	3
Total	20(62.5)	9(28.1)	3(9.4)	32

()* Figure in parenthesis is in percentages

It is revealed from the above table that out of a total of 32 women representatives nearly two thirds are pursuing household work, 23.6 percent are engaged in services and 28.1 percent are earning their livelihood by engaging themselves in wage labour. While a higher percentage of women in the ward-member category engaged in wage labour constitutes only 14.3, in case of Samiti members it is seen that all of them are engaged in household work only. The reason why a large number of members/representatives are housewives can be attributed to the fact that those who are engaged in economic activity either do not prefer to spend time for this activity or they cannot afford to spare time for this, according to them their labour accrues an additional income to the family earning.

Table 8 : Distribution of Women Members According to Family

()*	Nuclear	Joint	Total
Ward member	16(72.7)	6(27.3)	22
Sarpanchs/Naib Sarpanchs	4(57.1)	3(42.9)	7
Samiti Member	3(100)	-	3
Total	23(71.9)	9(28.1)	32

( )* Figure in parenthesis is in percentage

Table-8 shows that out of the total number of women representatives, 71.9 percent are living in nuclear families and the rest are living in joint families. Out of a total of 22 ward-members 72.7 percent are living in nuclear families and in case of Sarpanch and Naib-Sarpanch 42.9 percent are living in joint families. It is observed that all the Samiti members are staying in nuclear families. Traditional norms and values in a joint family system where women's role is more restrictive is the reason why women belonging to this system generally have lower participation level.

Table 9 : Inspiration and Motivation Derived by the Members

()*	Total	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ward-Members						
SC	6	1(16.6)	2(33)	3(50)	3(50)	-
ST	10	1(10)	1(10)	10(100)	3(50)	1(10)
General	6	4(66.7)	4(66.7)	2(33.3)	2(33.3)	-
Total	22	6(27.5)	7(31.8)	15(68.2)	8(36.4)	1(4.5)
Sarpanchas/Naib-Sarpanchs						
SC	2	2(100)	1(50)	2(100)	-	-
ST	1	-	-	1(100)	1(100)	-
General	4	3(75)	1(25)	-	2(50)	2(50)
Total	7	5(71.4)	2(28.6)	3(42.9)	3(42.9)	2(28.6)
Samiti Members						
SC	1	-	-	1(100)	1(100)	-
ST	1	1(100)	-	1(100)	1(100)	-
General	1	1(100)	-	1(100)	-	-
Total	3	2(66.7)	-	3(100)	-	-
GrandTotal	32	13(40.6)	9(29.1)	21(65.6)	13(40.6)	3(9.4)

( )* figure in parenthesis is in percentages

Note: (1) Family
(2) Villagers
(3) Own Caste/Tribesmen
(4) Political leader
(5) Village leader

The above table indicates that out of the total number of women surveyed 32 women representatives have got inspiration from their own caste/tribes men to be involved in the Panchayat Raj Institution, whereas, 40.6 percent are influenced by the family

and political leaders. Besides this, the villagers also motivated the representatives in 28.1 percent cases. However, influence of the village leaders for this purpose was marginal.

In case of ward-members their own caste and tribesmen played a major role to motivate the members to be involved in the Panchayat. Political leaders also played a major role in this direction as more than one third of the ward-members were influenced by them. Village leaders however played a very limited role, as it is observed from the table, in the case of ward-members. In case of tribal women ward-members, their male counterparts were the main source of inspiration and motivation. The family, villagers and village leaders have to play a limited role in this case. In the case of SC women, SC men as well as the political party have motivated the women to be associated with Panchayats. In comparison to scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women, women of general caste were inspired more by the family members and villagers.

In case of Sarpanchs and Naib-Sarpanchs 71.4 percent have been motivated by family members and influence of own caste/tribesmen and political leaders is on 42.9 percent women. The political leaders as well as family had equally played a significant role in motivating the women members to contest election for the post of Samiti member. The caste of tribesmen have played major role as it appears from the table.

Table 10 : Party Affiliation of the Members

()*	No Party Affiliation	Congress	Janata Dal		Total
Ward-members					
SC	1(16.7)	2(33.3)	4(50)		6
ST	1(70)	1(10)	3(20)		10
General	1(16.7)	2(23.3)	3(50)		6
Total	9(40.9)	5(22.7)	8(36.4)		22
Sarpanchs/Naib-Sarpanchs					
SC	1(50)	-	1(50)		2
ST	-	-	1(100)	1	
General	-	3(75)	1(25)		4
Total	1(14.3)	3(42.8)	3(42.8)		7
Samiti Members					
SC	-	-	1	1	
ST	-	-	1	1	
General	-	1	-	1	
Total	-	1(33.3)	2(66.7)	3	
Grand Total	10(31.2)	9(28.1)	13(40.6)	32	

()* figure in parenthesis is in percentages

2.3 *Political Background of the Respondents*

Two thirds of the respondents have party affiliations and all of them either belong to Congress or Janata Dal. It can be observed from the table that 40.9 percent of ward-members have no party affiliation because they are not aware of party politics as they belong to the lower echelons of Panchayat hierarchy and also in the political structure. Party affiliation, they think, has no importance for them. However, for the higher post, party affiliation is marked. If we see from caste background, it appears that more number of tribal ward-members had no party affiliation, they constitute 70 percent of the Caste Panchayat which is more powerful among them and 20 percent of them are affiliated to Janata Dal. In case of scheduled caste it is seen that they have more affiliation to the party than the scheduled tribes women members. The same is the case with general caste ward-members. The reason may be that women belonging to these categories are aware of the importance of political parties.

All the 3 Samiti members are affiliated to political parties out of which 66.7 percent are affiliated to the ruling party i.e., Janata and Congress. The reasons for being affiliated to political parties though the post is non-political may be strong political support is necessary to get elected to this post.

When asked, a woman Sarpanch said that she does not belong to any political party. But other women representatives of that Panchayat mentioned that her husband who is a teacher, is an active leader of Congress party and during the election, leaders of Congress party had supported her in cash and kind.

Those who were not affiliated with any political party i.e. 31.2 percent, were asked about their willingness to join any political party in future. They opined that they had no time to be associated with party meetings and that being a party member carried no advantages whatsoever.

When asked about the resistance faced by them from different sources it is observed, that only in the case of Sarpanch, there was resistance from village leaders and opposition party candidates. The opposition party leaders threatened her and asked her to withdraw her nomination. It was also observed that in case of ward-members they neither faced resistance from any opponent or opposition party members nor from the family members.

Table 12 : Opposition faced by the Members

()*	Having Opponent	No Opponent	Total
Ward Member	5(22.7)	17 (77.3)	22
Sarpanch/Naib Sarpanch	6 (85.7)	1 (14.3)	7
Samiti Members	3 (100)	-	3
Total	14 (43.8)	18 (56.2)	32

()* figure in parenthesis is in percentage

It appears from the table that out of the total number of women representatives 56.2 percent had no opponent. Since all the members except Sarpanchs have got elected to the Panchayat Raj body from a woman's constituency, no male opponent is found in case of ward-members, Naib-sarpanchs and Samiti members. But in case of Sarpanch the seat was open, so there were 3 male candidates for the office. From among the total number of ward-members 77.33 percent had no opponent.Those five ward-members who had opponents in the elections belonged to the same Gram Panchayat (Nandapur) where strong party affiliation was observed. In case of Naib-Sarpanch and Sarpanch 85.7 percent had opponents and only one Naib-Sarpanch got elected without any contest. All the Samiti members had opposition candidates because for that post political parties play a strong role as can be seen from the table-12.

Table 13 : Perceived Factors to win

()*	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Total
Ward Member	2(40)	2(40)	1(20)	-	5
Sarpanch /Naib Sarpanch	-	3 (50)	2 (33.3)	1 (16.7)	6
Samiti Members	-	3(100)	-	-	3
Total	2(14.3)	8(57.1)	3(21.4)	1 (7.1)	14

()* figures in parenthesis is in percentages

(1) Support by village people

(2) Party Support

(3) Own Personality

(4) Family

It is revealed from the table that out of a total of 14 members (those who had contestants) 57.1 percent said that they won due to the support they received from their party and 21.4 percent won election due to their own personality. However, very few of those respondents opined that they won the election either due to family support or support from the villagers.

In contrast to this, in the case of ward-members, it was the support of the political party and village people which played an important role in winning the election. However, it was again the support from the political party along with their personality which the Naib-Sarpanchs and Sarpanchs feel is responsible for their victory. In case of the only Sarpanch surveyed, her family members have played a major role in winning the elections. All the Samiti members victory was based on the support of political party.

2.4 *Political Performance of Elected Women*

Merely getting elected to Panchayat Raj bodies without effective participation in decision making at all levels is meaningless. During the field survey it was observed that except 2 all the other members attended the Panchayat meeting. Sitting fees for attending meeting is much less than the daily wage. One of the members opined that she has a limited say in the decision making process for which she thinks her presence has no significance. It was found that 28.1 percent of women ward-members and Naib-Sarpanchs are not aware of the actual amount to be received towards sitting fees.

Gram Sabha has been viewed as the roots of democracy and an effective tool for the participation and involvement of the people in the democratic process. When the ward-members were asked about the Gram Sabha meeting no one could understand the concept. A woman Sarpanch said that the Gram Sabha meeting was being held every year, but that the first meeting of the Gram Sabha was adjourned due to lack of quorum and the rest of the meetings are generally held in the Panchayat office. Though the records maintained by the Gram Panchayat office show regular holding of meetings, the ward members are not aware of it. When asked about the Pallisabha meeting only 27.3 percent of the total ward members have attended it and the Sarpanch came to the village to attend it. In other cases Sarpanch himself prepares plans for the village people.

Table 13 : Participation of Women Members on Proposing, Opposing and Supporting Proposals

()*	Total	Only Supporting proposal	Only Opposing proposals	Both Supporting & Opposing	Total Resolution
Ward Member					
SC	6	3 (50)	1 (16.7)	3 (500	5 (83.3)
ST	10	5 (50)	-	4 (40)	8 (80)
General	6	3 (50)	-	3 (50)	4 (66.7)
Total	22	11 (50)	1 (4.5)	10 (45.5)	17 (77.3)
Naib Sarpanch					
SC	2	1 (500	-	1 (50)	2 (100)
ST	1	-	-	1 (100)	1 (100)
General	4	2 (50)	1 (25.0)	1 (25)	3 (75)
Total	7	3 (42.86)	1 (14.28)	3 (42.9)	6 85.7)
Samiti Members					
SC	1	-	-	1	1
ST	1	-	-	1	1
General	1	-	-	1	1
Total	3	-	-	3 (100)	3 (100)
Grand Total	32	14 (43.75)	2 (6.25)	16 (50)	26 (81.2)

()* figures in parenthesis is in percentage

Half the surveyed representatives either support or oppose proposals, 43.75 percent support it and only two of them oppose it. In table 14, the picture is more or less same for the ward-members and Naib-Sarpanchs and Sarpanchs level but in case of Samiti members all of them either support or oppose the proposal. Distinction cannot be ascertained in this case as one will consider caste as the basis of supporting or opposing the proposals.

In case of ward-members 77.3 percent of the members pass a resolution and half of them only support the proposals brought up by others and never oppose any proposals saying that they are not willing to pay money from their pocket to do development work. Among the scheduled caste women representatives, it was found that only one had opposed a proposal because it was not for the benefit of all the

villagers. In the case of scheduled tribes; 50 percent of women ward-members support proposals because they think it will create misunderstanding among them and 80 percent of them pass resolutions for the development of their village. Among 6 general caste ward-members half of them either support or oppose proposals and 66.7 percent passed resolutions in the meeting. (Table - 13).

Out of the total number of Sarpanchs and Naib-Sarpanchs 85.7 percent passed resolutions and 42.9 percent of them either support or oppose proposals brought up by others. Twenty eight percent of them only support proposals and never oppose any proposals. Among the Naib-Sarpanch of general caste category 75 percent passed resolutions and 25 percent said that their word carries no value in the meeting. All the Samiti members either support or oppose proposals, brought up by the others, in Samiti meeting and passed resolution for their respective Panchayats also (Table 13).

It was found from the survey that those who passed resolutions brought proposals related to developmental and welfare activities only because they understood the function of the Panchayat as developing infrastructure facilities.

Table 14 : Financial Allocation and Awareness Level

( )*	Total Members	(1)	(2)	(3)
Ward-Member	22	13 (59.1)	9 (40.9)	6 (27.3)
Sarpanch N.S/	7	5 (71.4)	2 (28.6)	3 (42.9)
Samiti Members	3	3 (100)	3 (100)	2 (66.7)
Total	32	21 (65.6)	14 (43.7)	11 (34.4)

( ) * figures in parenthesis in in percentage

(1) Aware of financial/budget allocation

(2) Aware of the amount

(3) Suggestions accepted during preparing budget

From the above table it is found that out of total number of women representatives 65.6 percent were aware of finance allocation to the Gram Panchayat, but when asked about the actual budget amount only 43.7 percent could respond and at the time of making budget 34.4 percent of them had given their suggestions. Among the

ward-members it is observed that 59.1 percent were aware of finance allocation but all of them could not say the actual amount sanctioned for various activities. Only 27.3 percent of them had presented their views and suggestion at the time of budget preparation. In case of Naib-Sarpanchs 71.4 percent were aware about finance allocation and only 42.9 percent of them have taken part in budget preparation. The Samiti members are well aware of the amount sanctioned to the Gram Panchayat and were of the view that their suggestions were not accepted all the time. It is revealed that the awareness level of ward- members about finance allocation is less in comparison to that of Naib-Sarpanchs and Samiti members; the reasons may be that they have not been taking part in decision making and most of them are either illiterate or unaware of Panchayat functioning.

Table 15 :Satisfaction Level with Performance of Gram Panchayat

( )*	Satisfied	Partially Satisfied	Dis-Satisfied	Total
Ward-Members	7 (31.8)	6 (27.3)	9 (40.9)	22
Sarpanch/ N.S	4 (57.1)	1 (14.3)	2 (28.6)	7
Samiti Members	21 (33.3)	1 (33.3)	1 (33.3)	3
Total	12 (37.5)	8 (25)	12 (37.5)	32

( )* figures in parenthesis is in percentage

The above table shows the satisfaction level of the members about their performance in the Panchayat and it may be observed that 37.5 percent were satisfied, 25 percent partially satisfied and 37.5 percent were dissatisfied with their performance in the Gram Panchayat. Out of total number of ward-members only 31.8 percent were satisfied with their activities in the Gram Panchayat, and in the case of Sarpanch and Naib-Sarpanch it was 57.1 percent. Dissatisfaction level is higher in case of ward-members in comparison to Naib-Sarpanch and Sarpanch and Samiti members.

A Naib-Sarpanch who was a middle aged general caste widow was found to be more active in the Panchayat. She said that the Panchayat was not working according to the rules and regulations of the Government. The Sarpanch and Secretary planned all the activities sitting in the house of the Secretary and no opinion was taken from other members of the Panchayat. She said that other members did not ask them, so they were working according to their own free will. She said that other members

Table 18 : Reasons for Partial Dissatisfaction on their role Performance

( )*	Total	Personal Deficiencies			External Deficiencies				
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
Ward Member	7 (57.1)	4 (42.8)	3 (28.6)	2 (42.3)	3 (57.1)	4 (42.8)	3 (85.7)	6 71.4)	5
Sarpanch / Naib	3 (33.3)	1 (66.7)	2	-	-	2	2	3	2
Sarpanch Samiti Members	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	10	5	5	2	3	6	5	9	7

( )* figures in parenthesis is in percentage

Personal Deficiencies

1) Illiteracy

2) Ignorance of rules & regulations

3) Lack of Information & Knowledge

4) Poverty

External Deficiencies

1) Male dominance

2) Lack of funds

3) Non-Co-operation from Sarpanch

4) Party Feeling

When asked about the reasons for partial satisfaction and dissatisfaction they cited deficiencies at two levels, i.e, personal and external. From the above table it can be observed that external deficiencies are main reasons for partial satisfaction. From among the total number of members who were partially satisfied, 90 percent of them felt it is because of non-co-operation of Sarpanchs that they could not perform the

way they were expected to do. Besides this, illiteracy and ignorance about the rules and regulations are the main reasons for their poor performance.

In the case of ward-members, non-co-operation by the Sarpanchs coupled with party rivalry are the main obstacles in performing their role. They feel that illiteracy is also responsible for their partial satisfaction, as the table reveals - 57.1 percent expressed illiteracy as the main reason. The Naib-Sarpanch also clearly mentioned that non-co-operation by the Sarpanch is the main reason for not performing their role effectively.

Table 19 : Reasons for Dissatisfaction on her own performance

( )*	Total	Personal Deficiencies				External Deficiencies				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	
Ward Member	11 (45.5)	5 (90.9)	10 (36.4)	4 (45.5)	5 (27.3)	3 (36.4)	4 (54.5)	6 (81.8)	9 (27.1)	3
N.S/ Sarpanch	2	-	2	-	2	1	2	-	2	-
Samiti Members	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-
Total	14 (35.7)	5 (85.7)	1 (35.7)	2 (50)	5 (28.6)	7 (50)	4 (50)	7 (78.6)	7 (21)	3

( )* figures in parenthesis is in percentage

Personal Deficiencies

1. Illiteracy
2. Ignorance of rules & regulations
3. Lack of Information & knowledge
4. Poverty
5. Cultural norms of the family

External Deficiencies

1. Male Dominance
2. Lack of funds
3. Non-Co-operation of the Sarpanch

4. Party feeling

The above table indicates that out of total members who are dissatisfied with their performance level, 78.6 percent mentioned non-co-operation of Sarpanchs in their work followed by male dominance and lack of funds as the main reasons for their dismal performance. It was found that 85.7 percent of them were not aware of the Panchayat's rules and regulations which stand as the main constraint. Poverty, as mentioned by 50 percent members, is also contributing to it and 28.6 gave the cultural norms of the family as the reason for ineffective role performance.

Among the ward-members, in almost all the cases, ignorance of rules and regulations is the main cause and it was complemented by the non-co-operation of the Sarpanch. In case of Naib-Sarpanch both poverty and ignorance of rules and regulations are the main reasons and they pointed out the fact that male members are dominating in decision making which causes ineffective performance.

Table 20 : Future Aspiration in Case of their Participation in PRI'S

( )*	Stick to the same position	Go beyond	no more in	Total
ward member	10 (45.5)	3 (13.6)	9((40.9)	22
Naib Sarpanch sarpanch	3 (42.9)	3 (42.9)	1 (14.2)	7
Samiti Member	2 (66.7)	-	1(33.3)	3
Total	15 (46.9)	6 (18.7)	11 (34.4)	

( )* figures in parenthesis is in percentage

When an enquiry was made about the vertical and horizontal shift of the position of the members in the Panchayat hierarchy, it was observed from the above table that almost half of them preferred to stick to the present position and one third of them were not willing to devote their energies and interests beyond the present term. Only 18.7 percent of them were interested in contesting elections above the present position. It is significant to note that maximum percentage of ward members i.e., 40.9 percent are not willing to continue in the position, as they feel that they failed to perform as expected by the people. They either did not have time to devote or old age was a constraint. Only three representatives have aspiration to go beyond the present position. In case of Sarpanch, Naib-Sarpanch 42.9 percent would like to remain in the same position whereas the same percentage of members like to go higher. It is surprising that 33.3 percent of Samiti members are not interested to fight elections next time, because they cannot devote more time towards performing

the role of Samiti members, which needs full involvement. None among them were willing to contest for higher position (i.e Zilla Parishad Member) than their present one, because strong political support and money power is required for these posts.

Some of the members were not interested to continue their political career. The main reason was, due to the lack of funds they could not work as people expected. Another reason they pointed out was that only the Sarpanch and Secretary are all powerful in the Panchayat functioning and members had no role in decision making. Even the sitting fees which they get towards attending meeting was very meagre and not regular.

Table 21 : Distribution of Women Representatives Regarding Opinion for Elimination of Political Party

( )*	For Elimination of Political Parties	For retention of Political Parties	No Response	Total
Ward Members	15 (68.2)	3 (13.6)	4 (18.2)	22
Sarpanchs/ N.Sarpanch	6 (85.7)	1 (14.3)	-	7
Samiti Member	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	-	3
Total	22 (68.7)	6 (18.7)	4 (12.5)	32

( )* figures in parenthesis is in percentage

Majority of the representatives feel that elimination of political parties in the Panchayat level is necessary while 18.7 percent favoured retention of political party affiliation. While elimination of political party is favoured by ward-members, Naib-Sarpanch and Sarpanchs, most of the Samiti members favoured the retention of political parties. In case of Panchayats more than two thirds of the respondents are of the opinion that political parties should be eliminated from Panchayats either from their passive or active support. In the opinion of the representatives, a Panchayat being a small unit to work collectively for the benefit of the village people, does not require party politics as it will not only hamper political processes at the lowest level but will also become an obstacle to the unified functioning of the Panchayat. However, Samiti members feel that political party's backing is necessary for them to be elected to the present position.

Table 22 : Suggestion for Allotment of Gram Panchayat Fund for Women & Child Development

( )*	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Total
Ward Member	6 (27.3)	10 (45.5)	2 (91.1)	4 (18.1)	22
Sarpanch/ N.Sarpanch	4 (57.1)	2 (28.6)	-	1 (14.3)	7
Samiti Members	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	-	-	3
Total	11 (34.4)	14 (43.7)	2 (14.3)	5 (15.6)	32

( )* figures in parenthesis is in percentage

1. Separate budget earmarked for the development of women and children.

2. Form women's block with veto-power to negate proposals which are not in the best interest of the women and children in the Gram Panchayat.

3. Amendment of rules to invalidate proposals for allocation of funds, and

4. No suggestion.

When asked to suggest how the fund should be allotted for women and child development, it was found that 43.7 percent of the total respondents mentioned the need to form women's block in the Panchayat, having veto-power to negate proposals which are not in the best interest of women and children. 34.4 percent suggested a separate budget earmarked for the women and children's development. The ward-members have greater interest in forming women's block and only 27.3 percent of them were interested in separate budget. The case is reverse in case of Sarpanch and Naib-Sarpanch i.e., more number of them (57.1 percent) were interested in a separate budget and lower number (28.6 percent) felt the need to form women's block uniting all the women members in the Panchayat (Table - 22).

2.5 *Conclusion*

Reservation under Panchayat Raj for women is at present in the transitional phase and women are not adequately empowered in practice to play an effective role because of social, economic and political factors. Although women's participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions is very high in absolute sense, yet, analysis in relative terms shows that their participation in decision-making is very low. For equality to become a reality for women, the sharing of power on equal terms with men should

be the major strategy so that they can play an effective role in decision- making processes, especially in areas where various policies have direct bearing on their well-being. It has been revealed by the women representatives of different categories that they are not treated on par with male members either by the members of the institution or by the officials and felt that as they are women their views are not given weightage on many occasions.

Subordination of women in society acts as a structural constraint to their participation in political activities. This constraint operates more or less for all classes and communities of women. Another important constraint is the prevalent political culture, which not only has complicated the political processes but also many decisions are taken behind the scenes.

One of the greatest hurdles in contesting elections for higher posts both at Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti level is the ever increasing expenditure of election. This factor not only makes it difficult for women, who have very limited independent economic resources to participate, but completely eliminate those women who are below the poverty line from entering the arena. This situation leads to dominance of the women belonging to upper castes and upper classes in these positions.

During the study we came across the fact that husbands and family members influence the women representatives in taking decisions. The most important aspect the investigator observed during the course of the field survey, was the way the members performed their role in the Panchayat system. In most case they participated as dummies to the male members of their family and they were invariably influenced by their male family members.

On interviewing a woman Sarpanch, it was found that some of the primary and Middle Elementary School teachers had gone to her to forward their applications for sugar for Saraswatipuja. It was observed that instead of deciding the quantity to be given to each school by herself, her elder son who was a contractor was taking the decision for which she was only signing the application.

Section 3

3.1 Recommendations

1. There is a need for comprehensive and meaningful training programmes for women representatives to perform their Constitutional duties and responsibilities as members of Panchayat Raj Institutions. They are ill informed about power procedures and functioning of these bodies. The kind of role they have to play and the problems they are likely to face in male dominated political institutions should be taken through training. 'Mahila Vikash Samabaya Nigam' has taken initiatives for providing training to all the women representatives at the Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti level. Before starting the training programme MVSN had organised Training Of Trainers programmes involving NGO workers, Government officials, lecturers and other grassroots level workers. After that NGO's are being given the responsibility of providing training to the Panchayat members calling resource persons from the Training Of Trainers participant's list.

2. In order to make women able to participate fully, it is necessary to spread legal literacy not only among general community but also among elected representatives.

3. Both men and women who are in positions of power should be sensitized to women's issues.

4. As a large number of women are illiterate, ignorant and poorly informed about ongoing issues concerning the society in general and women in particular, there is a need to disseminate information for raising general as well as political awareness. They should be helped to realise their own capabilities and potentialities, which will strengthen their self-image and foster them with confidence to take action in life.

5. Mass awareness or awakening is required about the role of Panchayats with reference to the 29 functions listed in the 11th schedule of the Constitution, what type of people should make it to the Panchayat as elected members and so on.

6. There should be a forum of elected women representatives so that they can meet periodically, which will provide an opportunity to exchange their ideas and views and this will go a long way to develop their self-confidence.

7. There should be provision for reservation of women to the post of Chairperson in Zilla Parishad/Panchayat Samiti elections.

8. The elections to, and composition of, Panchayats should not be based along political party lines.

9. It is necessary to provide certain support services to women members such as special training for confidence building, skill for making intervention in Panchayat meeting as well as for decision-making, so as to strengthen their political empowerment.

3.2 *A Note on Task Force for Strengthening Panchayats in Orissa*

After completion of two and half years of the existing Panchayats, the Government of Orissa in collaboration with UNICEF convened a three-day workshop on 21st to 23rd February 1995, inviting officials from the Panchayat Raj Department from the Centre and State, NGOs academicians and UNICEF, to identify problems being faced by the elected Panchayat members in their functioning and to suggest ways to resolve them. As a follow-up of the workshop, the Government of Orissa constituted a Task Force to support the Government Institute for training all the elected representatives of the Panchayats.

The Task Force includes Principal Secretary to Government, Panchayat Raj Department as a Chairman and Programme Officer UNICEF as convener and few NGO's including ISED and officials from the Panchayat Raj Department, Rural Development and Women and Child Development. The Task Force in its subsequent meetings has identified the learning materials required for training the Panchayat members, creative writers to write the materials, resource persons for State level masters' training, a core team of State level trainers and also at the district level and training calendar for State as well as district level training of trainers.

A ten day workshop of the creative writers from 3rd to 12th April was organised inviting 30 persons from various parts of the State. The first two days of the workshop were devoted to orientation of the participants on various aspects of Panchayats. After that the participants were divided into five groups and were given the task of writing the draft material on different aspects. Based on their reports six modules of learning materials have been prepared. They are :

1. Legal Literacy Reading Materials
2. Programme Literacy Reading Materials
3. Welfare Relating Programmes
4. Equity Concern Reading Materials
5. Planning Literacy Reading Materials

6. Human Resource Reading Materials.

The other modules will focus on

a. Child Labour Act

b. Orissa GP/PS/ZP Acts

c. Contract Labour Act

d. Equal Remuneration

e. Joint Forest Management

f. ICDS & Nutrition

g. MSY/OBB/TLC

h. Role of Women in Panchayat Raj

i. SC & ST (Based on Bhuriya Committee Report)

j. Micro Planning and Resource Mapping.

These materials will be finalised after field testing in the tribal and coastal regions. Training of the State level trainers is scheduled to be held on 26th to 28th June. this will be followed by the first two batches of training of the District Training Team (DTT) in the Central Division of Cuttack, Mayurbhanj, Balasore and Puri between 10th and 14th July. The DTT is to be conducted by the State level core team of trainers. The project officers of DRDA will co-ordinate the DTT. The training dates for the remaining districts will be finalised after completion of training in the Central Division.

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Valedictory Address: Mr. L.C.Jain

The critical requirement for the success of the Panchayats is the devolution of power and finances to them. In his valedictory address, Shri.L.C.Jain addresses the larger issues of finances available for development processes in the context of the new economic regime. He also comments on the countervailing pressures of globalisation and decentralisation on development through Panchayats.

...Documents such as the report of the Tenth Finance Commission and the RBI bulletin (of October 1994) review the finances of the State Government. The Ninth Finance Commission and N.K.P.Salve Commission gives an idea of the state of finances of the country. There is no substitute for these documents. We need to address larger issues other than Panchayat Raj. The State has to mobilize resources and has many competing needs - health, agriculture and irrigation.

The message from these documents is that there is no need to borrow for capital investment in development - there is no need to generate surpluses. Now our interest payments in the current budget is Rs.52,000 crores which is more than double the defence expenditures. While they may represent development - they are used to meet current consumption and revenue expenditure. The whole journey downhill is towards deficit and indebtedness. Interest payments is sparked off by the Fourth Pay Commission that increased Rs.3000 crore burden on the State and Central Government. Now there is the Fifth Pay Commission and a greater demand by Civil Services in the environment of globalization and the increase in Multinationals. With elections, there will be a greater demand for setting Fifth Pay Commission and all concerned Indians will be bothered.

Empowerment is an external stimulus. At the moment, Panchayats have a contribution that, given the state of finances of the country, they will raise resources and not look to the Government - against the current paradigms Centre to State, and State to grassroots. The future of our development and growth in financial resources is limited. If financial resources are used to activate other static resources- soil, water, man power - we have a greater scope of development, that is participatory, dynamic and persistent. The development will mean not only growth but durability also.

On the political level, the system of governance is under pressure. The Constitution has ground rules which need to be followed. If the Centre and State administrations and different political parties give up their complacency in given situations, there will be rapid growth. Unless development is guided, and political stability is ensured, Panchayats cannot exist. The Panchayat boat should be steered in this turbulence to its destination.

Panchayats are now in, but universal suffrage has been around for sometime. And there is a responsibility to ensure that political waters are well kept. There is a responsibility by women and men to ensure that Panchayats cannot be kept in isolation. This view is rather naive and we have a responsibility to correct politics per se at all levels. The way to correct polluted politics is to orient an organisational dimension to political parties. This is now non-existent - parties only garner votes. Most political parties all over have no organisation and most of them are hired - no political party has organised elections.

Let's not limit Panchayats like frogs in the well. Panchayats per se will not do in isolation. Even if the parties are reduced to merely legislative functions, this will be greater than politics merely at central and state levels. The Panchayat can create a nursery for political leadership.

Political and economic process require social dimensions, fundamentally and inexorably, pulsating the entire system. That is the relevance of one-third reservation. It is a ventilating window.

Our interest in Panchayats must be viewed in a larger perspective and should not be compartmentalised. Merely keeping a goat like Gandhiji did, will not make one a Gandhian. Gandhiji's Panchayats dealt with minimum economic activity, with production of food grains within the Panchayat area to meet demands of local consumption wherever possible. There exists no rationality in having 15% of the districts feeding the rest of the populace. There should be belief in local production, that is, subject to proximate feasibility, production and consumption as giving power to political bodies called Panchayats.

Today, when we have chanced upon Panchayats in some form (although not as Gandhi envisioned it, nor as Article 40 says), production and consumption due to globalisation is as distant as possible. So also space and power (Article 70, 243 G (a) area planning - wells to tube wells, therefore others become dry) The present economic policy is dangerous. Like the old village well which was dried up by the new tube wells, globalisation similarly may kill proximate production and consumption.

Pulsating power of 3 million elected representatives will be a force. One-third women, who if consciously developed, will make the choices, between the employment of weavers and decision taken outside the boundaries of the country.

I would like to comment on Srilatha's point- that women already have three burdens, and that Panchayat Raj is an added burden. The hope is that women will see the priority and ensure that Panchayat Raj is not an additive burden by reducing the other burdens.

About the relationship with bureaucracy - even during Ambedkar and Montague Chelmsford reforms, the British were prepared to devolve more powers within the limited democracy. The ICS officers said that they were against devolution of powers. They were not ready to work under elected representatives and promised social justice. Listening to bureaucrats will convince one that they will give good governance. Why waste energy on elected representatives? When Provisional Government came, very powerful political figures evolved. ACS were directly responsible to the Viceroy and Whitehall till independence. Sardar Patel did not see the point of his being Home Minister without civil services under him and Arthur Anderson Under Secretary shuttled to wear out Sardar Patel. Therefore, Nehru and Sardar Patel were not allowed control over ICS.

Even under the Provincial Government, the interim Government could not assume control over the ICS and we assume that the elected representatives will ensure that they will deliver. From inequity, the bureaucracy has acquired a space of patronage with the MP's and MLA's who have done it openly. They see no contradiction in passing a resolution (73A) seeking to put one crore of rupees, outside the ambit of Panchayat Raj, directly with the DC who is the chosen representative of the Panchayat Raj bodies. States resources (eg. IRDP) are put into pockets of those who are not poor.

It is not enough to merely blame the bureaucracy as the evil force but it is important to ensure power is devolved to the lower echelons. Clinically seen, if power does not vest with the local institutions, then access of the weak, especially women to push the institution to deliver and change the direction of development will be circumscribed. Any amount of training cannot help unless they are as close to the decision making process as possible.

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