

**WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA
(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO UTTAR PRADESH)**

Dissertation submitted to the Jawahar Lal Nehru University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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Declaration

I hereby, declare that the Dissertation entitled "**Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in India (with special reference to Uttar Pradesh)**" submitted by me, **Jaya Keral, Centre for Political Studies, Jawahar Lal Nehru University, New Delhi**, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is my original work and has not been submitted in part or in full for any other degree or diploma in any other University.

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Jaya Keral
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Chapter I

Introduction

“As long as the women of India do not take part in the public life there can be no salvation for the country.... It would have no use for that kind of *Swaraj* to which women have not made their full contribution.”

Mahatama Gandhi.

India achieved independence in 1947 and gave itself a democratic constitution in 1950. The political rights to women were granted on an equal standing with men, under the universal adult suffrage, irrespective of caste, class, religion, place of birth, educational or property qualification. Thus recognizing the need for a free and active political participation of women on an equal measure.

Despite the numerical strength of women, they occupy a marginalized position in Indian society because of many socio-economic constraints. This has inhibited the effective participation of women in the political processes and institutional structures of Democracy. According to Document on Women's Development (1985), women's role in political processes has virtually remained unchanged, despite the rapid growth of their informal political activities. A broad based political participation of women has been severely limited due to various traditional factors such as caste, religion, feudal attitudes and family status.¹

¹ Shashi S. Narayana, 'Gender Equality through Reservation in Decision Making Bodies', *Social Action*, Volume 48, April-June, 1998, p.147.

An opportunity for the participation of women in Local Self Government came about with the introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The Act provided for the much-required constitutional recognition to the long-standing need of developing power of the people at the grassroots level. Effective participation by women at the grassroots level is crucial for strengthening of democratic decentralization. The political process in India allowed limited opportunities for women's participation in the electoral process.

In view of this, the passage of 73rd Amendment by the parliament is a landmark in history of Panchayati Raj System. It gave panchayats a statutory status and provided 33% of reservation of seats to women. It thus created space for women and other disadvantaged groups like the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, backward castes and minorities to participate in grassroots politics, an area dominated by men from upper castes or the affluent classes so far.

The participation of women in PRI's is considered essential not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process but also for realizing the development goals for women. Participation of women in PRI's involves i) women as voters ii) women as members of political parties iii) women as candidates iv) women as elected members of the PRI's taking part in decision-making, planning, implementation

and evaluation and also v) women as members of Mahila Mandals and their association with voluntary organisations.²

The enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act with a view to involve women in decision making provided psychological empowerment and a sense of efficacy. This indeed, is a welcome, though delayed gesture for democracy, would not be meaningful in a traditional society like India without the full involvement of women and other weaker sections of the society.

Apart from its potential to draw women in requisite numbers, the 73rd Amendment Act also seeks to delegate political authority to women in order to implement policies which affect their lives the most. This includes agriculture, social forestry, fuel and fodder, drinking water, family welfare and public distribution system. By participating in the panchayat process women can advocate for themselves more effectively, because so far men have been incapable to perceive or understand women's problems the way they themselves can.

The changing face of village Panchayats today challenges the very notion of traditional Panchayats. PRI's needs to be empowered with resources and power to emerge as viable and responsive institutions of self-governance. Many states are in process of transferring resources and responsibilities to Panchayats. This is conducive to either the development of local leadership or to the growth of self-governing

² Sweta Mishra, 'Women and 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act: A Crucial Appraisal', Social

institutions. Women are looking for support networks, which are vital in their on-going struggle and encounters with complex state structures and rural power elites. Though the reservation resolves some of the problems but the constraints, which stem from traditional village institutions and socio-cultural forces still remain the same. The real issues to be confronted are village level resistant to women's political empowerment and skepticism about effecting any qualitative change in politics or in governance through quotas.

Protagonists of reservation argue that the male dominated political system has so far refused to provide space to women. The provision of reservation can thus enable women to exert pressure on the system and bring their issues on to the political agenda. On the other hand opponents of reservations are skeptical and raises their doubts about women's capabilities and effectiveness due to illiteracy, ignorance of procedures, rules, regulations etc. and experience in dealing with public affairs.³

Reservation in itself, or even the mobilization of women in its response does not constitute real 'empowerment' which infact is an integrated and multifaceted concept. Even in its limited or diluted connotation of strengthened political participation the concept of 'empowerment' would imply that women be enabled or equipped to fulfill

Action, Volume 47, Jan-March. 19, p.21.

³ Kumud Sharma, 'Transformative Politics: Dimensions of Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj', *Indian Journal Of Gender Studies*, 5:1, 1998, p.36.

the functional responsibilities associated with the posts which they represent.⁴ It is not as much their strength in terms of numbers, but also their effectiveness and forcefulness as Panchayat functionaries that will determine to what extent the Act has succeeded in empowering them in political sphere.

The objective of the study is to know whether women are involved or participating in Panchayati Raj Institutions, and also to get into the depth of the experiences of women candidates contesting elections. The issues examined during the course of study are family dynamics, receptivity of the community, political awareness and perception of meaningful participation of women in political scenario.

Chapter two of the dissertation conceptualizes the issue of women's participation in politics and the government's approaches in passing of 73rd constitutional Amendment Act.

Chapter three assesses the achievements of women and also reviews the role of elected representative in Panchayati Raj institutions. Chapter four focuses on Uttar Pradesh, it presents the role of women in politics of Uttar Pradesh. A brief study is done of women representatives in PRIs of Meerut district. The caste distribution, educational status and age group distribution of women representatives has been analyzed. Chapter five presents the constrains and achievements so far, of women representatives especially in case of Uttar Pradesh. Strategies to be

⁴ Neera Aganimitra, 'Women in Panchayats: Empowerment or Illusion', *Gandhi Marg*, Jan-March

adopted for better implementation of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act
are also mentioned.

Chapter II

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act And The Status Of Women And In India

The political status of women depends on the degree of equality and freedom they enjoy in the shaping and sharing of power. The Recognition of women's political equality in the Indian constitution was a radical departure, not only from the of traditional ideas about the status of women but also from notions of women's rights prevalent in the advanced countries. The two major forces which acted, as catalysts in the achievements of political equality of women were the national movement and the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.¹

Women in India have been denied their due share in public decision- making bodies even though there are some very prominent exceptions. Being relegated to the confines of their homes for centuries, they hardly come out to take part in public activities.²

Women, constituting half of the humanity are being marginalized all over and one of those marginalized areas for women is the area of electoral politics.³ The status of women in the Indian context cannot be defined simply. In order to understand the nature of the constraints and disabilities that affect women in the performance of their multiple roles in the society, the economy and the polity, they have to be seen not as a

¹ Report of the Committee on Status of women in India, 'Towards Equality', Government Of India, 1974.

² Kamala Mahapatra, 'Women in PR in Orissa: A study from the field', ISED Bhubneswar.p.1.

³ Kiran Saxena, 'Women and politics', Gyan publishing house, New Delhi, 2000, p.27.

homogenous group but as members of different sections of the population according to the difference in their caste, class and community status.⁴

Three important events have influenced the status of women in modern India. Firstly the freedom movement which brought women out in the struggle for national liberation leading to independence and the enactment of the Constitution which guaranteed equal rights to all its citizens. Secondly, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) which made the first assessment of status of the Indian woman and focuses on her as an individual with rights of her own. Thirdly, the UN Women's Decade, which influenced women's thinking all over the world and compelled governments to shift the emphasis of women oriented programmes from welfare to development.⁵

The Constitution of India contemplated a social revolution brought about through the use of law as an instrument of social change. The attainment of equality of status for women was one of the specific objectives, which is implicit in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. In order to assess the impact of these constitutional provisions, one has to consider the legal and

⁴ Report of the National Committee on the status of women (1971-74). status of women in India; ICSSR. 1974. p4.

⁵ C. Dhawan, 'Village Panchyats, women and the constitution', *Kurukshetra*, June 94. p.12.

administrative measures taken there. Status of women in India is largely determined by traditional norms of caste and community.⁶

In order to achieve gender equality United Nations adopted a Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952. In 1985, at Copenhagen, it took important steps towards promoting international cooperation and to strengthening peace through women's participation. UN stressed in the declaration of Nairobi that woman by virtue of their gender, experience discrimination in terms of denial of any role in deciding development policy.⁷

The global concern for women's political participation was first articulated in 1975, when the UN declared the decade as the Women's Development Decade and forced the government to shift the emphasis of women's programme from welfare to development. It was surprising to note that there was hardly any mention of this subject in the National Plan of Action for women drawn up in 1976. Perhaps for the Government of India and United Nations at that time, the issues of health, education and employment had higher priority than their political participation. However subsequent national documents prepared at the time of Nairobi Conference of 1985 and the forward looking strategies after it recognized the importance of this theme and gave emphasis to women's participation in politics through reservation of 35% seats in all elections.

⁶ op.cit Report on the commission of Status of women in India.p2.

⁷ op.cit. Kiran Saksena, p.32

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 cannot be achieved. Further, national development will be more effective if every citizen irrespective of being a man or woman has an active share in all the activities.⁸

The Committee on the Status of Women was appointed by the Government of India in 1971 to evaluate the changes that had taken place in the status of women as a result of constitutional, legal and administrative measures adopted since independence. It was also to examine the impact of the complex processes of social change on various sections of Indian women, particularly rural women.

The Gandhian Period:

The beginning of 20th century saw a minority of women participating voluntarily in social welfare activities outside their homes, particularly in the cause of women's education, welfare of weaker sections of society and provision of relief to people in distress. The early 20th century saw the birth of women's organizations and the beginning of the demand for political rights.

⁸ op.cit Kamala Mahapatra, p.2.

Mahatma Gandhi declared himself to be “uncompromising in the matters of women’s rights”. He believed that women have a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society and that the recognition of their equality was an essential step to bring about social justice. He had also extended his continued and unqualified support to the enfranchisement of women. This added to the massive participation by women in the freedom movement, had a direct impact on the political and social elite including women of these classes.

A transformation in attitude towards woman was triggered by the Gandhian view regarding women’s role in social revolution and reconstruction. Responding to Gandhiji’s call, women of different communities and all walks of life came out to join the struggle as political campaigners, joining protest marches and demonstrations as constructive workers, participating in and often taking charge of the village reconstruction programmes, as workers in the cause of social and economic justice working for the removal of untouchability and other forms of social oppression. Under Mahatma Gandhi’s direction, the civil disobedience movement and the salt Satyagraha saw women in the forefront.

A meeting of representative women’s organization in 1930 drafted a memorandum demanding immediate acceptance of adult franchise without sex discrimination. Though rejected by the government the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress in 1931 accepted the

demand and committed itself to women's political equality regardless of their status and qualifications. This principle was redeemed after independence when the Constitution pledged the nation to the principles of equality and dignity of the individual and proclaimed the fundamental right of women to political and legal equality and guaranteed non-discrimination in employment and office under the state.⁹

Participation of Women As Voters And Candidates In Elections: -

The Committee on the Status Of Women in India (CSWI), in its report '*Towards Equality*', published in 1974, mentioned how in a democratic system, participation in politics has to be viewed at the levels of acquisition and exercise of power and exercise of the rights of a citizen. Their study of election statistics indicated a general trend of increase in the turnout of women voters. Their percentage increased from 46.6% in 1962 to 55.4 % in 1967 and 49.1% in 1971. Even, as there was a general decline in participation of all voters. The difference between percentage turnout of men and women voters declined from 15.4% to 11.8% during the nine-year period.

In the case of candidates, the difference between men and women is much sharper. For the Lok Sabha only, 17% of the total seats were contested by women in 1971, which is the highest so far as compared to the total number of candidates; women have never exceeded 4%. The

⁹ op.cit Report on Status of Women.p.11.

factors, which were responsible for the less active participation of women in politics, were the increasing expense of elections (this constituted the biggest handicap, as the majority of women did not command any independent income), threats of violence and character assassination.

Political Attitudes:

Levels of political awareness among women varied from region to region, class-to-class and community-to-community. They were conditioned greatly by the political culture of the area, the approach of political parties to women and the quality of the local leadership. The influence of education, urbanization and exposure to mass media was not uniform anywhere. On the whole, working women, including professionals had greater awareness but this was not always reflected in participation. The study also indicated that political awareness is less among women in the higher income groups, who have a negligible interest in politics, though many of the women legislators came from well-to-do families.

The influence of husbands on women exercising their right to franchise seemed to be on the decline. In villages, the influence of village elders was still strong. Difference in the levels of political information between men and women persisted due to the indifference of political parties to women. The investigation done by the Committee revealed that women were more concerned with problems that affected their day-to-

day lives. The unity between political, economic and social issues that characterized the freedom movement was one of the causes for the high degree of women's participation. The absence of a similar movement in the period after independence and the divorce between social problems that affect women directly and the political process has been one of the major causes for lower participation of women in recent years.

Impact Of Women On The Political Process:

Women's active participation in politics has not been reflected in a significant presence in legislatures, as political parties have generally not given the tickets for contesting elections. The number and percentage of successful women candidates for the Lok Sabha had been on decline steadily from 33 (50.6%) in 1962 to 21 (25.9 %) in 1971. The sharp decline was due to the increase in the number of independent women candidates most of whom were defeated. The increase in independent candidates was largely due to the failure of parties to sponsor an adequate number of women. It was found that the success of women candidates depended upon party backing, the campaign strategy adopted and the personality including the family background of candidates.

The election manifestoes of political parties emphasize that women constitute a backward section of society to whom special privileges had to be granted to bring them at par with men. The Indian National Congress has sponsored the largest number of women candidates at all

elections but it still failed to reach its stipulated target of 15%. The Communist Party Of India believed that women could be fully liberated only in a socialist system. Women constitute only 5% of the membership of CPI. Similar is the case of CPI (M) and Bhartiya Jan Sangh.

Women In Local Bodies:

In order to provide greater opportunities to women to actively participate in the decision making process, it is imperative to recognize the true nature of the social inequalities and disabilities that hamper them. This can best be achieved by providing them with special opportunities for participation in the representative structure of local government. The present form of associating women in these bodies, through co-option or nomination has become a kind of tokenism. The time has come to move out of this token provision to a more meaningful association of women in local administration and to counteract the general apathy and indifference of the local bodies to women's development and change of status.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) recommended the establishment of statutory women's Panchayats at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programme for women and children, as a transitional measure, to break through the attitudes that inhibit most women from articulating their problems and

participating actively in the existing local bodies. They should be directly elected by the women of the village and should have the right to send representatives to the Panchayat Samitis or Zilla Parishads. The CSWI also recommended that women should be included in all important commissions or delegations that are appointed to examine socio-economic problems.¹⁰

Quotas For Women: An Option Long Rejected:

Quotas for women were actually considered as early as in the 1930's in the context of the constitutional reform in British India. The 1935 Government of India Act implementing the principle of group representation on an unprecedented scale in the subcontinent granted women as well as some eleven other categories, reserved seats in elected Provincial Councils. But from then on until the 1980's the option of special provisions to ensure women's political representation was not considered.

In 1939, the Women's subcommittee within the National Planning Committee formed by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose to evolve the future economic policy of independent India rejected the option of women's quotas. The Constitution of India adopted in 1950, indeed rejected the idea of reserved seats for women and

¹⁰ Government of India 'Towards Equality', Report of the committee on status of women in India, Delhi, 1974.

proclaimed the equality of men and women as one of the Fundamental Rights.

Reservations however, were adopted for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in higher-level representative bodies (Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha), as well as in educational institutions and government jobs.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India in its report, *Towards Equality*, published in 1974 as part of the preparations for the Women's Decade (1975-1985) proclaimed by the UN, represented the most ambitious survey on every aspect of Indian women's lives. Its conclusions convey its author's dismay at the glaring discrepancy between the promise of the Constitution and the reality, twenty-five years after India gained independence.

In order to encourage a greater participation by women in the political process, the CSWI recommended that 'Women Panchayats' i.e. Women's Council, be formed in every village as an integral part of the structure of local government. It also enjoins political parties to increase the proportion of women among their candidates, 'so that in time to come the representation of women in the legislative bodies has some relationship to their position in the total population of the country or the state'.¹¹

¹¹ Stephanie, Tawa Lama-Rewal, *Women in Calcutta municipal corporation: a study in the context of the debate on Women's reservation Bill*, CSH Occasional Paper No. 2/2001.p.4.

With the dawn of independence, in line with Gandhiji's contention, the 'All India Congress Committee (AICC) in its 14th Nov. 1947 meeting passed a resolution that the Panchayats have to be the basic brick of our policy. The village-centered approaches for development and village-based democracy (Panchayati Raj) were underscored to enable self-governing and self-sufficient little republics.¹²

Before the panchayat structure was put into practice, the philosophy of community development was practiced with the financial assistance from the USA. The programme made provision for appointing Block Development Officers and the village level workers to awaken villages in India. But the programme failed to take off along expected lines. This community development programme could not make much headway in fulfilling the dreams of the rural masses. ¹³

In order to examine the causes for its failure, the Government of India constituted a high power study team headed by Balwant Rai Mehta, a Member of Parliament. The team observed that the failure of the CDP was due to the conspicuous absence of people's participation. In order to secure participation, the team suggested that a set of institutional arrangement would have to be created to make participation meaningful and effective. This resulted in the creation of a three-tier system of PRI's to organize and manage the rural development activities.

¹² F. Stephen and N. Raja Sekaram, ' *Sheep and lambs: An emperical study of women in Local Self Governance in Karnataka* ', Search publication, 2001. p.7.

¹³ *ibid.* p.8.

Thus began a new experiment in the sphere of rural development through the participation of people.¹⁴

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report that was submitted in 1957 suggested instituting of democratic decentralization in rural areas with the help of a three-tier system; the village Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. The same three levels have been retained now but with a new vigor.¹⁵

Ashok Mehta committee made periodisations of the growth of PRI's during post independence period, namely the phase of ascendancy (1959-64), phase of stagnation (1965-69) and the phase of decline (1969-77). Commenting on the performance of PRI's during these phases the committee records "A number of developments in the past have conspired to undermine the Panchayati Raj structure and make them effective. Infact, except in Maharashtra and Gujarat the PRI's have been rarely given an opportunity to take up planning or implementation work on a sizeable scale."¹⁶ In line with the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Mehta also recommended women's active participation and involvement through the reservation of two seats for women in Panchayat bodies.

¹⁴ B.K.Chandrashekhar, "*Panchayati Raj in India - Status Report 1999*", Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi 2000. p.5.

¹⁵ Ratna Ghosh and Alok Kumar Pramanik, '*Panchayat system in India*', Kanishka Publishers, 1999, New Delhi. p.33.

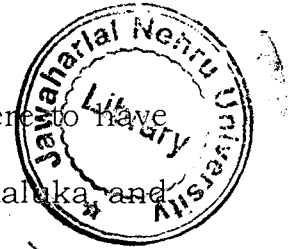
¹⁶ op.cit. B.K.Chandrasekhar .p.6.

The Committee found that "these PR Institutions have suffered a serious set back in the absence of regular election and due to perfunctory audit". Therefore, it suggested that the PRI's should be reconstructed, reinforce and revitalized as an organic integral part of democratic process and that they should be accorded appropriate constitutional status and recognition.¹⁷

Mehta's recommendations were not implemented due to the fall of the Janata Government though a few states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal did go ahead with them as non-congress governments ruled them. The Congress Government appointed two committees headed by G.V.K. Rao (1985) and L.M.Singhvi (1986) to recommend a new spurt in democratic decentralization. L.M. Singhvi committee recommended reorganization of villages to make village panchayats more viable. It suggested that they should have more financial resources and there should be judicial tribunals in each state to adjudicate controversies about election to these local bodies; their dissolution etc including other matters relating to their functioning. The Committee wanted to vest Panchayati Raj with a constitutional status saying that a separate chapter should be added in the Constitution of India so as to make the identity and integrity of the PRI's reasonable and substantially inviolate.¹⁸

¹⁷ op.cit. Ratna Ghosh and Alok Kumar Pramanik .p.33.

¹⁸ op.cit. B.K.Chandresakher .p.8.



The position of women in this set up was that they were to have representation on each of the three bodies at the district, taluka, and village levels. In the case of the Zila Parishad, two women were to be co-opted if the directly elected members did not include women. A special status regarding women's representation on Panchayat bodies may be described as the adoption of a considerate approach to women as a weaker section of society. The Constitution regarded women and backward classes as weaker sections, which were in need of special consideration.¹⁹

The Committee on Status of Woman believed that the active involvement of women in the decision making process will be best achieved by providing them with special opportunities for participation in the representative structure of local government. The necessity for such association of women representatives is already accepted in the country and provision for reservation of seats for women through either election, co-option or nomination in these bodies has been made in the constitution. The Committee felt that as the statutory local self governing institutions do not pay much attention to the subject of women's development, women's representation in Panchayat bodies should lead to a greater participation of local women in the political process and thus it

¹⁹ Hazel D'lima, 'Woman in local Government: a study of Maharashtra', Concept publishing company, 1983, New Delhi, p.18.



would be easier to press for special programmes or schemes for women's development.²⁰

The report of the Committee on PRI's says that by representation in panchayat bodies, the role of women in decision making in development projects has been brought to the forefront. The report also suggest that the decision-making role would apply especially to welfare and development programmes for women and children. The growing emphasis on rural industrialization will also necessitate women's active participation in the diversified occupational pattern for which they will need to be trained. While women occupied comparatively small portion of the Report, it was encouraging the note that their role has been described more positively and with a greater breadth of vision. They are not merely the representatives of an underprivileged group but their involvement is regarded 'as an integral part of the total development of the village community'.²¹

The 1990's : A new consensus

The recommendations of the CSWI do not seem, over time to have had any significant impact on the proportion of women in elected assemblies. In the Lok Sabha, this proportion peaked at 8.6% in 1999,

²⁰ Committee on the Status of Women in India, 'Towards equality', Department of Social Welfare, GOI, 1974. p.304.

²¹ op.cit, Hazel D'lima.p.19.

while in the Vidhan Sabha, on an average woman constituted only 4% of representatives between 1952 and 1997.²²

At the end of the 1980's, the notion of women's quota was revived as a way to force the invisible barrier that denies them access to politics. The National Perspective Plan for women, a document prepared under the Rajiv Gandhi Government, in 1988, updated the data compiled in *Towards Equality*, and recommended that i) 33% of seats in all elected assemblies from the village to the union level be reserved for women and that ii) Political parties should promote women's electoral representation by giving atleast 33% of their tickets to women candidates.²³

The amendment phase began with the 64th Amendment Bill (1989), which was introduced in Parliament for constituting panchayats in every state at the village, intermediate and district levels. It proposed that the legislature of a state could, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government. This bill was the brainchild of late Rajiv Gandhi, who strongly believed in strengthening panchayats by giving them a constitutional status. Unfortunately, though the Bill got a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha, it was struck down in the Rajya Sabha on Oct 15th, 1985, by just two votes. The next government headed by V.P.Singh also made an abortive effort to provide constitutional status through the introduction of 74th amendment bill. The Government

²² Fact file, 1952-1977, *Seminar* 457, 'Empowering women'. p.50.

declared its commitment to the philosophy of 'Power to the People' for the purpose of providing much needed constitutional status to panchayats. The then Congress-I Government headed by P.V. Narsimha Rao initiated the 73rd amendment to the constitution in 1991. A comprehensive amendment was introduced in the form of Constitution (72nd amendment) Bill in Dec.1991, which was subsequently referred to a joint select committee of the parliament in December 1991 for detailed examination. Finally after including the necessary amendments, the amendment bill was passed with near unanimity in the Lok Sabha on Dec 22, 1992 and in the Rajya Sabha on the December 23, 1992. The Bill got the President's assent on April 20, 1993 and the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act came into effect from April 24, 1993.²⁴

The decentralization Bill introduced by Rajiv Gandhi in 1989, which ultimately became the 73rd constitutional amendment provided 33% reservation for women in local elected bodies four years later. But women's quota existed at the local level even before 1993. Four states played a pioneering role in this regard. In 1985, the Janata Government of Karnataka implemented quotas (25% of seats) in the village & district levels followed in 1986 by Telugu Desam Party government in Andhra Pradesh, which reserved 9% of seats for women in district councils. In 1990, the Congress (I) government of Maharashtra introduced quotas (30% of seats) in urban local bodies as well as in the district, block, and

²³ op.cit. Stephanie, Tawa Lama-Rewal .p. 4.

village councils, and in 1991, the Communist led government of Kerala introduced quotas (30% of seats) at the district level only. The 73rd constitutional amendment was anticipated in India by a debate spanning six decades, over the feasibility of women's quotas, as well as by a few local experiments. In India, the provisions relating to quotas (for women, SCs, STs) were hardly discussed prior to the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. This may be due to the fact that those who passed the constitutional amendments were not likely to be personally affected by their implementation.²⁵

The unanimous passing of the 73rd constitutional amendment on Panchayati Raj in 22 Dec 1992 was a historic achievement of Indian Parliament and the Government of India. The Panchayati Raj is an ancient and indigenous system. It has evolved out of the ethos of Indian civilization leading to qualitative changes in national life.²⁶

Features of 73rd Amendment Act

The Constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992, provided for the establishment of three tiers of Panchayats as units of local self-government. It also contains provisions regarding regular elections to Panchayat bodies, setting up of a State Election Commission and a State Finance Commission, reservation for SCs, STs and women, enabling provisions for reservation for Backward Classes of citizens etc. Adequate

²⁴ op.cit. B.K.Chandrashekhar .p.7.

²⁵ op.cit. Stephanie, Tawa Lama-Rewal .p.5.

powers and responsibilities will have to be devolved upon these institutions at appropriate levels to enable them to prepare and implement schemes for economic development and social justice. ²⁷

Reservations of seats

The Constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992, (Part IX), of the Constitution under Article 243 D provided for the reservations of seats. It says (i) seats shall be reserved for - a) the Scheduled Castes and b) the Scheduled Tribes in every panchayat. (ii) not less than 1/3rd of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Caste or as the case may be the Scheduled Tribes. (iii) not less than 1/3rd (including the number of seats) reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. (4) the office of the chairperson in the Panchayats at the village or every action level shall be reserved for the SCs and STs and women in such manner as the legislature of a state may by law provide. ²⁸

The significance of the above provisions relating to women and SCs and STs is that Panchayats will provide ample opportunity for women

²⁶ Dr. M. Aram and T. Ravichandran, 'Panchayati Raj, a giant step towards participatory democracy', *Kurukshetra*, April 1995. p.34.

²⁷ A.K.Dubey, 'Panchayati Raj. the constitutional perspective', *Kurukshetra*, April 1995.

²⁸ V.Ramachandran, 'State Legerliation on Panchayati Raj. Consequent on the constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992', Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, 1993.p.15.

from weaker sections to play an important role in governance and administration of the village affairs. The rural women could avail themselves of this opportunity and take part in Panchayat administration.²⁹

In a pathbreaking move, the constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992 reserved 33% seats for women in Panchayats. The Act by itself was not enough to work wonders and revolutionize circumstances overnight. The Act is definitely a major move towards strengthening the position of rural women and requires many supportive forces like literacy, respect for women, socio-cultural enlightenment and other changes in the socio-economic and political milieu in which Act Operates.³⁰

Aims And Objectives of 73rd Amendment (Reservation Clause):

Theoretically, the 73rd amendment aimed at decentralizing power and removing gender imbalance and bias in the institutions of local self-government. In the absence of constitutional intervention, the marginalized section like women SCs and STs suffered from the various types of oppression. The reasons for providing them representation are based on several assumptions. These include:

- (a) Shared perception of justice deprivation and oppression;
- (b) Shared experiences of marginalisation vis-à-vis the power structure.

²⁹ op.cit. M.Aram and T.Ravi chandran .p. 35.

- (c) Collective empowerment through representation and democratic process will give them voice, feeling of solidarity and democratize politics;
- (d) With regular elections and constitutionally mandated Panchayats, permutations will change and issue-oriented groupings or interest groups will emerge;
- (e) Affirmative action will build a critical mass of local leadership from such groups that will be active participants in the strategic decision-making process.

Reservation gave these sections of society a share of participation. This opportunity can be used for political training and mobilization, which forms the basis of collectivist common interest and common development. Experiences from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and West Bengal, where reservations for women began even before the 73rd amendment, indicate that women could put their priority issues effectively on the Panchayat's agenda. ³¹

The relevance of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment lies in the fact that reservation for women, wherever practiced, could bring about a gradual and positive change in the nature of their involvement in the working of the institutions. When

³⁰ Dr. Neela Mukherjee, 'Rural Women and PRI's', *Kurukshetra*, June 1994, p.9.

³¹ Task Force on Panchayati Raj, 'Revitalisation of PR in India, Problems and Prospects', Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi, p.38.

co-option or nomination was practiced as a rule, there was a feeling that the women who were co-opted or nominated were considered by themselves and others as second class members. Things have changed since their membership has become a matter of right and they are expected to shed their conventional apathy towards politics.³²

With the passage of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India, a new era dawned on the panchayat movement of the country. Though the Panchayat system of guiding and directing the process of development in the rural areas is not new to India, yet the unique feature of the 73rd Amendment is that it brought new life to these institutions by making it compulsory that women should be adequately represented in these bodies because they should be active partners in the process of development. Certainly this is an epoch making phenomenon towards women empowerment. As a consequence large number of women from the villages of India became the members of the PRIs and got the opportunity to control the affairs in their areas through their active participation in both the decision making and implementation of the programmes for rural development. ³³

³² National conference on women and PR, April 23-24, 1995, '*Participation of women in PR -A status report*'.p.2.

³³ Dilip K. Ghosh, 'Grassroot women leaders, who are they? A Study in a West Bengal District', *Journal of Rural Development*, Vol.16 (2). 1997.p.292.

The participation of women in PRI's is considered essential not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process but also for realizing the development goals for women. Participation of women in PRI's involves ; i) women as voters ii) women as members of political parties iii) women as candidates iv) women as elected members of the PRI's taking part in decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation v) women as members of Mahila Mandals and their association with voluntary Organisation.³⁴

The enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act with a view to involve women in decision making provides psychological empowerment and a sense of political efficacy to those who had been left powerless to influences public decision that affect them. This is a welcome, though delayed gesture for democracy will not be meaningful in a traditional society like India without the full involvement of women and other weaker segments of society. But a constitutional provision with a necessary and enabling step, which should be followed by effective measures for women's upliftment in the country.³⁵

In the sense of its being enabling and necessary, though not sufficient condition for empowerment, the 73rd Amendment is a

³⁴ Sweta Mishra , ' Women and 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, a critical appraisal', *Social Action*, Vol.47.Jan-March 1997.p.21.

milestone in the way of women assuming leadership and decision-making positions, as it makes such a role mandatory and universal for the whole of India. But it must be remembered that a change cannot be brought about overnight and by legislation alone.³⁶

The Amendment aims to remedy the existing constitutional and legislative weakness, which had impeded the participation of women in the political process at the grassroots level. It offers an opportunity to women, especially the weakest of them, to make an impact on policy planning and programme administration. It also aims to enable women to exercise public power in a manner that they consider appropriate to change the power balance for democratic change.

In spite of its facilitatory role, the objective of the Amendment will be elusive and its utility for women's rights and development will be eroded if supportive and supplementary steps are not taken to strengthen the hands of the law. While reservation in itself can only be the first step to elicit women's participation along the prescribed lines, women's effective participation can only be one of the prerequisites for their true empowerment.³⁷

³⁵ Dr. George Mathew, '*Panchayati Raj: From Legislation to Movement*', Concept publishing, New Delhi, 1994. p.130.

³⁶ Susheela Kaushik, '*PR in Action: Challenges to women role*', Published by Fridrich Ebert Stiftung, New Delhi, 1995. p.3.

³⁷ Neera Agnimitra, '*Women in Panchayats: Empowerment or Illusion*', *Gandhi Marg*, Jan-March 1996. p.454.

Chapter III

Role of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Review

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992 ushered in a new era in the history of Indian women. Indian women were fortunate in getting their franchise as soon as India became independent. However, the right to vote did not help them to improve their status. The PR Act gave them a chance to wield greater power, for the Act which came into effect on April 24th 1993 has a provision for not less than 1/3rd of the elected members being women, not less than 1/3rd chairperson at different tiers of Panchayat (i.e. Village, Block, and Zilla) being women. This means, that about 20 lakhs women would be contesting elections, out of which 8lakhs women would be elected as members and out of which 80,000 would be chairpersons women, specially rural women could take part in decision making which has so far remained a far cry for them. The power envisaged in the Act has given them Constitutional rights to deliberate debate and decide important policy matters, which concern the people's day-to-day life.¹

With the passage of this Act, women could stake their claim in the process of planning, policy formulation and execution of rural development programs and fund allotment. Also, laws can be enacted and amended, programmes planned and executed. The 73rd

¹ A. Suriaknithi, PR: Redefinition of women's power; Major issues in PR system, edited by S. Narayanaswami, G. Palanthurani and B. R. Dwarki

Amendment of the Constitution gave innumerable opportunities to women to redefine their power.

A significant feature of this Act was that, it recognized that although women had entered politics even earlier real power had eluded them. The 73rd Amendment seeks to ensure that women not only participate in politics, but that they are in a position to wield power.²

Status of Women in Panchayats before the 73rd Amendment Act:

Andhra Pradesh Mandal Praja Parishad, Zilla Praja Parishad and Zilla Abhivrudhi, Sameeksha Mandal Act, 1986 had a provision of reservation of a minimum of two and a maximum of four seats for women in Gram Panchayats and some percentage in Mandal Praja Parishad and Zilla Praja Parishad. Certain percentage of the posts of chairpersons of the Zilla Parishad was also reserved for women.

Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Act also had a provision of 25% reservation for women. The Karnataka Zilla Parishad Taluk Panchayat Samiti, Mandal Panchayat and Nyaya Panchayat Act 1983 had a provision of reservation of 25% of seats for women at Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat levels.

Kerala Panchayat Act provided 30% provision to women in panchayats. Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Adhinyam 1990 provided 20% reservation for women at village level, 10% each in Janpada

Panchayat and Zilla Parishad. The Maharashtra Panchayat Act had made a provision for 30% reservation for women. Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act 1991 reserved not less than 1/3rd seats for women including SC/ST women. West Bengal Panchayat Act also had a provision of not less than 1/3rd seats for women at different tiers of the panchayat.

Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa had given comparatively more berths to women in different tiers of panchayat than the other states. Orissa was the only state which introduced not less than 1/3rd reservation for women in panchayat when the idea of giving this much of reservation for women at national level was merely being debated.³

Women In Governance:

The constitution (73rd amendment) Act 1992 made a provision for 1/3rd reservation of seats at all levels for women, in the newly constituted PRIs. This opportunity provided by the reservation policy has been received with varying degrees of enthusiasm or the lack of it by women, their male counterparts and society in general. Some women have willfully chosen self-exclusion taking for granted that the political sphere is the exclusive domain of men. Some have been persuaded by their family and community to avail of the opportunity. Such women have

² Dr. B.S. Bhargava and Dr. K. Subha, "Political Empowerment of Women", Edited by Ratna Ghosh, Alok Kumar Pramanik, Kanishka publishers, New Delhi, 1999, p. 175.

³ Dr. Mahipal, "Empowering women through PRIs", *Kurushetra*, June 1994 .p.30.

sometimes acted as mere props of influential males who actually run the show to fulfill their vested interests. These men make a mockery of the spirit of the 73rd Amendment; assuming that women are not capable of decision making or possess any understanding of their public roles.⁴

At the other end of the spectrum, a lot of women (sometimes backed by family) harboring aspirations to positions of power, have enthusiastically fought elections and emerged winners. Transcending their ascribed roles, they have dispelled the myth that women do not have political aspirations. However the path they have to tread after the initial euphoria of winning the elections has not been easy. They have been prey to narrow social prejudices. Acts of physical violence against them have grossly violated the essence of the reservation policy and can act as a potential deterrent to other women who want to take on public roles. Others have had to contend with various impediments, ranging from no confidence motions to death threats. A lot of women, undaunted by these odds, have displayed exemplary performances as leaders. They have refused to succumb to pressures, both external and internal and have pursued their goals with sincerity and integrity. Such women can serve as effective role models for other women who are desirous of taking up leadership positions.⁵

⁴ Malini Nambiar, 'Participation and governance', *The Bulletin*, Volume 7, no. 19, Nov 2000. PRIA. Delhi, p. 1.

Experiences From States:

Elections in Karnataka, West Bengal and Orissa even prior to 1993, had witnessed appreciable number of women turnout as voters and as candidates. In Karnataka, the Ashok Mehta Committee recommendations had already been implemented in 1985, when Rama Krishna Hegde was the Chief Minister. Because of his commitment to grassroot democracy, 25% of the seats were reserved for women. This helped in the effective participation of women in the political process at the grassroot level.

In West Bengal, the PRIs have experienced regular elections over the past many years during the period of the Left Front government. The party cadre has spread throughout the length and breadth of rural areas and as a result, the rural masses have gradually become politically conscious. Moreover, right from the beginning, 15 to 25 % of seats have been allocated for women.

In the case of Orissa, the then Chief Minister, Biju Patanaik, got the Panchayati Raj elections held much before the passing of 73rd Amendment Act and provided for 25% reservation for women for elected posts to the PRIs. Not merely in the reserved constituencies, but even in the general constituencies women contested with great confidence. In

⁵ *ibid.* Malini Nambiar .p.2.

many cases, the percentage of women who got elected to the PRIs exceeded the quota.⁶

The last elections to the PRIs shown that in Karnataka 43%, Madhya Pradesh 38% and West Bengal 35% of the elected positions in the PRIs are held by women. It is probably such an encouraging development in these elections that had made person like Biju Patnaik to ask for 50% reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj system.⁷

Orissa has been the first state in the country to implement 33% reservation of seats for women in panchayats at a time when the center was still only deliberating the issue. The state had about 25,000 of women representative in 5,263 Gram Panchayat and 314 in Panchayat Samitis, which had been superseded by the Congress government. Most of the seats reserved for women witnessed multi cornered contests. This achievement becomes all the more spectacular when it is seen against the backdrop of the low literacy level of women in the state, which is 29.1% only.⁸

In West Bengal the elections held to panchayat bodies in 1993, 24,799 women were elected to the different tiers of the panchayats. Of

⁶ Sweta Mishra , 'Women and 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act', *Social Action*, Vol.47, Jan-March 1997, p.23.

⁷ *ibid.* p.24.

⁸ George Mathew , '*Panchayati Raj: From legislation to Movement*', Concept publishing House, New Delhi 1994, p.74.

them 8 were Chairpersons of Zilla Parishad, 91 of Panchayat Samiti and 191 of Gram Panchayat.⁹

In Himachal Pradesh, of the total 2,877 Gram Panchayats for which elections were held in December 1995, as many as 970 have women as their Pradhans/Chairpersons.¹⁰ In Harayana for the first time a large number of women took up posts such as Panches numbering 17,918, Sarpanches 1,978, members of Panchayat Samiti 806, Chairpersons of Panchayat Samiti 37, members of Zilla Parishad 103 and Chairpersons of Zilla Parishad 5. Women's representation has been quite encouraging in Karnataka, it is reported that out of total of 80,627 seats in 5,640 Gram Panchayats 43.77% were held by women.¹¹

In the case of Rajasthan, the Act enabled the elections of 3,064 women Sarpanches at Gram Panchayats level and 33,566 women at the Gram Panchayat level. In Panchayat Samiti, 80 women are pradhans and 1,740 are Panchayat Samiti members. At Zilla Parishad level, 10 women are Zilla Pramukhs and 331 are members of Zilla Parishads. A large number of women are first time holders of public office yet they have shown that they have improved in terms of performance and understanding of issues involved in administrative matters.

Women representatives at the Gram Panchayats level in Rajasthan have faced serious problems and suffered on account of being women.

⁹ Prabhat Datta, 'Village Self Government in Post Colonial India', *Kurukshetra*, Vol XLIII, No.7, Apr 1995, p.55.

¹⁰ *Panchayati Raj update*, 1996, Institute of Social Sciences, Jan p. 2.

The interference of family members and others in the functioning of GPs at the Gram Sabha level is more pronounced than at the higher level. At the Zilla Parishad level women pradhans have reportedly been working as efficiently as their male counterparts.¹²

In Maharashtra, the provision of reservation for women is not a new concept. As regards the election of women to office, it was observed that their lack of formal education and their associated unfamiliarity with structures, rules and regulations pertaining to panchayat institutions worked against them. Moreover, other difficulties in the form of men/husbands trying to dominate women leaders without giving due weightage to their opinion, non cooperation of officials, lack of knowledge and training regarding their powers posed great problems for women. However, some recent studies seem to have sensed a positive change in the scenario with women candidates admitting to being recognized by family and society, considering their political entry respectable paving way for political empowerment.¹³

The 33.3% representation of women in PRIs at all the three tiers in Orissa has no doubt increased the numerical strength, but in actual practice their political participation is very limited. The State Act has not made any sort of provision for women in the Standing Committee at the PS level and Functional Committee at the GP level. A recurring complaint

¹¹ op.cit Prabhat Datta .p.56.

¹² Status Report 1999, '*PR in India*', Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi, 2000.p.198.

¹³ *ibid.*p. 143.

raised by women representatives of different categories is that they are not given equal weightage as their male counterparts, either in official business or in the meetings of PRIs at each level. It is also reported that in some areas of Western Orissa, despite reservation of seats for women, many women did not come forward to contest elections owing to their illiteracy as well as inability to communicate to the officials about the grievances of their constituencies. It appears that reservation under Panchayati Raj for women is in a transitional phase, since their participation in decision making is poor and very often their dependence on their men folk is considerably more.

In case of female representation in the panchayat bodies of Tamil Nadu, the requisite 1/3rd women's presence is maintained at the village panchayat level, while at the panchayat unions council and district panchayat levels, it is higher than the reserved quota, i.e. around 37.31 % and 36.1 % respectively, in the 1996 elections. This is a significant trend considering that reservation of seats for women in panchayats is a new phenomenon in the state and needs to be given some time before it becomes widely accepted. On the whole, the reservation policy has undoubtedly succeeded to some extent in bringing the vulnerable group to the forefront of the local governance process in the state.

The participation of women has been fairly large in Uttar Pradesh, but their participation in the non-reserved or general category is negligible. One of the studies conducted by the Gandhian Institute of

Studies does indicates that the empowering process certainly has brought about a marked change in the knowledge, attitude, status, style of life and self identity of the elected women of the panchayats in U.P. Women's participation in the elections of the panchayats gave them a chance to talk about and understand politics. Some studies have quantified the perceptible changes in the functioning of the panchayats and also the way elected women were coping with their new responsibilities.¹⁴

Studies On Women's Leadership At Panchayat Level:

The study of the role of women in Panchayati Raj in Madhya Pradesh by Rashmi Arun, found that though women constituted more than half of the population in India, their participation in the decision-making process was negligible. This naturally has an impact on the decision-making process as regards reservation for women.¹⁵ The Panchayati Raj Act, however, has envisaged and implemented, to a considerable extent, the participation of women and power sharing. It was found that a majority of women Panches were housewives and were either illiterate or educated merely up to the primary level. Significantly, the decision to participate in the election was not of their own volition. If a seat was reserved for a woman, the men who were politically active convinced their wives, mother or sisters-in-law to contest the election, in

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.235.

order to keep the family's presence intact in local politics. Infact it is the men who were exercising power by proxy. The institution of 'Sarpanch-pati' or 'Adyakasha-pati' might not have any legal sanction but it is thriving in many panchayats of Madhya Pradesh.¹⁶

Dr. P. Jeyapal and K. Dravidamini's study of the elected female representatives of Lalgudi Panchayat Union in Tamil Nadu revealed that there was a predominance of the younger members among women panchayat presidents. Among them, 80% were inexperienced in political or social fields and 87% of them were found with low awareness about the Panchayati Raj System.¹⁷ In Tamil Nadu, it was observed that half of the electorate comprised of women and the male campaigners could hardly enter homes to seek support of women voters. It was also noticed that some women candidates were dummies, running for their husbands.¹⁸

Utsahi Mahila Abhudaya (UMA) of Bangalore which has systematically concerned itself with the functioning of women in the PRIs has yielded important insights into the conditions of a possible transformation of the political spheres at the lower levels. UMA study group noticed that women in the childbearing age group were coming forward to join politics in spite of the domestic responsibilities. The study

¹⁵ Rashmi Arun, 'Role of women in PR', *The Administrator*, Apr-June 1996, p.115.

¹⁶ Kiran Saksena, '*Women in PR Institutions*', Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, p.142.

¹⁷ Dr. P. Jeyapal, K. Dravidamani, 'Women Panchayats President', *Social Welfare*, Vol 44, No.1, Apr. 1997.

¹⁸ Task force on PR, 'Revitalization of PR in India, problems and prospects', Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi, p.41.

of Maharashtra revealed similar features in one of the micro studies of the state. Only 2 out of 90 women candidates admitted that they had entered politics on their own, the rest had been urged by their parties or families to stand for elections.¹⁹

According to George Mathew, a study of women representatives in Karnataka PRIs between 1987 and 1990 conducted by the Institute Of Social Sciences at a time when Zilla Parishad had just come into being revealed that majority of women elected members have no experience of active politics; usually a male member of the family had been instrumental in persuading these women to contest. In many cases women continue to devote all their time to house hold chores as usual because the men in the family were involved in discharging the political responsibilities on their behalf. However it was reported after two years when the same Zilla Parishads were studied again that there were evident changes.²⁰

The Institute Of Social Sciences, New Delhi, monitoring the performance of women panchayat members in Orissa revealed a mixed picture. While a woman Sarpanch from Jagatsinghpur district, who although educated, took time to assert herself, while another woman Sarpanch from Rayagada district, with no education whatsoever, took her job confidently from the beginning. At the same time both these

¹⁹ Janaki Nair , 'An important springboard', *Seminar* 457, Sept 1997. p.44.

²⁰ Dr. George Mathew, 'Will reservation ensure participation', Vol 42, no.5-6, *Social welfare*, Aug-Sept, 1995. p.34.

districts had instances of women panchayat meetings pointing to the needs of proper training of the elected representatives, particularly women.²¹

The work of UMA and of Indira Hirway on Gujrat's PRIs has confirmed that the entrenched power of the dominant castes has only been strengthened by the reservation system, with landed elites gaining ground. UMA studies have repeatedly revealed the enhanced role of women from dominant castes such as Vokkaligas and Lingayats, while dalit and tribal participation has been muted. Male relatives usually coach women to speak at meetings or actually do the necessary paperwork when the women are illiterate.

Women have displayed an inability to assume their political duties due to childcare and other domestic responsibilities. No significant reallocation of domestic work has occurred in families of women panchayat members. The studies of Gujarat, Kerala and Karnataka have shown that the more effective female political participants are those from 25-40 age group for whom childbearing and rearing responsibilities are less pressing.²²

Dr. Ujwala Hiremath conducted a survey of 40 members of 10 Village Gram Panchayat in Karnataka. Her studies show the same trend that is seen at the national level politics; members of influential families always seem to have an edge over the rest. Majority of the members were

²¹ Dr. George Mathew, 'Women in public life', Vol 44, No.5-6, *Social welfare*. Aug-Sept 1997, p.24.

illiterate. However it was interesting to know that all these women had programmes for shelter for the poor, electricity, toilets, roads, schools, water facility, doctors for primary health centers and many other things including old age and widow pensions, employment for youth, and girls education.²³

Manu Bhaskar, in her study of women panchayat members in Kerala found that only about 30% of the members belonged to the forward castes/communities, while the bulk of them were from backward castes/communities.²⁴

Positive Outcomes Of Women's Leadership:

In many cases, women started coming forward and recognizing their roles. Many of them are also seized with the desire to do something for other women. Almost all of them recognize the need for education; they have also started getting acquainted with government schemes for villages. Apart from contesting elections and getting elected, women have played important roles in other fields.²⁵

Women Panchayat members in the Karnataka village Shastrinagar in Hoogly district, tried to improve the economic standing of rural women by imparting training in floriculture. In the same village women

²² op.cit. Janaki Nair .p.44

²³ Dr. Ujwala Hiremath. 'Women in grassroot politics', Vol 44, No.2, *Social welfare*, May 1992. p.13.

²⁴ Manu Bhaskar , 'Women Panchayat Members in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Apr 26, 1997. p.15.

²⁵ op.cit. Sweta Mishra .p.24.

themselves built an embankment to prevent flooding during monsoons. They had been demanding action from the government for long and when the government proved apathetic, they themselves took the initiative.²⁶

A study of the working of Panchayati Raj institutions in Haryana has reviewed the progress of some 100 elected women in four districts of the state over two years and indicated the beginning of a discernible revolution. Majority of the elected women Panches, including younger women were illiterate when elected to office. After two years in office they demanded literacy skills and generally felt the need of education for their daughters.²⁷ One Sarpanch of Rewari block in Haryana removed the wine shop from her area because it was considered very injurious to the health of the villagers. In another incident, one Sarpanch of Gram Panchayat of Betta Patti directed her panchayat secretary to meet the SDO (health) and request him to get the water supply going in the village. When there was no response she dragged him to the village, thus proving that women could assert themselves when required.²⁸

In Haryana, the number of women Sarpanches before the amendment was only 45, now the representation of women at the grass root level has significantly gone up. Most of the women at the block and district level are educated and can seek support and canvass on their

²⁶ *Panchayati Raj Update*, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, July 1996.p.7.

²⁷ op.cit. Task Force On PR.p.43.

²⁸ op. cit. Sweta Mishra .p.24.

own. They have contested the election on issue like water supply, sanitation, improvement in girls' education, health etc.²⁹

In Goa, women took the lead in training women to develop plant nursery and to prepare good variety seeds for commercial purposes, thereby enabling women to make use of their existing knowledge in agriculture. In West Godavari district of Andara Pradesh, women panchayat members were successful in stopping the employers from hiring labour for less than the minimum wage from outside their village depriving the women of their work and wages.

Elected women in some states have taken part in protests and rallies against low wages and for drinking water. Some are reported to have participated in demanding better implementation of government schemes and have communicated information on government schemes to the people for whom they were meant. Women panchayat members in Kozhikode district of Kerala have made concerted efforts to solve water problems in the hilly regions of the district. In Ernakulam district of Kerala, women representatives in panchayats strive for the enrolment of children in schools and towards putting an end to the incidents of dropouts from schools.³⁰

Despite fears to the contrary the participation of women in the PRIs have not been too disappointing or wanting in enthusiasm. Not only has the quota given to them been filled up, but in some cases the contest

²⁹ op.cit. Task Force On PR.p.44

has been lively and keen. Women in panchayats have raised many issues like alcoholism, lotteries, drinking water, health facilities etc. There is also ample evidence of women gaining the courage to speak up at Gram Sabhas and panchayats meetings and even imposing a new code of conduct in the panchayats. The hostility towards more vocal women in PRIs is a sign of how seriously local patriarchal structures may have been challenged and those women who have not been put up by their families have usually paid a heavy price.³¹

All Women Panchayats:

Medha Kotwa and Senorcita Gopal Singh, who looked at all-women panchayats in Maharashtra felt that women here were working more effectively than the women Sarpanches of other panchayats, because the former could get encouragement and strength from fellow women. The members of all-women panchayats have shifted the developmental priorities of the village.³²

The emergence of all women panchayat faced stiff patriarchal resistance. The new sarpanch of Erangaon in Amardtavati, Maharashtra was presented with a pot of dung; the Sarpanch of Misaladwadi, Maharashtra was beaten up by her opponent's relatives. Feminist Madhu Kishwar sees these all-women panchayats as signs of transformations in

³⁰ op. cit. Kiran Saksena .p.145.

³¹ op. cit. Janaki Nair .p44.

local power arrangements. But such signs cannot be taken for granted as a closer scrutiny of at least some cases reveal that all-women panchayats at Pidhghara, Madhya Pradesh and Brahmanagar and Srirampur (Maharashtra) exist only because no man wishes to serve under a female panchayat head.³³

Hindrances To The Initiatives Of Women:

Illiteracy: It is a major impeding factor in women's wholehearted participation in governance. It makes them vulnerable and susceptible to the connivance and deception of people with a preconceived social mindset, who are keen to discourage women participation. Surbaya panchayat in the Shivpur district of Madhya Pradesh was reserved for Adivasi women. Bhaktbai (aged 45) illiterate, was elected as prop of the influential up-sarpanch. She initially functioned as a rubber stamp, this soon began to change. She dared to symbolically assert her autonomy by occupying the Sarpanch's chair in the presence of the up-sarpanch. The latter used his influence and Bhaktibai's illiteracy to remove her. He passed a no confidence motion against her, that she signed ignorant of its content. Routine proceedings followed thereafter and she was eventually ousted from office.³⁴

³² Bishaka Datta, *'And who will make the chapattis ? A study of all women panchayats in Maharashtra'*, Stree, Calcutta, 1998, p.156.

³³ Madhu Kishwar, 'Women and politics: beyond Quotas', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(43), 26 Oct 1996, p.2867.

³⁴ *'Status of PRIs in Madhya Pradesh (1995-2000)'*, Samarathan Centre For Development Support, Bhopal, p.36.

Many of the rural women are illiterate which can pose a major bottleneck in their official operations under panchayats, especially for technical matters and other matters like reading and written endorsements. Their outside knowledge is also limited as compared to their male counterparts because their movements are mostly limited to areas in and around the village. Hence it is not unnatural to expect problematic situations and even a certain sense of inferiority existing among such women.

Time constraint: Another major stumbling block in women's participation in panchayats is the pressure on women's time. It has been generally observed from field situations that rural women of different groups and ages have in general little spare time in their daily schedule. Right from early morning to late night they take care of their children, sweep and clean their houses, walk long distances to fetch water, fodder, fuel wood, cook and feed the family and do all kinds of miscellaneous things which are important to keep a household running.

Rural women may not be properly motivated and not able to undertake the additional work of panchayats, given their workload. The work allocated to them is such that they hardly find time to do justice to the panchayat's work. They also perceive panchayat work to be the work of men and may lose interest, not being able to influence decision-making in panchayats in their favour.³⁵

³⁵ Dr. Neela Mukherjee, 'Rural Women and PRIs', *Kurukshetra*, June 1994, p.10.

Caste: It is a significant factor in socio-political interaction more so for women. Women of lower caste that is SCs and STs, find it extremely difficult or almost impossible to make the panchayat of mixed castes, hear them or give them their due respect and importance. The case from Rajasthan shows the extreme resistance to the leadership of the female ST sarpanch Mishridevi from Tikri village in Dausa district. She belonged to the tribal community and was elected to the post of srpanch reserved for an ST woman. The upper caste male villagers could not digest the idea. On August 15, 1998 she was stopped from hosting the National flag during the Independence Day celebration. The upper caste men went to the extent of stripping her. Misridevi was humiliated in public; even the sweets she had brought for the event were thrown in the drain as she was considered to belong to an Untouchable Caste.

The case of Mishridevi exemplifies the acts that upper caste people can resort to, in order to crush the spirit of lower caste women aspiring to leadership positions. Such experiences of humiliation and violence leave behind an indelible sense of disenchantment and create apprehensions among other women aspiring to leadership roles. The leadership of SC, ST and OBCs has not been accepted by the upper castes. They cannot come to terms with a lower caste member emerging as the head of a village institution and taking active part in the development process of the village.³⁶

³⁶ *Status of PRIs in Rajasthan (1994-1999)*, Unnati, Rajathan. p.13.

Violence against women:

In Kachranli village near Panipat in Haryana, an incumbent Dalit women member, Jindhanbai was beaten up and abused by the police while inquiring about a land deal. In Madhya Pradesh, in Harpura village of Bhind district, both the hands of the woman Sarpanch were broken.³⁷ Tapti Srkar, a Forward Block member of the Chandpara gram panchayat in West Bengal was assaulted with an iron rod.

Apart from violence against the elected women representatives there are cases of sexual harassment against them. Bhanwari Devi from Bassi block in Jaipur district of Rajasthan was gang raped for fighting against the evil practice of child marriage.³⁸ Draupadibai, a woman panchayat member of Salheona village was reportedly stripped naked in front of the BDO, Rajgarh district. In another incident, a woman Sarpanch in Kahndwa district was subjected to gang rape.³⁹ In Orissa, an up-sarpanch of Basmatibara Kutra Panchayat of Sundergrah district, complained of sexual harassment by the minister of panchayats.⁴⁰

Male members in a number of other panchayats are making similar attempts where women are effectively functioning as Sarpanchs by virtue of the law for reservation. A lot of effort is required by way of

³⁷ Susheela Kaushik, '*PR in action: Challenges to women's role*', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, New Delhi.p.85.

³⁸ *Panchayati Raj Update*, Institute Of Social Sciences, New Delhi, June 1995.p.2

³⁹ *Panchayati Raj Update*, Institute Of Social Sciences, New Delhi, Nov 1995.p.4.

⁴⁰ op. cit. Susheela Kaushik .p.86.

capacity building to change people's set perceptions regarding women's role.

Socio-cultural factors:

Cultural norms of traditional society come in the way of the effective participation of women in elected bodies. Women traditional societies are not expected to talk and debate alongside men. Similarly, women are not expected to go outside their homes at night. Even during the day many families object to their going out for settling any dispute among villagers. Rather their husbands are made to do the job. Apart from attending official meetings at the panchayats, parents'/in-laws'/husband's permission is necessary to visit any other place. All these factors place constraints on their mobility, which is extremely necessary to be effective as a representative of the people.⁴¹

Party pressures:

Fatima Surha, a primary school teacher was a very active worker in literacy campaigns. Her party virtually compelled her to contest elections and she won by a large margin and was elected President of Puthigae Gram Panchayat in the district of Kasargod, Kerala. Her party, for making "adjustments" in the development schemes, offered her bribes, but she did not yield. Going against the dictates of her party she

refused to sanction undeserving programs. Following this, the party put pressure on her to resign but she refused to do so. The party then organized a siege on the day of the panchayat committee meeting, Fatima was quite perturbed.⁴¹ Soon after this incident she was forced to resign.⁴²

This case shows how political parties can abuse the positions of newly elected women panchayat members. It undermines the very essence of the purpose of reservation for women and turns it into a farce. Here, the woman is put forward as a proxy and an attempt is made to appropriate her powers and functions, even though she is capable of making her own decisions. When Fatima was keen to pursue her responsibilities sincerely and honestly, the party pressurized her to resign. This incident brings to light the internal tussle between a woman's ascribed roles and her public ones.

Provision of no confidence motion:

In spite of working with dexterity and taking steps to alleviate sufferings at the grass root level, women Sarpanchs are being victimized by their male colleagues in the Panchayati Raj bodies. The panchayat members go the extent of removing women Sarpanchs by bringing no confidence motions against them.

⁴¹ Sukla Deb Kanango, 'Panchayati Raj and emerging women leadership: an overview', *Social Action*, Vol 46, Jan-Mar 1996, p.88.

⁴² *Status of PRIs in Kerala: an appraisal (1995-2000)*, Sahayi, Kerala, p.83.

The instance of Ramilaben from Gujarat who contested for District panchayat elections from Kashidar reserved constituency, Ahmedabad comes to mind. She recalls that from the beginning people at the Panchayat Bhawan were reluctant to accept a female President. The Vice President even demanded her to work according to his instructions, otherwise, he said, he would make her resign within 15 days. She took this as a challenge and made herself more accessible to the general public and made her work more transparent. This made her more popular, and resulted in a record 5 no confidence motions against her. However each time she emerged a winner. In 1996, a total of 16 writ petitions were filed against her in the court. And hence she was suspended on the grounds of incompetence. In another case, of Shamubai Gadri, who was the Sarpanch of Kanarkheda Panchyat in Jaipur district, Rajasthan was removed from her position through a no confidence motion sponsored by the Deputy Sarpanch. The provocation for the move was the backward caste status of the incumbent.⁴³

These instances show how the energies of committed women panchayat members get diverted when they have to contend with a negative environment as well as the indifferent attitude of government officials. These cases call for action to curb the rampant misuse of a handy provision like the no confidence motion. It further indicates that it

⁴³ *Status of PRIs in Gujarat(1995-2000)*, Unnati, Gujarat.p.34.

is crucial to sensitize the top bureaucracy to take the leadership of women in their stride.

In spite of the various constraints they have faced, women have attempted to do justice to the job legally assigned to them. The reservation of seats for women in PRIs has succeeded in creating space for them and provided them access to political power at the local level. It enabled them to break the barriers of traditional power structures. They have been exposed to new and unfamiliar forms of patriarchy, at the political, bureaucratic and administrative levels, in addition to traditional constraints relating to class, caste, culture and institution. In spite of the constraints, the majority of women who entered politics emerged as leaders at the personal, household and community levels and have attempted to direct the government machinery in their favour.

Decentralization through the 73rd Amendment opened the doors for the oppressed and the marginalized women of the country. The reservation of 1/3rd seats and share of the post of presidents for women in PRIs across caste groups has provided new avenues in politics for many women members. Women also began to realize that the forces responsible for the marginalization of women are the same as those responsible for the marginalization of other communities. Thus the reservation for women has sown the seeds for social and political mobilization of women to have a lively and healthy civil society.

Chapter IV

Women Leadership At Grassroot Politics In Uttar Pradesh

Historical Background:

Panchayats historically have been one of the fundamental and basic institutions in the village life of India. With the passage of time, their forms and structures have changed. During the British period, the Famine Commission emphasized the importance of local self-government. It was followed by Lord Ripon's famous resolution on local self-government in May 1892. However, the Royal Commission on Decentralization took up the issue of local self-government in the country in right earnest in 1907-08. This Commission recommended the formation of village panchayats so that local government might be built up from the bottom.

Uttar Pradesh Village Panchayat Act Of 1920:

The British rulers enacted this legislation in 1920 in pursuance of a policy adopted by the central government in Delhi to revive the panchayats in India. It sought to confer on panchayats civil, criminal and administrative powers. This act did not give sufficient freedom to the people to establish panchayats in their areas. There was no provision for

election of 'Panches' and the functional resources were hopelessly lacking. But it did led to the passing of U.P. Panchayati Act of 1947.¹

The U.P. Panchayati Act 1947:

This legislation was passed with a view to establish local self-government in the rural areas of U.P. and to make provisions for better administration and development of villages. It provided for the formation of 'Gaon Sabha' and 'Gaon Panchayat' in each village and the panchayat courts in a group of villages. The act also provided for election of the executive body, for three years. Also seats were reserved for the SCs and STs and other minority communities.

U.P. Kshetra Samiti And Zilla Parishad Adhiniyam, 1961:

The year 1961 was watershed year in the history of panchayati raj in Uttar Pradesh. In this year, UP Kshetra Samiti and Zilla Parishad Adhiniyam of 1961 was enacted and implemented. In the same year third elections to the panchayats were also held. The U.P. Kshetra Samiti and Zilla Parishad Adhiniyam was amended in 1980 and the Amendment provided that 30% of the panchayat member's posts be reserved for women and that at least one seat be reserved for women belonging to SC groups. The sixth elections conducted in 1988, following this amendment

¹ Sunil Singh. 'Status of Panchayati Raj in Uttar Pradesh', *Journal of Rural Development*, Volume 10,1991,p.68.

led to the election of over 1.5 lakh women members to the panchayats and of them nearly 66,000 women belonging to SCs. Though the posts of Pradhans were not reserved for women, 930 women were also elected as Pradhans.

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the United Provinces Panchayati Raj Adhiniyam and Zilla Parishad Adhiniyam, 1961 were amended through the Uttar Pradesh Panchayats Laws (Amendment) Act 1994.

The UP government enacted its Panchayati Raj laws on April 22nd 1994. When new Panchayati Raj laws came into being, there were 67 districts in the states. As a result 67 Zilla Panchayats, 901 Kshettra panchayats and 58,620 Gram Sabhas were created.²

Women Leadership In Uttar Pradesh:

Uttar Pradesh is credited with having contributed several firsts in the country. Immediately after independence it had Sarojini Naidu as the first women governor of any state. Sucheta Kriplanit was the first ever women Chief Minister in the country and Mayawati became the first woman belonging to the Scheduled Caste group to become Chief Minister. The most famous Indian woman, Indira Gandhi, who shaped

² A Status Paper. 'Status of Panchayati Raj in Uttar Pradesh'. *Sahabaghi Sikshan Kendra*, Lucknow, August 2000.p.4.

the destiny of the country for nearly two decades was born and brought up in Uttar Pradesh.

But despite these illustrious examples, representation of women in Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha and Vidhan Parishad continue to be abysmally low. The last assembly in U.P. had a mere 17 woman MLAs out of 426 legislation, while the upper house had just 3 women legislators out of a total membership of 108. In percentage terms, women form just 3.99% and 2.80 % of the total membership of the two houses.

When it comes to lower level politics, the trend is similar to that witnessed at the higher echelons of politics. The representation of women in panchayats was minuscule before mid-1980s. In 1983, the government reserved 30% of the seats of panchayat members for women, thereby heralding an era of representation of women in panchayats. It was also decided that atleast one women belonging to SCs should also be represented in every panchayat. Sixth elections to panchayats held in 1988 witnessed over 1.5 lakh women becoming panchayat members and of these 66,000 belonged to one or the other of the SC groups.

Laws framed in the state as sequel to the 73rd Amendment Act, reserved one third of the seats in all local bodies for women. Further within the share set apart for women, quotas were provided for SC, ST and OBC women. A share of the posts of Chairpersons of local bodies was also reserved for women.³

³ *ibid*, Status of PR in UP. p.46.

Reservation And Women:

The act provided for one-third reservation for women in all the three tiers of the Panchayati Raj system. The participation of women has been fairly large in the state but their participation in the non-reserved category is negligible.

TABLE 1:PERCENTAGE OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES IN PANCHAYATS IN UTTAR PRADESH (1995)

POST	TOTAL NO. OF ELECTED MEMBERS	SCs (IN %)	STs (IN %)	OBCs (IN %)	GENERAL (IN%)	TOTAL (IN %)
CHAIRPERSON						
GP	58620	20.92	0.28	26.80	52.00	33.30
KP	901	27.02	0.93	31.37	40.68	35.74
ZP	76	33.33	—	22.22	44.44	35.52
TOTAL	59597	2104	0.29	26.87	51.81	33.34
MEMBERS						
GP	682570	26.23	0.49	27.31	45.93	25.55,
KP	58165	23.95	0.63	28.75	46.66	24.07
ZP	2551	23.92	0.77	29.02	46.30	25.40

TOTAL	743 86	26.06	0.51	27.42	46.01	25.44
GRAND TOTAL	802883	25.59	0.48	27.37	46.57	26.02

SOURCE: Sebhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow.

Table 1 reveals that female Chairpersons of local bodies exceed the 33.3% mark. The table also indicates that SC and OBC women occupy more posts than those reserved for them. Some studies have quantified the perceptible changes in the functioning of the panchayats and also the way elected women are coping with their new responsibilities. The areas, for which the elected women gave priority in the utilization of funds, clearly reflect the most urgent needs of women, namely (i) employment generation for women, (ii) improving health and drinking water facilities, (iii) solving the problem of atrocities against women.⁴

When reservation system for women was implemented, most of the earlier pradhans were deprived of opportunities to contest elections. To maintain their supremacy, they fielded women of their families in the elections. They themselves filed nominations and conducted electioneering and supervised voting and counting of votes. They themselves acted like representatives. If any woman wanted to work, she was only required to put down her signature when needed so.

⁴ B.K.Chandrashekhar. *Status Report 1999, "Panchayati Raj In India"* Task force on Panchyati Raj, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi, 2000 p.235.

In Lucknow district, for example, 181 women made it to the 507 posts of Gram Pradhans, and 180 to 508 post of Kshettra Panchayat members. During a survey, a woman Pradhan said she did not have any knowledge of her rights and functions. She said her husband had been Pradhan earlier and that he was still looking after all the work.⁵

An educated woman Pradhan did not know her voters though she was willing to work for the overall development of her village, but her role as decided by her husband was limited to signing papers. A survey revealed that many women gram Pradhans have not ventured out of their homes. Similarly, several people in the gram sabha had not seen the face of their Pradhan. If the villagers have any work in which the Pradhan is required, the husband of the women Pradhan plays the role.

Issues And Problems Faced By Women Representatives:

Literacy has a direct relationship with political awareness. The illiterate women in the vast rural areas of Uttar Pradesh do not have access to information that is vital for them. They do not have access to mass media, including print and electronic. It is therefore natural that women are not aware of the provisions of laws, which are of interest to them. Their male kin exploit this dismal scenario to the hilt. Given the prevailing social conditions in the state, a large number of women

⁵ Rajvinder Kaur, "*Gram Panchayat Ki Vastivik Istithi: A study*," Sahabaghi Sikshan Kendra, Lucknow, 1997, p.10.

Chairpersons are merely proxies of their men-folk. In Sadar tehsil of Sultanpur district, the condition of Gram Panchayats that are headed by women Gram Pradhans are quite bad. Barring a few, the functions of the Pradhan are performed by husbands, brothers-in law, fathers-in-law etc. Despite being heads of their villages, the role of these women is limited to household chores.⁶

Dependence on male family members caused several problems before the women panchayat representatives. During a study on 'women leadership in panchayats' in Uttar Pradesh, carried out by Sahbhagi Shiksha Kendra in Ghazipur and Khushinagar district of U.P., it was found that all the female representatives in panchayats were dependant on someone for their panchayat related work. For example, Seema Yadav, president of Ghazipur Zilla Panchayat, who successfully challenged several Acts of the State Government, was entirely dependent on her husband as far as the functioning of her panchayat was concerned. Another example was of Chandri Devi, Gram Pradhan of Belwa Palakdhari. She was extremely delighted when an illiterate like her became the Pradhan. But her happiness was short-lived as her husband started exploiting her position.⁷

In Gram Sabhas headed by women Gram Pradhans belonging to upper castes, the situation was quite dismal. People had only heard of

⁶ Brijesh Singh, 'Kuber Times', Lucknow, May 26, 1998.

⁷ Shachindra Sharma, "Women Leadership in Panchayats in UP: a study", Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow, 1999. p.53.

their pradhans, 80% of them had not even seen the face of their pradhans and more than half of the people did not know the names of their pradhans. Ninety percent of women Gram Pradhans, did not know the names of their Block Development Officer and Panchayat Secretaries. In such a state of affairs, government officials were taking advantage and benefiting from the prevailing situations.⁸

It was found in another study, that nearly 40% of women in Uttar Pradesh Panchayats shared the perception of men that they were incapable of participating in decision-making, due to illiteracy and lack of knowledge of panchayat affairs. In Pratapgarh district's Mirgarhwa gram Panchayat, Pradhan Sushila Devi said that she lacked self-confidence, as she was illiterate. She said that she did not have faith if her decisions would be right or wrong. The panchayat member of Lathtara Gram Panchayat Chandrakali echoed similar sentiments; she wondered how she could break social traditions. When she went to the meetings, she had to remain behind the veil and honour the elders. Because of this she could not open her mouth before them. She did not have the faith whether she was doing the things rightly or not.

During a study of 'Women Leadership in Panchayats in U.P.',⁹ female elected representatives were asked to do self-rating on awareness, participation, accountability, transparency and self-reliance on a scale of 'very good', 'good', 'so-so', 'bad' and 'very bad' scale.

⁸ op.cit. Brijesh Singh

TABLE-2: SELF-RATING OF THE PANCHAYAT REPRESENTATIVES (IN PERCENTAGE)

RATING ISSUES	VERY GOOD	GOOD	SO-SO	BAD	VERY BAD
1. Awareness	12.8	22.8	41.1	17.8	3.9
2. Participation	11.1	22.8	35.0	22.2	7.2
3. Accountability	10.7	23.3	36.7	22.2	6.1
4. Transparency	10.6	25.0	31.1	23.9	7.2
5. Self-reliance	12.8	15.0	40.0	21.7	8.3

SOURCE: Sebhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow.

Table 2 makes it clear that women panchayat representatives rate themselves average, as far as these issues are concerned.

As a public figure panchayat representatives need cooperation from various people for being effective. The level of cooperation from fellow male panchayat members, from the panchayat secretary, from male government officials and from female government officials becomes crucial.

⁹ op.cit. Shachindra Sharma. p.60.

TABLE-3 CO-OPERATION FROM VARIOUS PEOPLE (IN PERCENTAGE)

PEOPLES CATEGORY	VERY GOOD	GOOD	SO-SO	BAD	VERY BAD
1. Male Members	08.9	31.1	28.9	06.1	03.3
2. Female Members	11.7	23.3	25.0	12.2	05.0
3. Panchayat Secretary	12.8	22.2	18.3	11.7	11.7
4. Male Govt. Officials	13.3	20.0	16.1	11.7	13.9
5. Female Govt. Officials	22.8	13.9	13.9	07.8	09.4

SOURCE: Sebhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow.

Most of the responses were in the negative. 21.7% representatives said 'No' on the extent of cooperation from male panchayat members. This can be explained from the fact that a large number of women panchayat members did not at all interact with any of these people and their work was being done by the men folk.

Women members were also asked to compare themselves with fellow male members on awareness, participation, accountability, transparency and self-reliance. The study reveals that women rate themselves on an equal footing with men (Table 4)

TABLE-4: COMPARISION WITH MALE MEMBERS (IN PERCENTAGE)

ISSUE OF COMPARISION	BETTER	SAME	WORSE
1. Awareness	28.3	43.9	19.4
2. Participation	31.1	36.1	23.9
3. Accountability	30.0	37.8	23.3
4. Transparency	33.3	28.9	28.3
5. Self-reliance	26.1	40.0	26.1

SOURCE: Sehbhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow.

While comparing awareness, participation, accountability, transparency and self-reliance of men vis-à-vis women. The rate of awareness of the majority of male representatives has been rated as 'good' while of women representatives as 'so-so'. Similarly participation of 49.7% of male representatives in the affairs of the panchayat has been rated as 'good' while that of 44.6% women representatives have been rated as so-so.¹⁰ Accountability of both men and women representative is almost similar with 37.9% of men and 39.0% women in good category. As far as transparency is concerned, exactly 39.5% of both men and women representative has been rated as 'very good', that of 46.7% of women representatives as 'so-so'.

Myths About Women In Politics: The leadership profile of women pertains to various things like women's proxy status, the coming of 'biwi-

beti-bahu' brigade as panchayat representatives and the coming of 'Pradhanpatis' and 'Sarpanchpatis'. The second myth is that only the upper class/caste could avail the benefits of reservation. Thirdly women's passivity and disinterest in political institutions.

In panchayats an outcome of reservation of seats for women has been the emergence of a 'proxy cult'. Men extremely reluctant to give up power, persuade their women folk to stand for election. Once elected, male relatives act as proxies for the women members. The field study done by Center For Social Research shows that new leaders are quite aware and are articulate in voicing their problems. Table 5 shows the influence of the family in the working of panchayat members.

TABLE-5 INFLUENCE OF FAMILY MEMBERS

FAMILY INFLUENCE	MEN	PERCENTAGE	WOMEN	PERCENTAGE
YES	69	17	150	25.1
NO	238	58.5	338	56.5
NOT SPECIFIED	100	24.6	110	18.4
TOTAL	407	100	598	100

SOURCE: Center For Social Research And Center For Women And Child Studies.

¹⁰ Shachindra Sharma, "Functions of Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchyats: a Study", Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow. 1997.p.42.

According to the table, 25% of women members are influenced by their families. Nearly 56.5% of women run for the post independently. Even among men, the influence of the family is a significant 17%.

TABLE-6 ENCOURAGEMENT FROM VARIOUS MEMBERS BY SEX

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM	MEN	PERCENTAGE	WOMEN	PERCENTAGE
Male Members	164	40.3	290	48.5
Female Members	62	15.2	94	15.7
Others	34	8.4	35	5.9
Not Specified	147	36.1	179	29.9
Total	407	100	598	100

SOURCE: Center For Social Research And Center For Women And Child Studies.

From this table, one can conclude that a large number of women are influenced by their families to take up politics, and 15% is a significant number that cannot be ignored. As far as the reaction of the family members towards these new women leaders are concerned, the negative attitude from the family front is 4.5% only. But different case studies all over the state shows that these women are able to come out of family barriers and are faring quite well.

The proxy status of women representatives of local bodies in Uttar Pradesh is much more than in other states. In U.P., out of 58,620 Gram

Pradhans nearly 20,000 are women. But most of the women here are not assertive because of the societal structure; women have not stepped out of their houses. Dependence of male relatives causes several problems for the women panchayat representatives. Chanari Devi, Gram Pradhan of Belwa Palakdhari Singh in Uttar Pradesh says she was very delighted when illiterate like her became the Pradhan. But her happiness was short lived as her husband started exploiting her position.¹¹ Moreover, the husbands also thrust words into the mouth of their wives. In a panchayat called Patya, all the women including the Pradhan were under tremendous pressure of their husbands so much so that they would speak only when their husbands gave them permission.

Bina Kushawha was elected panchayat member in 1995, she was prompted by her husband and in-laws to become the village Pradhan of the Hussain Sagar village in Unnao district in Uttar Pradesh.¹² Though her family members supported her, she wanted to take up responsibility on her own. But the men in her village refused to talk to her and her husband was forced to come to all the meetings. Such pervasive resistance to female pradhans all over Uttar Pradesh has led to the emergence of a parallel class of power wielders called 'Pradhanpatis'. The point to be noted is that the rise of 'Pradhanpatis' has nothing to do with the inability of women; rather, it has everything to do with the conservatism and male chauvinism of a deeply patriarchal society.

¹¹ op. cit. Status of PR in UP, p. 53.

Giri Institute of Development Studies in Lucknow showed that 40% of women were illiterate and hardly ever stepped out of their houses even for a single meeting. The study remarked that in Azamgarh, Bahari Bai, a woman Pradhan was given the impression that her husband was actually the Pradhan and her only duty was to sign papers as his wife.¹³ In Muhpur village of Gautam Budh Nagar, district panchayat in U.P., 23 years old Pushpa Nagar became a proxy candidate. Her father and brother assisted her but only when she needed. In Uttar Pradesh, the proxy status of women pradhans is more due to the traditional and feudal social structure.

The myth that reservation would bring to the fore only upper caste women is also ill found. Women belonging to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs have also come up in large numbers as a result of reservation in Panchayati Raj bodies. A study done by Nirmala Buch on the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the states of M.P., U.P. and Rajasthan, found that a large number of women belonging to lower caste and lower class had been elected. For example, in U.P. 20.92% of women Sarpanch belong to SC category and 0.28% of the women Sarpanches belong to the ST category. 26.8% of women Sarpanches in U.P. belong to OBC category.

¹² *Sunday Observer*, August 26, 2000.

¹³ *Telegraph*, October 9, 1998.

The economic profile of women representatives in Uttar Pradesh indicates a wide representation of classes and castes in the new panchayats. 14% of them come from landless families, 19.5% with marginal holdings and 20.6% from families with small holdings. In U.P. 46% came from families that were using hired labour. Those who worked as hired labour include 12.7% in Uttar Pradesh and 20.5% chairpersons in U.P. reported the possession of a car or jeep. In U.P., 60% of women are from the upper class/caste families thus showing a trend of upper caste representation.¹⁴

Thirdly, it is wrong to say that women are not interested in politics. Women are given the image of being passive, self-sacrificing and 'home loving' creatures. The statistics for women's participation and actual experience of women's role in politics contradicts the statement that women are passive or disinterested in politics. Women Sarpanchs like Pushpa Rana of Alak village, Alka Chauhan of Nalapani village are among the few examples of successful Pradhans. They have taken steps for village's overall development, apart from addressing the concerns of women.

Women in Uttar Pradesh are aspiring to stand independently for elections to the panchayats. These women are coming out of their veil to stand for elections and end the 'proxy functioning' of 'pradhanpati's'.

¹⁴ Nirmala Buch, "Women's Experiences in New Panchayats: The emerging leadership of rural women", CWDS, New Delhi 1999, p.80.

No matter what class or caste they belong to. Their passivity has given way to a stronger and an affirmative role. In Pipraich block in Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh, it was found that in block development training programmes, men occupied the front chairs, while the elected women 'Pradhans' sat meekly on the floor in the last row with their face covered by 'ghoonghat'. This scenario changed, after a while. Women Pradhans got round to sitting on the chairs and taking part in discussions.

No matter how glorious the stories seem to be, women's political empowerment has been hampered by the ideology of patriarchy. What little advance that has been made falls into the category of tokenism. Despite the equality of men and women guaranteed by the constitution, the language of politics is still masculine. Women have lacked a common platform to voice their concerns. This has affected the transformation of women in the political arena, despite the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

The social discrimination based on caste is glaring in Uttar Pradesh. Villagers generally approach representatives from their own caste. The Status Report 'Panchayati Raj In India' by Rajiv Gandhi Foundation in 1999 pointed out that not a single petitioner of the 'general' category has ever gone to a SC representative. The social distance between caste groups in Uttar Pradesh is very different as compared to other states. Caste plays a powerful role in U.P. The extreme

poor in U.P. constitute about 18% of households and in rural areas; their share is about 21%. In this category 42% are SCs, 22% are OBCs and only 7% are Brahmins. Socio-economic disparities are quite high, and these disparities coincide with caste distinctions.

In Uttar Pradesh, Women Dalit Sarpanches face various forms of opposition, through no-confidence motions, defamation cases or through public humiliation and violence. Dalit women face more trouble due to their 'double demand' status of being women and a Dalit. Women have traditionally played a subordinate role in society. Therefore, any effort by women to wield power and get rid of their subordination is resented by men. This is very evident in the panchayats of U.P. Women members and Pradhans of panchayats have faced all sorts of obstructions thrown at them by men resentful of losing power.

A Dalit Woman Sarpanch, Kunti Bai Dhure of Sanwalkhera panchayat, though physically challenged launched various development projects in her panchayat. She implemented various schemes to make the village self-reliant and 'not depend on bureaucrats for funds'. An upper caste landowner started a defamation campaign against her. Her case is indicative of the problems which women members of panchayat face.¹⁵

Participation of Dalit Sarpanches can be appraised through the cases of Nirmala Devi, a Zilla Parishad member from Chandoli district of

¹⁵ Hindu, "Less Panchayat More Raj", July 5, 1998.

U.P. and Bina Kushwaha of Hussain Sagar village in Unnao district of U.P. Gundiabai's 'mistake' was to think of unfurling the flag on Independence Day, which shocked the local Yadav dominant caste leader who felt outraged that a chamar should hoist the national flag when he was around. Here the flag signified power and status. There was no confrontation in the village before. This was the first time a Dalit had tried to assert herself. On the day she was about to unfurl the flag, her husband was severely beaten up and she along with her associates made a hasty retreat.¹⁶

Apart from all the hindrances, the social discrimination based on caste is quite glaring and impairs the normal functioning of the panchayats.¹⁷

Uttar Pradesh has a total of 58,620 Gram Pradhans in which nearly 20,000 are women. But most of the women in U.P. are not assertive, because of the societal structure. Nirmala Devi, a Dalit Zilla Parishad member from Chandoli district of U.P., was an anganwadi worker for 12 years before she won the elections. She rues the fact that not even her supporters and co-workers accepted the sweets she handed out after her victory.¹⁸ The untouchability and the polluting factors are still prevalent in most parts of the state. Dalits still cannot draw water from common hand pumps.

¹⁶ op.cit. Status of PR in UP. p.54.

¹⁷ op. cit. P.K. Chandrashekhar.p. 236.

¹⁸ Times of India, "Born a Dalit, tag that won't go away", 27 Dec, 1998.

Bina Kushwaha, Sarpanch of Hussein Sagar village in Unnao district of U.P., is from the backward caste of Kanchis, but she is educated and a school teacher. She initially had to take the help of her husband. She couldn't attend any meeting without being escorted by male relatives. But later she did most of the work on her own and became quite enthused about it. She took up schemes for education and income generation for women.¹⁹

The power of women, which is the real source of strength in rural areas, needs to be recognized. It has to be used for development, empowerment, good governance, and, above all, equality. Higher officials are insensitive to rural needs and make inordinate delays in implementing welfare schemes and financial grants; they would hardly bother about the concerns of women.

The debate about the role of women in Panchayati Raj System is still continuing. We know that reservation per se does not lead to empowerment or egalitarianism or change in power relations but only gives weaker sections, a share in power by creating spaces and opportunities for political mobilization and training. Empowerment of women is the only answer to their oppression and exploitation.²⁰

¹⁹ *Sunday Observer*, Aug 26, 2000.

²⁰ Kumud Sharma, "Transformative Politics: Dimensions of women's Participation in Panchayati Raj", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 1998. p.38.

Case Study Of Meerut District

The state of Uttar Pradesh, has witnessed, since the mid 1980's, the new role for panchayats in local administration. This has sharpened social identities and political consciousness among women and lower castes in the state. Meerut in Western U.P. is one of the most prosperous districts of the state. It reflects the socio-economic transformation taking place in this region over a period of time. The impact of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in this region is significant and worth analysing.²¹

Elections to panchayat bodies were not held regularly in Meerut district prior to 1994. After 1970, they were held in 1972,1982,1988 and after the 73rd Amendment, in 1995 and then in 2000. An attempt is made to study the election results of Gram Panchayats in Meerut district and also the characteristics and profile of women leaders who emerged in the elections of 2000.

Meerut district is divided into 12 development blocks. Meerut has 19 Gram panchayats, Kharkhoda has 34, Janikhurd had 42, Rajpura has 45, Rohta has 37, Sardhna has 38, Sarurpurakhurd has 29, Daurala has 43, Hastinapur has 452, Mavana has 45, Machra has 42, and Parikshitgarh has total number of 49 Gram panchayats.

²¹ G.K.Lieten, "Panchayats in Western UP, ' Namesake' members", *Economic And Political Weekly*, Sept 28, 1996. p.2700.

TABLE -7: NUMBER OF FEMALE PANCHAYAT HEADS.

Sl.No.	Development Block	Number of Panchayat Heads Total	Number of Female Panchayat Heads
1.	Meerut	19	9
2.	Kharkhoda	34	12
3.	Janikhurd	42	15
4.	Rajpura	45	16
5.	Rohta	37	12
6.	Sardhna	38	13
7.	Sarurpurkhurd	29	10
8.	Daurala	43	16
9.	Hastinapur	42	14
10.	Mavana	45	14
11.	Machra	42	16
12.	Parishitgarh	49	19
	Total	465	166

SOURCE: Records of the Block Development Officer (BDO), Meerut District, U.P.

This table specifies that more than 35% percent panchayats are headed by women in Meerut district. This data reveals that the representation of women has gone beyond the quota provided by the 73rd

Constitution Amendment. As per the norms in place after the Constitutional Amendment 34 seats are to be occupied by Scheduled Castes women. But the total count suggests that 37 seats are with SC women. For example in Rajpura block, Shrimati Mukesh won from an unreserved seat. Block-wise representation of women and the category they belong to are as follows.

TABLE-8 BLOCKWISE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MEERUT DISTRICT

Sl.No.	Name of Block	Total No. Of Women Panchayat Heads	SC (Women)	OBC (W)	Others (W)
1.	Meerut	9	3	4	2
2.	Kharkhuda	12	2	3	7
3.	Janikhurd	15	4	7	4
4.	Rajpura	16	3	4	9
5.	Rohta	12	3	4	5
6.	Sardhana	13	3	5	5
7.	Sarurpurkhurd	10	1	2	7
8.	Daurala	16	4	4	8
9.	Hastinapur	14	3	4	7
10.	Mavana	14	3	8	3
11.	Machra	16	3	9	4

12.	Parishitgarh	19	5	6	8
	Total	166	37	60	69

SOURCE: Records of the Block Development Officer (BDO), Meerut District, U.P.

Table 8 reveals that women head on an average 35 percent of panchayats and the representation of scheduled castes women varies from 25 percent to 33 percent. The representation of women from other backward classes in Meerut district is upto 50 percent, though their representation varies according to the population of the community in that area.

TABLE-9: CASTE DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN MEMBERS.

Sl.No.	Name of the Block	Total No. Of Women Panchayat Members	SC	OBC	Others
1.	Meerut	88	22	42	2.
2.	Kharkhoda	165	42	41	82
3.	Janikurd	191	54	50	87
4.	Rajpura	212	64	53	95
5.	Rohta	137	50	47	90
6.	Sardhna	174	41	42	91
7.	Sarupurkurd	139	26	33	80
8.	Daurala	202	70	56	76
9.	Hastinapur	190	55	44	91

10.	Mavana	207	66	56	85
11.	Machra	194	49	45	100
12.	Parishitgarh	219	58	53	108
	Total	2168	597	544	1027

SOURCE: Records of the Block Development Officer (BDO), Meerut District, U.P.

Table 9 shows the caste distribution of women members indicating that 27.5 percent panchayat members belong to Scheduled Castes and around the same percentage of women belonging to other backward classes i.e. 25 percent. Remaining 47.3 percent are from the other communities.

TABLE 10: AGE GROUP DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN PANCHAYAT HEADS (IN YEARS)

Sl.No.	Name of the Block	Upto 25	25 to 30	30 45	45 and above
1.	Meerut	0	1	7	1
2.	Kharkhoda	0	2	5	5
3.	Janikurd	1	1	7	1
4.	Rajpura	0	3	11	1
5.	Rohta	1	4	5	2
6.	Sardhna	0	0	12	1
7.	Sarupurkurd	2	2	5	2

8.	Daurala	1	4	9	2
9.	Hastinapur	0	0	9	5
10.	Mavana	1	3	8	2
11.	Machra	2	4	9	2
12.	Parishitgarh	0	6	11	12
	Total	8	30	101	26

SOURCE: Records of the Block Development Officer (BDO), Meerut District, U.P.

Table 10 makes it clear that out of 165 women members in Meerut district 61.2 percent members are of the age group 30-45 years, only 4.8 percent members are below 25 years and around 18.1 percent in the age group 25 to 30 years. Only around 15.75 percent members are above 45 years. This implies that though the new generation women prefer to grab the opportunities by the 73rd Amendment, elderly women are not much interested to break out of traditional society. In other words, few of them feel the urge to evolve a new society where the existing deprivations and discriminations no longer exist. Another reason could be that elderly women have the burden of family, which leaves them with little time for anything else.

TABLE 11: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN MEMBERS

Sl.No.	Age Group	No. Of SC Women
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		Members
1.	Up to 25 years	1
2.	25 to 30 years	6
3.	30 to 45 years	23
4.	45 and above	5
	Total	35

SOURCE: Records of the Block Development Officer (BDO), Meerut District, U.P.

Age distribution of SC women members in Meerut District (table 11) shows that 65 percent of members belonging to SC community are from the age group 30 –45 years. Only 2 percent of SC women members are panchayat heads. They almost remain the silent spectators and listeners of the ongoing process. This certainly to some extent jeopardizes the intention of providing reservation to SC women for the effective participation in the decision making process at the grassroots level.

TABLE 12 – EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN PANCHAYAT HEADS

Sl.No.	Educational Status	Number of Women Panchayat Heads	Number of Scheduled Castes Women Panchayat Heads
1.	Illiterate	40	9
2.	Below High School	31	18

3.	High School	16	4
4.	Intermediate	14	2
5.	Graduate	7	3

SOURCE: Records of the Block Development Officer (BDO), Meerut District, U.P.

Table 12 shows that at the gram panchayat level, the members are still illiterate and illiteracy is equally prevalent among SC women panchayat heads. Among the illiterate women panchayat heads 22.5% belong to the SC community. Around 50 percent of total women panchayat heads belong to 'below high school' category and in most of the cases they are illiterate without any formal schooling.

Thus, the study of PRI's of Meerut district reveal that women are occupying seats beyond the quota reserved for them. The representation of women from the OBC category is large, that is up to 50%, because the population of this community is dominant in Meerut district. But these women representatives still lack far behind in educational status specially those belonging to scheduled caste. For achieving the objective behind provision of 73rd Amendment, it is of utmost necessity that both the political parties and the bureaucracy amend themselves for extending effective support to these emerging leaders.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Decentralized governance is envisaged in the 73rd Amendment Act as one of the best means for promoting participation and achieving efficiency at the grassroot levels of administration. However the constraints of patriarchy and tradition in villages have prevented these lofty goals from being realized. Women in Panchayati Raj institutions, once part of faceless, nameless statistics under 33.3% reservation are emerging as leaders and fighters. For them, each day is an educative experience, as they have to face multiple challenges. There were more stumbling blocks than building blocks for the first generation women members in panchayats. Still, some of the women could emerge victorious due to their determination and perseverance.

Evidence from the field highlights several paradoxes, which both women and institutions of democratic decentralization face. Women have been given power but are not yet seen as political actors. Women are looking for support networks, which are vital in their ongoing struggles and encounters with complex state structures and rural power elite.¹

George Mathew, rightly points out that women have social handicaps and constraints of various kinds, which block their effective functioning. They have to operate despite cultural, economic and political barriers and overcome odds at the personal, family and community

levels. Their major limitation lies in the fact that they have to work within the limits set by traditional patriarchal society in which they live.²

Women's lack of familiarity with male dominated politics, political models and discourse, restrictions on their mobility, illiteracy, dependency on male relatives or village functionaries, the weight of the bureaucracy and problems in learning rules, regulations and procedures, etc are major road blocks. The hostile attitude of upper caste members, their marginalisation by political economic and social systems and gender discrimination are some of the major constraints faced by women members.

A major section of Indian population is dominated by an inequitable caste system, which holds that politics is the prerogative of only men and the upper castes. The social value system particularly in the rural areas does not allow representatives of the so-called lower castes to hold office with dignity. Dalit women have to encounter both gender and caste discrimination. Several Dalit women were prevented from filing their nominations while a number of them faced threats to their lives during and even after the elections. The women members from weaker sections who managed to get elected had to face hostility. Also in

¹ Sharma Kumud, "Transformative Politics; Dimensions of women's Participation in Panchayati Raj, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 1998. p 36.

² Mathew George, 'Women in Public Life', Volume 44, No.5, '*Social Welfare*', August-September 1997, p.25.

many cases no-confidence motions against Dalit Pradhans were moved in a number of gram Panchayats.³

Women from privileged groups have to face constraints imposed by orthodoxy and patriarchy. The behavioral construction of gender roles does not permit upper caste women to work freely with males either. Several field studies have pointed out that, by and large, the lives of women representatives are controlled by their husbands, in-laws and political parties. The patriarchal dominance and subjugation of women from upper castes is also a serious stumbling block.

Constraints at the personal level are rooted in illiteracy, inferiority complex, and lack of confidence and lack of communication skills. In addition to patriarchal customs and traditions, restrictions from jealous husbands prevent women from participating in the political process. The husband of Panch or the Sarpanch (Panchpati, Sarpanchpati) is often seen as the real wielder of power. Men see women as threats to their authority or as a source of status enhancement.⁴

In some areas, attempts were made to prevent women from contesting so that they would not have to face the darker aspects of the election experience such as violence and character assassination. Also the corruption and criminalisation of politics deter women themselves from contesting elections. In some cases, women who didn't even know

³ F. Stephen, N. Rajasekaran, '*Sheep And Lambs: An empirical study of Women In Local Self Governance In Karnataka*', A Search Publication. Bangalore.2001,p.174.

⁴ op. cit. Sharma Kumud .p.37.

the meaning of reservation or politics were forced by their husbands and relatives or other community members to contest elections. By and large the lives of women representatives are controlled by their husbands and in-laws. Some wanted to wield power through their wives, other wanted a dummy candidate for getting an edge in close electoral battles. Still, some wanted to profit from their wives position in the panchayat.⁵

Women also have to face non-conducive atmosphere at the institutional level. The male members and secretaries refuses to cooperate with women members who had acquired power through reservation. The general complaint of women members and presidents is that the village secretaries deliberately withhold information crucial to the development of the village. Often no-confidence motions are moved to remove presidents from their post due to party dynamics or lack of cooperation between people.⁶

In spite of the various constraints faced by women, they have attempted to do justice to the job legally assigned to them. They have to face various impediments ranging from being victims of manipulation and scheming, to facing threats to life and no-confidence motions. A lot of women undaunted by these odds have displayed exemplary performances as leaders. They have refused to succumb to the pressures and have perused their goals with sincerity and integrity.

⁵ Pant Mandakani, 'Women in PRI's: Gaps and Strategies For Change', Bulletin PRIA, *Participation And Governance*. Volume 7, No.19, Nov 2000, p.20.

⁶ *ibid.* p.21.

Women representatives at the grassroot level have been active in local organizations and movements (literacy campaigns, anti-arrack campaigns, self-help groups) and have been exposed to various sensitization activities and have both the political will and the energy to take on the challenge and withstand strong counter pressures. Women have protested against alcoholic husbands and in-laws, took decisions regarding their children's education and also became aware of the need for civic amenities and tried to provide them in their areas. A majority of women who entered politics emerged as leaders at the personal, household and community levels and also attempted to direct the government machinery in favour of the poor and women.

Participation does not exist in the abstract but is defined through the individuals' involved, specific institutions, processes and ideological and cultural factors. In the case of panchyats in U.P. there is a differential participation of men and women. While men due to their superior social position, literacy and knowledge of local affairs play a dominant role, women in spite of the provision of reservation are marginalized and play a minimal role.

The issues and problems faced by women are the following: Firstly women feel that they are not independent economically. Even for attending the meetings or going outside the village they have to ask their husbands or male members of their households for money and permission. Although women are elected representatives, they feel

neglected. They do not receive any communication either from the Gram panchayat or Kshetra panchayat. There is no cooperation from the bureaucracy. Also, no confidence motions are moved against Dalit women pradhans showing that power gained by weaker sections through reservation is not acceptable to the dominant sections of society.⁷

Women leaders particularly at the level of Gram Sabhas and Panchayat Samities are being upstaged through the instrument of no-confidence motions. In this context, amendment should be initiated to ensure that the new occupant of the post should also come from the same reserved category so that the representation of women is not reduced to less than 1/3rd through removal by no-confidence motion. Also noting the rampant interference and proxy rule by male members of the families of women Pradhans, the government of UP issued a circular banning the entry of male members of the panchayat Pradhan's families in all official meetings.⁸

However, standing for election and becoming pradhans has made a very significant difference in the lives of women. It has made them realize that it is their illiteracy, which prevents them from playing a more active and responsible role in the affairs of the panchayats.

The need is to develop not only participatory mechanism of empowerment but also the means to overcome the structural inequalities

⁷ Pal Mahi, 'Women in Panchayats, Experience of a training camp', *EPW*, Jan 24, 1998, p.150.

⁸ Chandrashekhar B.K., *Status Report 1999, "Panchayati Raj In India"* task force on Panchayati Raj Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi 2000 p 235

of social power. Reservations together with education have the potential to transform the lives of women but this will take considerable time in the male dominated society of UP.⁹ Much needs to be done in terms of female literacy, independent voting rights, change in the status of women in the family and society, for women to participate fully in the public sphere.

Decentralization should include restructuring of the system, devolving functions and powers from the State and ensuring a sound resource base and resource allocations from Central and State governments. Most importantly, it should lead to a planning process that promotes strategic gender goals from the bottom up, through a coordinated system. In order to ensure the participation of women in PRI's, some effective steps have to be taken.

Firstly, it is essential that women are made aware of the various provisions enshrined in the 73rd Amendment Act. Women's organizations and government agencies should be involved in mobilizing women and raising their awareness and encouraging them to come forward to stand as candidates when elections are announced. There is a need for the dissemination of information at a convenient place and by the media that is accessible and intelligible. The radio as a medium could be used to

⁹ Lieten GK, Panchayats in Westren UP, "Namesake" members, *EPW* .Sept 28 ,1996 . p. 2703.

give information to women representatives in far flung parts of each district.

Secondly, education on politics, legislation and day-to-day procedures of the broader political and panchayat system is also important. Women have to be informed of various development policies and programs as well as those pertaining specifically to women and children.

The provision for enabling women to participate in the PRI's will be really fruitful only if women are given proper training in the working of politico-administrative institutions. The subject matter covered in the training programs should include the role of panchayats, village based planning for increasing employment opportunities, primary education for all, public health programs etc. Training alone cannot make them leaders, it depends on the attitude and motivation of women to take the initiative and mobilize others.

Significantly, women's leadership in politics also depends on the attitude of the political parties. Almost without any exception, all the political parties portray the established values of male domination, a disinclination to sponsor and support women candidates. The political parties need to reorient themselves to the changed setup.

The constitution of 'all-women panchayat's' by means of legislation as a transitional measure to break through the traditional attitude in rural society is another way by which effective participation of

women can be ensured. It is hoped that the working of 'all-women panchayats' would reduce the inhibition of women and facilitate their active participation in the local bodies.

The future agenda for the effective functioning of women in the PRI's can include organizing workshops to impart training in resource mapping and participatory planning to women representatives. Also, literacy campaigns can be launched to enhance the understanding of women. Economic independence is a precondition for political empowerment of women. Hence, some gainful activities like *papar* making, sewing centers, etc may be created in rural areas for their economic empowerment.¹⁰

Training for leadership by itself does not provide women representatives with a base of solidarity and backing on which they can rely for political and moral support. It is important for the grassroots federation of women, particularly the poor marginalized women to build up solidarity network in the political process. Being involved in a democracy is not equivalent to having a voice. Women's voices need to be nurtured through capacity building interventions. They need to feel free to express themselves. Training programs for empowering women can weaken the barriers posed by patriarchy, caste and poverty. But more importantly women have empower themselves to identify and establish their gender needs and interest as legitimate policy concerns.

¹⁰ op.cit. Pal Mahi,p.151.

Even for effective participation to evolve, women have to be enabled or equipped to fulfill the functional responsibilities associated with the posts that they represent. To be active in the system they need to understand their roles and responsibilities as members of PRI's and to take full advantage of their participation in the system. It is therefore not only women's strength in terms of numbers but also their effectiveness as members and chairpersons that determine the extent to which they have been empowered.

In sum, while women may have gained something in the course of their limited and hesitant participation in PRI's, there are no indications that the institutions themselves have been seen as sites for the transformation of the social and specially gender relations. The studies of successful women in PRI's are instructive; it is only in situations where they have been active village level women's groups and women's activism that a meaningful participation is possible. In other words, there is no substitute for genuine political education of women at every level of Indian society. And in this process reservation for women must only be seen as an interim measure.

Thus, women's entry into politics at the grassroots level is certainly a positive development but to make it work it needs sincere efforts from different quarters. The framers of the legislation have to ensure that undue difficulties are not created for women that may discourage them from participating in the political process. Participatory democracy at the

grassroots level is an attempt to give a new meaning and dimension to the political empowerment of women. There is a strong feeling that large participation of women in the political process can reverse the disadvantages faced by women in public life.

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