

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN NEW PANCHAYATS: THE EMERGING LEADERSHIP OF RURAL WOMEN

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In December 1992 Indian Parliament passed a new amendment to the Indian constitution to revive and revitalise the Panchayati Raj - the rural local self-government in India. This 73rd amendment gave a constitutional mandate for democratically elected panchayats at the village, district and intermediate levels in the whole country with provisions for (a) their regular elections, powers, resources; and (b) for representation of the hitherto socially and politically marginalised sections of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women. It has thus become a watershed in deepening democracy and evolution of a third tier of constitutionally guaranteed stratum of government.

This paper presents some of the findings of our recent study on women's representation and participation in panchayats and is in three parts. In the first part we briefly recapture the steps taken in India from time to time for revitalisation of panchayats. In the second part we see the evolution of representation of women in these institutions in colonial and post-colonial India. We then discuss some of the findings of our study (Buch; 1999) of women in panchayats after the amendment in 1992 mandating a minimum one-third representation to women in all panchayats in the country. The study captures their experience and impact in three northern states of MP, Rajasthan and UP. The study explores various aspects, including the newly elected women's socio-economic profile, motivation to enter these institutions, awareness and knowledge, participation, performance, constraints, aspirations, supports of various social institutions and the community members' perception about their impact and performance.

Indian Village and Local Self- Government Institutions

The Indian constitution adopted in 1950 envisaged a federal structure of a central government and state governments and union territories. India's founding father Mahatma Gandhi had conceived of India's independence with village as the base of the whole structure. He visualized that

"Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles." (*Harijan*: 1946).

There was legislation for rural local bodies at the village, district and sub-district levels in colonial India. The new Constitution of independent India did not include rural local bodies as an essential part of the federal structure. However, Article 40 as a directive principle of state policy stated the *state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government.*

The history of independent India includes phases of interest in creation of strong rural local self-government institutions alternatively with their decline and dormancy. In the first decade of independence, India embarked upon a Community Development programme for community participation in development and also initiated steps for constitution and expansion of village panchayats. In 1957 a study team reviewed the working of community development projects and in that context specifically the success in receiving community participation. It found that the rural local bodies had not been fully involved in community development and the nominated advisory bodies formed at local levels could not ensure people's participation. Report of this, Balwantrai Mehta study team (GOI: 1957 b) which is credited with giving a blue print of the structure of rural local bodies at three levels, namely, the district, block and village became the basis for renewed efforts at revitalisation of democratic rural local self government. Initiatives were taken for legislation, constitution of rural local bodies and endowing them with powers and responsibilities and resources. However, this was followed by a phase of their neglect and decline. In 1977-78 another Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions known as Ashok Mehta committee (GOI: 1978) again studied the subject and gave fresh recommendations. There was again a revival of efforts at revitalisation of these institutions at least in some states.

The decade of 1980s witnessed fresh effort for a comprehensive look at the whole question, including their composition and representation, functions, resources and constitutional guarantee for their existence and functions. In December 1992 a historic step was taken with the 73rd amendment to the Constitution to revitalise rural local government in the country, culminating the of an effort initiated in 1989 - when the 64th and 65th constitution amendment bills were presented in the Parliament for constitutionally mandating local self government in rural as well as in urban areas.

Village councils or panchayats are not new in India. They existed in tradition and were also created later by statutes in different provinces/states as the subject is within their competence. They are seen as autonomous, local institutions of self -government responsible for development and also as agencies for government's development and welfare programme delivery. Women's entry in these institutions is also not new. *What is new, however, is their universal, constitutionally mandated fully elected structure at three levels - village, district and an intermediate level - which may be a block/taluka/tahsil unit. There are provisions for elections by an independent state election commission in each state, reservation of membership and chairpersons' positions for weaker sections of scheduled tribes and castes (ST/SC), finance commissions to suggest devolution/ transfer of tax/non tax revenues, regular elections every five years and an indicative list of subjects in social sectors for devolution of responsibilities and functions to these institutions by each state.*

Evolution of Women's Representation in Panchayats.

The 73rd amendment has mandated representation of *at least one-third women through election instead, of the earlier token one or two women nominated by government or co-opted by the predominantly influential, powerful male membership/leadership of these panchayats. The reservation is of at least one-third membership and chairpersons' positions in panchayats at all the three levels. Further, this reservation is not only in the total membership but also within those reserved for the SC/ST thus providing for women's reservation across castes and class. Thus, now all panchayats at every level will have at least one-third women members, (they can contest for other seats too), and at least one-third of panchayats at each level - district to village- will be headed by women chairpersons .*

This mandated minimum one-third reservation has thus legitimated entry of women in a critical mass in mainstream politics at the grass root level in the whole country and has created political space for women across caste and class. It is a major step for inclusive politics and, addressing as it does their continued political marginality, it has a potential of changing the existing gender relations.

Women's representation in panchayats has been finally included at one-third of membership and chairperson's positions after a long journey in colonial and post colonial period. In the first official initiative for constituting statutory village panchayats the question of women's representation was not even raised. Even on the subject of women's franchise at other levels, the Joint Select Committee of British Parliament in its first report on the bill for the Government of India Act 1919 only endorsed the recommendation of the Franchise Committee and said "The question whether women should or should not be admitted to the franchise on the same terms as men should be left to the newly elected legislative council of each province to settle by resolution. It seems to them to go deep into the social system and susceptibilities of India, and, therefore, to be a question which can only, with any prudence, be settled in accordance with the wishes of Indians themselves as constitutionally expressed."

In the first set of Panchayat Acts of 1920's in the then provinces and princely states women did not figure as representatives or even as voters. In accordance with the then prevalent ideology they were not even considered for specific attention. In fact, the panchayat legislation in some provinces specifically excluded them and the creation of panchayats was also voluntary and discretionary. In the *Central Provinces (CP) Village Panchayat Act, 1920*, for instance, the Deputy Commissioner was to make an inquiry into the desirability of establishing a panchayat and could establish a panchayat. "On an application made to him by a District Council or by not less than twenty adult male residents of a village or a group of adjacent villages". The elected panchas were to be from among the *male* (omitted only by CP Act V of 1934) owners of houses and proprietors or tenants of land permanently resident within the circle.

The Holkar State Panchayat Act 1920 (of Indore princely state now part of M.P. state) included property qualifications for voting and there was no reference to male/female. The Indore Village Panchayat Act 1928 specified that the subha (collector) may with the sanction of the minister, establish a panchayat on his own motion or on the report of the Amin or on receipt of an application by not less than 20 adult male residents of a village or group of villages and *bona-fide adult male residents* of a village were entitled to elect panchas. Finally, it was only the Indore Gram Panchayat Act 1947 that provided for vote by every bona-fide adult male resident, and resident adult woman who was able to read and write or had immovable property. *Property, tax or primary education qualification were needed for being elected and a woman with these qualifications was also made eligible to contest.*

In the UP Village Panchayat Raj Act 1920_ the Panchas as well as the sarpanch were to be appointed by the collector. Hence there was no reference to male/female eligibility to vote or to contest elections. The Bombay Village Panchayats Act 1920, categorically stipulated that *no person may become an elected member who was a female* and election was to be held in each village by the *adult male* residents therein at a meeting presided over by the assistant or deputy collector. In the then undivided Bengal too, the law of 1919 stipulated that the electorate was to consist of all adult males having residence within the union and paying local tax, that is, union rates or cess.

Even as late as 1946, in the debate on the CP and Berar Panchayats Bill 1946 in the then CP legislature, an MLA Mr. Abdul Razzak Khan moved an amendment that the panchas appointed shall include a Muslim, a Harijan and *a Woman*. In Case the panchas so elected do not include a Muslim, a Harijan and a woman, the total number of panchas of a gram panchayat shall be increased by nomination by the provincial government of a Muslim, a Harijan and a Woman, as far as may be from among those persons whose names are on the electoral roll of the gram panchayat area. The minister replied opposing it and said that as far as women were concerned, when he presented the Municipal bill in 1938 such a provision was made but the woman member from Berar, had opposed and said that she wanted that no such reservation may be made for women. They would like to come themselves on the basis of their service. In the House there were three women but none of them had proposed separate reservation for them in the gram panchayats. The member countered that the three leaders could not be said to be the representatives of their whole sex in all the sections of the Indian community. However, the amendment was not accepted.

In independent India the question of women's limited representation or rather token representation came up for consideration at the national and state levels from time to time. The Constitution after guaranteeing equality to women in all spheres, left their political representation to their own willingness, opportunity and support while providing for reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in Parliament and state legislatures (in their lower houses). As far as the panchayats are concerned, since the Constitution only provided in the Directive Principles, the further question of representation was left to state legislatures.

In accordance with the prevailing practice of national level consultation and deliberations and consensus which was then reflected in the state legislation, the subject was discussed in various fora at the national level. Thus the Central Council of Local Self Government in its third meeting in 1957 recorded the decision that these elected representatives, (about 20 in number in each block panchayat), *will coopt two women_who are interested in work among women and children*. (GOI; 1957a emphasis added)

The proceedings of the fourth meeting of the council recorded that "the Panchayats to be a real representative body of the people should have women as about half the number of members. But till we reach that stage, it is imperative that we ensure adequate representation of women, on the panchayats. Some states have reserved one seat for women but, in practice, it is found that a solitary woman is unable to express herself freely on the aspects touching women's life in the villages. It is, therefore felt that at least two seats must be reserved for women. Some states are revising their legislation and incorporating reservation of at least two seats for women. This step would go far in enabling panchayat to assess total needs of village development from a fuller angle. (GOI; 1958 emphasis added).

The proceedings referred to women as a neglected sector along with SC/ST but the representation recommended for women did not exceed a token of at least two seats. At the same time, the recommendation for SC/ST was for review of reservation in all states, adequate representation by reservation of necessary seats depending upon their population in a given panchayat area and irrespective of population, to reserve at least one seat for them

The Balwant Rai Mehta study team 1957 continued this inclusion / co-option of one *or two women interested in work among women and children_in* gram panchayat as well as the

panchayat samiti. (GOI: 1957 b) . The state Panchayat Acts in 1950s and early 1960s reflected this ideology and consensus. We see this reflected in different state laws. The Committee on Panchayati Raj, (Ashok Mehta committee) also continued the same trend except that it suggested the mode of inclusion of women who lost but received the highest votes and if no women contested, to co-opt eligible women. The evolution of women's representation in the decade of 80's and 90's as finally included in the 73rd amendment also makes interesting reading and also helps in understanding the motivation in its introduction, the invisible limits in the political commitment and the challenge that women face in using this new political space.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) had noted, in 1974, the ineffectiveness of the representation of token women in panchayats and, shying away from a bolder initiative, recommended, as a transitional measure, statutory women's panchayats as part of the panchayat structure. Government did not, however, implement this recommendation. In the decade of 1980's a number of developments, particularly, the movements and struggles during the emergency and post emergency period led to more debates on women's issues and renewed activity in favour of women. These included an increased focus on women in development in the VI and VII five year plans, the National Perspective Plan (NPP) for women and the alternative perspective plan offered by women's movement. The dominant discourse, however, continued to be *women in development*, and initiatives were developed to increase women's presence in decision - making structures, at least up to some levels. The NPP and the state sponsored national/regional conferences on panchayats/panchayats and weaker sections/women advocated the strategy of reservation for women including in the panchayats.

When the 64th Constitutional Amendment bill was drafted and presented to Parliament in 1989 it included "as nearly as may be" 30 percent reservation in favour of women in the membership of panchayats at all the three levels, in the seats reserved for SC/ST as well as in the total seats. In the seats reserved for SC/ST it mandated reservation of one seat for women if this reservation was of only two seats. It did not provide for reservation among chairpersons, leaving such reservation permissible in favour of SC/ST women if the state legislature wanted.

The National Front government of V.P. Singh, which succeeded Rajiv Gandhi after the 1989 elections, introduced another Constitutional (72nd) Amendment Bill in 1990 including in it "not less than one third" reservation for women in membership at all levels. These were to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies as was also stipulated in the earlier bill but there was no reference in this bill even to a possible reservation in chairpersons' positions. This bill was introduced in Parliament but did not come up for discussion. When the Congress party came back to power after the elections of 1991, a new amendment bill was introduced which finally became the 73rd amendment to the constitution. This continued the "not less than one third" reservation in membership but also introduced this in chairpersons' posts. Interestingly, while the reservation of seats, according to this amendment, " may be" by rotation, the reservation of chairpersons' posts "shall be" by rotation.

All the states in India have included these reservations in their panchayat laws but none of them have changed the reservation to any higher percentage. The Minister of State for Rural Development while introducing the bill for 73rd amendment had stated that "We have provided for at least one-third of the total seats at every level. Considering the fact that

women constitute nearly half the population, even this reservation can be considered inadequate; but the honourable members will agree that it is significantly more than what has been attempted so far in most of the states" (Lok Sabha debates Vol. 16). Most of the states have, however, just reproduced this "not less than one third" without enhancing or quantifying it at any higher level.

The national consensus and the guarantee in the constitution for one-third space for contest by women for positions of members and chairpersons of panchayats from the village to the district level in various states does not mean that no sections have reservation about this guarantee. In fact even when these amendments were under discussion, there were members who expressed that this would be used by dominating elements to continue their hold by bringing in women from their group. Syed Shahbuddin, M.P said on 2 December, 1992 while participating in the debate on the constitutional amendment :

"I do not regard the women either as a separate community or as a class or as a caste or even as a social group. In fact our historical experience is that reservation for women has been used by the vested interests in order to augment their power within the elected bodies because of the disparity in the level of education and consciousness among women belonging to different strata of society. Therefore, in principle, when all the general seats - two third of the seats - are left aside, there is a possibility that the very elements who are today dominating the village life shall find their way back riding on the strength of the women members who will be elected largely from their group."

These doubts, bias and prejudices continue to manifest in various comments and statements about women's handicap, inability and non- participation even after they have entered the panchayats. In fact, it is the continuation of such bias which were reflected when there was resistance to giving similar reservation for women in the national and state legislatures in 1997 and 1998. The ill-informed comments and reactions appear to be mainly due to the reservation in chairpersons' posts since these are perceived as foci of power and authority in the panchayats and there is obvious reluctance to share power with women in one-third of these posts.

Women in Panchayats : Representation, Participation and Experience

While initiatives were taken for developing national consensus for guaranteeing a fixed representation for weaker sections of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in panchayats which was then reflected in a number or proportionate seats for them in the various states legislation, women's representation continued to be only token even in the legal stipulations developed in the first four decades of independence. Only Karnataka introduced 25% reservation for women in the membership of panchayats and Andhra Pradesh introduced reservation for them based on the number of members in a panchayat. The 73rd constitutional amendment by providing reservation for women in rural local self governing bodies has provided for their representation in a 'critical mass' of one-third as well as for deepening of democracy in the country side by ensuring wider representation of weaker sections - men and women. *Hence, it is this part of the amendment and it's follow up which is the focus of our study in three states of India documenting the profile, experience, impact and other perceptions about the new entrants.*

As we see the evolution of women's representation in panchayats, women's representation and presence has continued to be influenced by the same ideology and tokenism as has continued at other political levels despite the political equality guaranteed by the constitution. However, the 1992 amendment has given a new direction for their representation in panchayats by guaranteeing a critical base of one-third representation which has not been possible so far in other political institutions whether the legislature or the party organisations despite pronouncements by almost all the political parties to the contrary. Our study has, therefore, a wider context for studying future profile of local self governing institutions in India.

Women have always and almost everywhere been on the fringe of political and social power. We share in India with other countries the continued marginality of women in the political institutions. In our Lower House of national Parliament women representatives have increased from 14 (i.e. less than 3%) in 1952 to 43 in 1998 and 47 in the just concluded election in Sept. 1999. In a total membership of 543 they constitute just less than 9% even now. Similar situation continues in the states despite our having had a woman Prime Minister and women Chief Ministers. Women had successfully participated in the mass movements in the national struggle for independence in India and were even arrested in large numbers, as they have joined later movements. Hence the comment, "It was easier to get arrested for supporting democracy than it is to get elected to the democratic institutions that Indian nationalists were fighting to obtain." (Nelson and Chowdhary : 1997).

Has the formal change brought by the institutional intervention of reservations adequately addressed women's marginality or has it only led to their numerically expanded presence? Has the numerical presence transformed these structures, made them more receptive to women's needs and concerns or has patriarchy already succeeded in defeating the intentions of the amendment? We sought the answers in our study in the experience of women who have entered the panchayats. In this study we have looked at women's experience in their new political role, the processes of change, the earlier transition phase for women's political presence, problems of participation, potential, support of families, communities and other social collectives. We have also tried to see whether this new presence and experience have impact and empowering effect.

The study was focused on the experience of women, their representation, participation, impact which, we believe, depend substantially on the socio-political context even within the states. We took up the study with no assumptions and to really find out what was happening. We tried to be wary so as not to arrive at simplistic conclusions regarding women, their families, the community and all the social collectives, and the role of the state and the real focus of various interventions.

The results are encouraging. A number of myths about these women are exploded which we hope can help us to avoid simplistic generalisations about rural Indian women's dis-interest in politics, passivity, non participation in local political institutions, proxyism by their male kins and women's universal political connectivity and belonging only to well off sections if entering panchayats.

Women's leadership has to emerge from the grassroots to gain confidence and to make a claim at higher levels. Therefore, we have tried to see if the formal change made by the amendment by guaranteeing a minimum space to women but without changing the institutions and structures adequately addresses this marginality. Can women's numerical presence even in a critical mass transform these structures and make them more receptive to

women's needs and concerns? If patriarchy is at the root of this situation, will the system not defeat the intentions of the amendment? There are issues of power and authority, hierarchy and control which bring up the essentiality of a change in power structures and gender relations if we hope to see transformed and transformative politics.

Hopes have been expressed that the process of empowerment of women in panchayats would enable them to re-examine their lives, recognise the sources and structures of power and of their own subordination and initiate action to challenge the existing ideologies as well as structures and institutions. They would move, it is hoped, from positions of silence to gaining voice. We may see their transformation from uneducated, unquestioning persons to questioning individuals, who may value their own knowledge and learn to question gender divisions of labour. They may change from having restricted mobility and right to move about only if escorted by men, to gaining much greater autonomy and mobility attending meetings, going to public offices without male escort and, most importantly, from politically passive persons to active agents in the political process.

But it is being said that "Women have come into politics as proxy candidates and continue to be manipulated by powerful patriarchal elites. A report on eight short state studies in early 1995 stated that many women were proxy candidates, they were not able to make their presence felt at meetings, were ill informed about procedures and functions of panchayats and with odds stacked against them it was noted as not surprising." (ISST: 1995). Perhaps, too quick a conclusion within a year or less of panchayat elections. *It contrasts with the experience of our first male research assistant's first visit to meet one of the village panchayat women chairpersons in the predominantly tribal district of Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh. Her leadership, command, confidence and clarity in dealing with the school teacher, panchayat secretary and with himself amazed him. As he put it, this illiterate tribal woman could stand up against any one in her leadership qualities.*

The barriers of gender division of labour, women's low levels of mobility, seclusion, lack of information and negotiation skills, internalised low self image, stereotypes and lack of confidence continue in some degree. They have not disappeared overnight. But we see that *the reservations have provided an opportunity for women's entry into a non-traditional space and a possibility for erosion of traditional gender, caste, class roles and hierarchy.*

The question we address is whether the intervention like a constitutional amendment, legal changes and women's response to them contribute to their empowerment or do the patriarchal structures manifest in the household and in the state only co-opt women and make them 'namesake' members. Are women's efforts to minimise the tension between their public role and household responsibilities by cooperation of husbands and other male kins a successful coping mechanism or a victory of patriarchal kinship relationships? Are they only victims of what is described as public patriarchy where women are not barred from the public areas but are none-the-less subordinated within, showing a shift in patriarchal strategy from exclusionary to segregationist and subordinating?

Are rural women in India beginning to break their silence, to question, to gain confidence, to gain access and control over material and knowledge resources, altering self- image after entering the newly re-elected panchayats? *Less than half a decade in these bodies, in our view, is too short a period to have a major shift in the dominant patriarchal structures continuing and reinforced by the equally patriarchal, paternalistic state apparatus. Hence we should only hope to see beginnings of the process and the direction of change. We see it in their awareness and knowledge, confidence and aspiration levels, their perceptions of self, status, recognition, participation and*

leadership in panchayats and outside and in their impact on panchayats and on their own self in their perceptions of people's and women's expectations and their own ability to meet these expectations. We believe that in the case of this long marginalised group these small beginnings are giant steps and have a big potential in future.

Generally panchayats and the higher level political institutions have the same ideology for women's place there - no women or token women though giving absolute formal equality with one person, one vote and no formal barriers to their entry. For the first time the constitutional amendment mandated one-third minimum reservation for women in the panchayats and municipalities. This has not extended to other political fora - the political parties, trade unions, national parliament and state legislatures so far. The debate on another amendment to bring one-third women in the Lower Houses of Parliament and state legislatures is still inconclusive. Everyone, at least almost everyone formally swears by their commitment to women's entry in similar proportion but the amendment bill to give this reservation did not get passed even after a parliamentary committee with all party representation recommended its adoption. So the experience of women in panchayats has far reaching significance.

We find people ready, in fact, eager to believe in any negative observations or statements that can be made about these women's performance in panchayats. Hence the new descriptions of *proxy*, *namesake members*, *sarpanch pati*, *pradhan pati* (husbands doing their work). The maximum scepticism is focused on women at the grassroots - the village institutions. Is it the insecurity or threat perceived by the patriarchal structures or the inability to see the emerging leadership of women from the marginalised groups? Perhaps it is both.

There is no allowance in the general comments on these new representatives' experience for an initial learning phase. Unusually high expectations in a short period are not realistic. Moreover, the experience and achievements must be seen against the powers, authority, and resources actually devolved in each state legislation and executive action including the state politics and invisible road blocks. If we carefully study the states' initiatives for devolution of powers and resources to panchayats, we find the actual devolution falling far short of the rhetoric of self government and autonomy.

The constitutional amendment has made the composition of panchayats wider within a broad framework of this amendment, but the social relations of gender are intertwined with local social, economic and political institutions. We, therefore, need to see the challenge, women's response and impact and leadership in their specific context. In the experience of women who have entered these bodies to the extent of one third and in some places a little more, this specific context determines the magnitude and quality of challenge as well as their response, success and frustrations. In our study we ensure this contextualisation. We have noted that absence of such contextualisation leads to sweeping generalizations of emergence of sarpanch/ pradhan pati (husbands of the village panchayat chairperson) doing their work, they being only proxies while in actual fact, it may really be part of women's search for new coping and support mechanisms when confronted with their own illiteracy, inexperience, ignorance, seclusion strong feudal and patriarchal structures restricting their mobility (if unescorted) and interaction, and a question of safety.

Women have even to consider the impact of their outside interaction on their marriage. The male elected officials do not have to consider this aspect or conflict at all. In our field work, especially in the case studies, women gave illustrations of this concern and their success or

inadequacy. The educated, district panchayat chairperson in U.P., a postgraduate but married in an extremely conservative, upper caste family, expressed how in the neighbouring district the woman chairperson was motivated and encouraged by her politician husband to contest for the post but now he had become her biggest opponent and she was facing the challenge in her political role as well as in her marriage. She explained how she had herself learnt a lesson from this case and balanced the two roles without compromising on the basics. She also explained how with her performance she was being offered the candidature for the parliament and how she negotiated for refusing it .

Another chairperson, again at the district level panchayat, stated how when her husband was encouraging her to contest, a senior, old family friend advised him against it saying that if she succeeded, he would become her first opponent. She succeeded and the family friend's prophecy proved right. The marriage has broken.

A tribal village panchayat woman chairperson expressed how men do not really want women to come up in politics as they are afraid that they would share in the political power that they are holding almost exclusively. How they set different conduct norms for women's public contacts with other men and for their own interaction but *how the women's public role was changing it and men were gradually though sometimes reluctantly conceding this change.*

We noted that this conflict was more at the district and block levels with comparatively more educated, economically better off representatives. At the village level and particularly among the socially, economically, educationally weaker sections, there was more sharing and support, perhaps substantiating that "women in lower strata exercise more rights than their men grant them ideologically, and men of the educated strata concede their women ideologically more rights than the latter can actually exercise".

There are a number of myths about women and their participation in governance in India particularly when the question relates to rural women who have low literacy rates, and numerous social restrictions and other socio- economic handicaps. Rural female literacy in India was 30.62% in 1991 census. In the three states of study, the literacy levels were even lower and much more so for rural women. In the three states, rural female literacy was 11.59% in Rajasthan and 19.73% and 19.02% in MP and UP.

Myths about Women in Panchayats.

We have identified at least four myths about women's participation in the rural local self-governing institutions of panchayats :

- i. Women's passivity and disinterest in political institutions - where are so many women to contest elections, etc.;
- ii. Only the well to do, upper strata women will come through reservations;
- iii. Their political connectivity - only privileged kins-women of powerful politicians will enter these institutions to keep the seats for them;
- iv. Women who have entered the panchayats are only proxy and namesake members. They do not participate in the panchayats.

The study questioned these myths and explored the experience of women in these three most difficult states in terms of grassroots democracy and gender. The study was conducted in three northern states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and U.P. which together account for 31% of India's rural population. These states also account for one-third of India's population living below the poverty line. These states are low on indicators of human development as well as of gender. To that extent the development of democratic institutions at the local level and the representative character and the experience of new entrants to politics was seen as a challenging task. Three districts were selected in each state giving regional representation along with variations of literacy, socio-economic development and population profile, including of weaker sections. Similarly, in each district four blocks were selected and in each block five gram panchayats were selected for the study area, with a purposive selection of panchayats with women chairpersons. Finally, a sample of 1199 respondents were selected for interview which included elected representatives of village level panchayats, district level panchayats and intermediate or block level panchayats including chairpersons and members. These included 843 women and 176 men, besides 180 members of the village community (Table 1). Our three year study thus included interview of 1199 respondents (of whom 843 were elected women in panchayats) and 180 community members and also 60 case studies.

Table 1
Elected Representatives, Level of Panchayats, and Community Members.

State / level of Panchayat	Madhya Pradesh		Rajasthan		Uttar Pradesh		All States		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
District Panchayats									
Chairpersons	--	1	1	2	1	2	2	5	7
Members	--	8	--	6	--	5	--	19	19
Sub-Total	--	9	1	8	1	7	2	24	26
Block Panchayats									
Chairpersons	--	11	7	5	--	11	7	27	34
Members	--	24	--	24	--	12	--	60	60
Sub-Total	--	35	7	29	--	23	7	87	94
Gram Panchayat									
Chairpersons	--	60	12	48	--	60	12	168	180
Members	60	179	48	192	47	193	155	564	719
Sub-Total	60	239	60	240	47	253	167	732	899
Total (All Panchayats)									
Chairpersons	--	72	20	55	1	73	21	200	221
Members	60	211	48	222	47	210	155	643	798
Total	60	283	68	277	48	283	176	843	1019
Community Members	52	8	45	15	44	16	141	39	180

Our data explode the myths and bring out the emerging leadership of rural women in the new political space created for them by the constitutional amendment without discounting the existence and behaviour of some who would fit in the patriarchally oriented frame work which also generates these myths.

Initially when the constitutional change took place, there was wide-spread scepticism. The question was asked - Where are so many women to contest elections? They had not been visible in the local government institutions and even in the national parliament women had never crossed 8% of the membership. *The panchayat elections shattered the myth of women's passivity in politics. Women contested elections sometimes on their own initiative but mostly on the initiative of their family members, their caste persons and the local community members.*

Earlier studies had documented how even when some groups and organisations had tried to encourage women's entry in panchayats the family members and others did not show much enthusiasm in encouraging or even permitting women in their family to contest. *The constitutional amendment by making it mandatory for one third positions to be contested only by women, gave a legitimacy and respect leading to families motivating women to contest, taking the new position as a point of entry for the family and not only for the individual woman.* Consequently we find that in the three states, 4,12,659 women entered panchayats in 1994 and 1995 when the elections took place in these three states. Besides, only much less than 1% of the positions remained vacant for instance in MP because of no nominations filed initially and not all of them were those reserved for women. *95% women in these three states had contested elections for the first time against 69% in the case of men.*

We see that almost half of the women as also men have entered panchayats without contest, but others have contested elections-most of them without support of political parties. Majority of them is new entrants to politics and even their family members-natal as well as affinal have small proportion of members with political experience or political affiliations. Family comes up as the main support of these women in their decision to contest elections, in their source of information on reservations and elections and help in the processes of election.

Profile of New Women

Women as also men who have come to the panchayats after the reservations show a wider representation of socio economic groups in view of the reservation given to the social groups in proportion to their population and within them to women to the extent of one-third. Majority of women across social groups, caste and class are younger and in the reproductive age group of below 45 years. (Table 2).

Table 2
Women Representatives - Social Group and Age Group (Percentage)

Social Groups	Age Groups				
	<25	25-34	35-44	45-59	60 and Above
1. SC	2.2	29.9	29.9	29.9	8.1
2. ST	9.5	34.7	40.5	13.2	2.1
3. OBC	6.8	26.2	35.3	21.8	9.9
4. General	1.7	24.6	35.4	29.7	8.6
All Groups	5.2	28.8	34.6	23.9	7.5

A major representation of male as well as female persons is of agriculturists. However, 37% of women are those who recorded that they were only doing household work while 58.1%

were working in agriculture against 75% of male members who were working as agriculturists. (table 3). In the case of UP, though, almost three-fourth of them reported doing only household work. As we see later, *UP in fact differs from the other two states even in other respects of income and asset levels and consequently in their social, cultural context and social practices resulting in lower unescorted mobility and higher seclusion.*

Table 3
Occupation: Male and Female Representatives Percentage)

Sl. No.	Occupation	Male	Female
1.	No work other than household work.	5.7	37.2
2.	Farm and non-farm wage labour.	5.7	9.4
3.	Cultivator	69.3	38.3
4.	Cultivator and Labour	4.5	10.4
5.	Service	2.8	1.7
6.	Business	11.4	2.5
7.	Artisan	0.6	0.5
8.	Livestock rearing	--	0.9
9.	Others	--	1.7

Women representatives are predominantly married and have a high concentration of illiterate or literate without levels. 70.5% of them are literate without levels compared to 41.8% of male representatives who are similarly illiterate or literate without levels. Even among literates more male representatives have higher educational levels. (Table 4).

Table 4
Education Level of Male and Female Representatives Percentage)

Educational level	Male	Female
Illiterate	18.7	51.9
Literate w. e. l.	13.1	18.6
Primary	19.9	14.5
Middle	19.3	7.8
Higher Secondary	22.2	4.5
Vocational Training	0.5	1.4
Graduate and above	5.7	1.3

w.e.l. = without educational level.

The study also explored the basis of the second myth and found that their socio economic profile indicated entry of a large number of women from families without any land or from small land holders who had low assets holding and whose family incomes were also quite low.

The extant annual household income cut off level for poverty line in rural India was Rs. 11,000 at the time of the study. *More than 41.4% of women representatives were seen with income levels below this line. 39% male representatives also come in this income group(table 5). To that extent it addresses the earlier concern about dominant sections with assets and land holding continuing their hold and capturing these institutions though we have to recognise the power and hold of socio economically powerful elements in the rural areas despite the numerical representation of the weaker sections and women.*

Table 5
Household Income of Male and Female Representatives.
 (Percentage of male and female Representatives)

Male/Female	Up to Rs. 5000	Rs.5000 to Rs.10000	Rs.10000 to Rs.20000	Rs.20000 and above
Male	23.9	15.3	19.3	40.3
Female	24.1	17.3	18.9	33.2

* Excludes 'not reported'. The Percentage will not therefore add up to 100.0.

Three more aspects of the economic profile of women representatives indicate a wider representation of caste and class in the new panchayats. 14% of the women representatives came from landless families, 19.5% from families with marginal holdings and 20.6% from families with small holdings. There are variations among the states with more members compared to chairpersons figuring in the category coming from landless families and those with marginal holdings. Similarly while about 1/4th women representatives in MP and Rajasthan used hired labour, in UP 46% came from families which were using hired labour. Those who worked as hired labour included 30.7% in MP, 19.1% in Rajasthan but only 12.7% in UP. though over all 32% used hired labour and 22% worked as hired labour.

We see a similar trend if we look at the specified agricultural, household and transportation assets with their households. 47.8% reported possession of plough and bullocks, only 11.5% reported tractor and 7.7% thresher. Among them 22.5% and 16.5% chairpersons have tractors and threshers against 10.5% and 8.1% members. In the household and transportation assets only 3.8% households had car/and jeep but separately 11% chairpersons and only 1.4% members had this asset. Across the states while 1.4% chairpersons in MP and 10.9% Rajasthan have a car/jeep, 20.5% chairpersons in UP have reported possession of a car or jeep. As far as members are concerned, not more than 2% of them have reported possession of a jeep in any of the state. Scooter, Motorcycle shows a similar trend. Families of 14.8% representatives have this assets but among chairpersons their percentage is 35%. Among the states, in UP 49.3% chairpersons and 13.8% members have reported their possession while in MP and Rajasthan those percentage are 20.8% and 34.5% chairpersons and 5.7% and 6.3% members.

The myth that only the kins- women of the privileged have entered panchayats is also not borne out if we look at the previous political experience and political affiliations of women representatives' family members in the affinal and natal families. Only 3.7 and 6.2% elected women had family members on the natal and affinal family side who had any previous experience in panchayats. Majority of women are first time entrants in panchayats as well as in similar institutions. In an earlier study (Buch : 1996) we conducted in Madhya Pradesh we found that 95% of women who entered panchayats in the new elections with one third reservations are first time entrants against 85% men who also came to panchayats for the first time now. We see in our study in three states only 3% women who had ever been elected earlier and only 20% women were those who had any political party affiliation. Even in their family members, as against the common perception of only women from those families coming to panchayats who had been in politics or contested elections to panchayats earlier, we found that only 3 to 6% of the representatives had their family members in natal or affinal family with previous experience and only 6% and 15% of their members had any party affiliation (Table 6). Perhaps, the kins of women are more visible or we only want to look for them.

Table 6
**Panchayat Experience and Political Affiliation of Women Representatives
 and Family Members (Percentage of WRs)**

Experience / Political Affiliation (self)	SC	ST	OBC	General	Total
Elected earlier.	2.7	6.2	1.2	2.3	3.0
Political party affiliation	19.2	35.7	13.0	14.8	20.0
Previous Experience family members					
(a) Natal family members	2.7	3.6	3.6	5.1	3.7
(b) Affinal family members	3.6	8.8	7.1	5.1	6.2
Party Affiliations					
(a) Natal Family members	4.5	9.8	5.2	6.3	6.3
(b) Affinal family members	17.5	20.7	10.3	12.0	14.9

The most prevalent myth is that women are only namesake, proxy members. We analyse it with reference to women's awareness and information and participation levels. We have seen their participation in terms of their regular attendance, efforts made to carry their viewpoint in the panchayat meetings, petitions and problems brought to them by their constituents and initiatives taken by them to deal with them and their assertiveness to carry their view point in the panchayat meetings.

Men and women still continue to live in different worlds. We explored the awareness of women representatives about the new reservation provided to them. A large majority (85.5%) displayed awareness on the subject. It was significant that in the case of women informal source of information like family members and neighbour were prominent as the source of information. In the case of male members, panchayat office bearers, government officials and media figured relatively more prominently as their source of information (Table 7). This was despite the considerable similarity in the socio economic bases of male and female representatives.

Table 7
Source of Information on Reservation (Percentage Reporting)

	M.P.		Rajasthan		U.P.		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Awareness	93.3	85.6	98.5	88.1	93.8	83.0	95.5	85.5
Source of Information								
1. Family	20.0	59.4	8.8	61.0	10.4	52.3	13.1	17.6
2. Neighbour	8.3	20.1	20.6	37.5	14.6	11.7	14.8	23.0
3. Panchayat office bearers	48.3	26.1	23.5	15.5	35.4	9.2	35.2	17.0
4. Govt. official	38.3	13.1	35.3	17.0	10.4	2.1	29.5	10.7
5. Media	21.2	5.3	35.3	15.9	18.8	6.4	25.6	9.1
6. Women / organisations	--	9.9	2.9	2.2	--	--	1.1	4.0
7. Own caste persons	--	--	13.2	24.5	--	0.4	5.1	8.2

Similar trends were seen in women's responses about the source of information on panchayat elections. Most of the women said that they received information from informal sources - 65% received information from their male family members, 27.8% from neighbours and 21.6% received from panchayat office bearers.

Women's Awareness and Knowledge about Panchayat Related Matters:

There are continued perceptions of women's lack of awareness and knowledge about panchayat related matters. The study explored this aspect and looked at their knowledge

about reservations, panchayats' powers and responsibilities, panchayat meetings, attendance of elected representatives, resources of panchayats, their views about raising resources and also about the level of success of development schemes. We see clearly that a majority of women have good awareness level about panchayat related matters. Expectedly, the chairpersons have higher level of awareness and knowledge than the members. (Table 8)

Table 8
**Awareness and Knowledge of Women Representatives
about Panchayat Related Matters.**
(percentage of WRs)

	CP Chairperson	M Member	CP+M
Reservation	94.5	83.6	85.5
Powers and responsibilities	75.5	65.6	68.0
Panchayat meetings	93.0	86.0	87.7
Attendance of representatives	96.0	90.7	91.9
Attendance of women Representatives	62.0	65.2	64.4
Resources of panchayats	86.0	77.6	79.6
Views about raising additional resources	77.5	39.2	48.3
Views about level of success of development schemes	91.0	89.1	89.6

WRs – Women Representatives.

Level of Participation in Panchayats

Elected representatives are expected to work for their constituents. Mandated reservation is only the beginning of their presence. Their effective participation would require not only attendance in meetings but also articulation, joining discussion, taking up issues and solving problems brought to them. We looked at women's participation in panchayats in terms of attendance in meetings, time spent in panchayat work, efforts made for carrying their view point in the panchayat meetings, petitions/problems received by them and efforts made to overcome difficulties. While the percentage of women who reported regular attendance in panchayat meetings is less than their male colleagues, two-third of them are regularly attending these meetings (table 9). This is against the common perception that almost all of them or at least the majority do not attend panchayat meetings. In fact, doubts have been expressed about the extent to which women can or really care to participate in panchayats or in other similar institutions due to their personal disabilities or other social and institutional constraints. Sweeping statements are often made about women representatives not coming in panchayat meetings, and not taking interest in the panchayat work. These impressions and perceptions are reflected in statements like these women representatives being only proxies, 'namesake' members or illiterate, ignorant, absentee members.

Table 9
**Representatives Reporting Regular Attendance
in Panchayat Meetings (percentage)**

State	Male	Female
Madhya Pradesh	95	66.8
Rajasthan	95.6	74.4
Uttar Pradesh	68.7	55.5
Three states	88.1	65.5

We see in table 10, the time given to panchayat work in a week by male and female representatives. 68.9% women and 75.6% men reported the time spent by them in panchayat work. While more men have reported spending more time, we see a substantial proportion of women attending to panchayat activities.

Table 10
Weekly time Spent in Panchayat Work by
Male and Female Representatives.
(percentage)

	State	Female			Male
		C.P Chairperson	M Member	CP+M	
Less than 3 hours	Madhya Pradesh	50.0	55.0	53.7	55.0
More than 3 hours		41.7	16.6	23.0	33.3
Less than 3 hours	Rajasthan	32.7	45.0	42.6	29.4
More than 3 hours		65.5	39.2	44.4	57.4
Less than 3 hours	Uttar Pradesh	42.5	22.9	27.9	27.1
More than 3 hours		30.1	9.0	14.5	16.6
Less than 3 hours	Three states	42.5	41.1	41.4	37.5
More than 3 hours		44.0	21.9	27.2	38.1

Elected representatives are sought by their constituents with petitions and problems. The number of representatives who are so approached will depend not only on the incidence of such problems but also the perception of the constituents about their accessibility and effectiveness and institutional powers and resources available with them. But within these limitations people will approach them and expect them to atleast make some efforts for their solution. We find significant indicators of women representatives participation in this respect (Table 11). Expectedly compared to members more chairpersons receive petitions and attend to them.

Table 11
Efforts made to solve problems presented (percentage of WRs)

	CP Chairperson	M Member	CP+M
Petitions/Problems received	56.0	43.1	46.1
Attended	49.0	30.0	34.5

Women reported various efforts made by them to press their views in panchayat meetings. These included taking other members into confidence, informal discussions, repeated efforts after some time, taking help of their husbands. The fact that more than 40% (table 12) reported such efforts, and expectedly more chairpersons than members were so active, shows that it is not fair to call all women as namesake members. *Women's election, representation and participation in panchayats as we see in their responses and experience captured in the study shows the beginnings of the emerging leadership of rural women in India. The fact that these are predominantly illiterate women and include those from socially economically deprived sections makes their grit and assertion even more creditable. They have faced difficulties and constraints and will face even in future but their learning phase has shown their potential and*

motivation for contributing to a vibrant local democracy and development of local self governing institutions.

Table 12
**Efforts made by women representatives
 for carrying their viewpoint in meetings. (percentage)**

State	CP Chairperson	M Member	CP+M
Madhya Pradesh	69.4	57.3	60.4
Rajasthan	43.6	25.2	28.9
Uttar Pradesh	54.8	32.4	38.2
Three states	57.0	38.1	42.6

Problems and Issues raised and handled

The nature of problems brought to the women representatives are reported to be family conflict by 28% chairpersons and 22% members, land disputes, land distribution, employment and assistance about basic needs by 49.12% chairpersons and 52% members, village development by 17.54% chairpersons and 25% members.

Women have cited modes of assistance in filling forms, forwarding applications, submitting memoranda, increasing budget, reporting to police, negotiations/ compromise, pacification, taking judicial help and perusing with panchayat chairpersons and government officials as varying modes of resolution of the problem brought to them. Almost one third of women reported that they tried to solve the problem with the help of their husbands (My husband told pradhan's husband "Mera Pati Ne Pradhan Ke Pati Se Kaha"). Almost a third tried to solve with the help of govt officials under govt programmes, about 7% reported discussion of these problems in the panchayat committee.

In M.P. the issues discussed in meetings are construction work, budget, women's development schemes, rural development. 92% mentioned rural development, 15% said construction work and 16% said other schemes. In Rajasthan issues discussed are drinking water, beneficiary selection 27%, encroachment, rural development. 42%, and work selection. In U.P. the issues discussed were reported as work selection (25.4%). Rural problems and development (38.4%).

We had asked women about their views on adequacy of resources of panchayats how they think the resources can be augmented and what would be their priorities in utilization of such additional resources. We see in their responses that only 13.3% find the income adequate. Among them, too, the M.P. representatives have more satisfaction about the adequacy of this income. But in all the three states more than 40% find the income inadequate and almost an equal proportion do not know whether it is adequate or inadequate. Local priorities indicated by them to utilize the additional resources include health facilities, construction work and drinking water in this order in M.P. In Rajasthan drinking water resources, development of village generally and education are highlighted. Livestock related matters, sanitation, getting credit support to poor and widows, old age pension, improvement in social services are also indicated. The priorities of U.P. representatives are more general - development of village and employment.

A good percentage of women representatives have reported their efforts to overcome difficulties in working in Panchayats. While 53.7% in M.P. reported efforts made by them, in Rajasthan and U.P. their percentage is 39.7% and 32.9% respectively. In M.P. 30% said they tried to solve problems with their own efforts, 11.4% said there was no reduction in difficulties and no means to solve problems but 8.5% complained at higher levels. In Rajasthan 16.7% sought advice from govt officials, 10.7% cooperation from people but 26.7% said there was no reduction in problems and no means to solve them. In U.P. 19.64% reported no effort, 14.8% said they tried to convince people and 7.9% and 5.7% said that they tried to seek the cooperation of govt officials and people.

These are not participation levels of women who are only 'proxy', "namesake" members. Admittedly, there would be some women who are not active but they do not represent the reality of simultaneous phenomenon of women's active participation and emerging leadership.

Community Perceptions about Panchayat Women's Performance

The community's perceptions about women's new role and performance should also give valuable insights into the processes of change, the transformative index and the sign posts of this long journey towards women's empowerment and contribution to deeper democratic process.

Total number of our respondents from the community members selected from one block in each study district were 180 - 141 male and 39 females. They included 19.4% ST, 20.6% SC, 26.7% OBC and 33.3% others. Semi structured interview schedule included 22 items on their background, views about women leaders, functioning and achievement of panchayats under their leadership, sources of constraints, criminalisation of politics, changes in attitudes, behaviour and socio-economic status of women representatives. Majority of them, of course, knew only the GP leaders.

More than 50% of the community members have positive view about women representatives and hope that under their leadership corruption and favouritism will be reduced. Others, of course have negative opinion that they are incapable, non-cooperative, do not seek cooperation of higher level politicians and development functionaries, do not get any cooperation of other members, and they are illiterate, etc.

Their responses indicate that *more than half of them feel that the panchayats functioning with the new elections and women's entry is satisfactory. They receive cooperation, there is understanding among themselves and that they are honest. On the other hand, more than 44% consider the functioning unsatisfactory, their efficiency is less and their voice is not heard. The reasons for this unsatisfactory performance are given as no development work, illiteracy and women's not being outgoing, no powers given to panchayats and lack of awareness among women representatives. It is also seen that more community members find the panchayat work satisfactory in M.P. than in the other states and U.P. has more community members' negative perception of panchayat functioning.*

Even in U.P. 52% of the male as well as female community respondents reported that the performance of the gram pradhans was appreciable. But a majority of respondents also said that women representatives did not do the work themselves. Their husbands or other male members worked on their behalf. Some of them reported that no developmental work had taken place during their tenure. They also said that women pradhans could not function properly due to

pressure from their family members. Majority of the respondents reported that performance of the block and district panchayat chairpersons was good.

Support of Social Institutions

Women need support of different social institutions to enable them to perform their role in panchayats effectively because they have to continue their domestic responsibilities as well as earning of livelihood. This is particularly so in the case of women from the weaker sections and our respondents have a significant number from weaker sections and lower income groups. We have tried to see how they are receiving support from informal institutions - the family, the neighbours, other community members and caste persons as well as from the more formal institutions of government, political parties, other Panchayat representatives, government officials and women's organisations. This support of social institutions has been seen by us on five parameters in the context of their new role and responsibilities in panchayats. (a) as source of information about reservations (b) as source of information about election (c) encouragement / motivation to women to contest (d) support in election processes and (e) consultation in panchayat work.

The family comes up as the most supporting institution as source of information, support in election and in helping women in their decision about contest. Neighbours and community members and caste persons come as the next important support and reported as the source of information about reservation. *The political parties and their members do not seem to have given any encouragement, information or support to these women representatives. Women and women's organisations were found conspicuous by their absence as the source of information or support.*

Impact: Identity, Confidence, Attitudinal shift and Aspiration.

A majority of the women clearly perceive enhancement of their status but it is a much larger majority in M.P. and Rajasthan. In all the three states the reason for this enhancement is seen in their holding the panchayat post and substantially less in their potential to work for the help of the local community. To that extent their perception is very much influenced by how their male colleagues also perceive the status change.

Women have reported increase in self-confidence, change in life style, awareness about critical need of education and increased concern for village development. There are positive changes which they have seen in their own attitudes and consequent impact on the family in shifts in various social practices (Table 13).

More than 48% (48.4) have reported change in their attitudes - the highest among ST and SC women. Further, the maximum change was seen in children's education - sending more children to school as women in our case studies as well as the community members also reported. In fact, 65.5% community members reported impact on women's education including in increased awareness.

Table 13.
Change in attitudes and practices
(Percentage of Women Representatives)

Nature of change reported/ perceived by WR	
Positive change	
(a) In Attitude	48.4
(b) In Practice :	58.6
Change in	
(a) Children's education	27.3
(b) Children's marriage age	10.2
(c) Dowry	8.3
(d) Others	12.8
Not Observing Ghunghat after coming to Panchayat though observing earlier	7.4

Table 14
Aspirations, Confidence and Sharing of Household work.
(Percentage of Women Representatives)

Nature of change reported / perceived by WR	SC	ST	OBC	General	Total
Sharing responsibilities					
(a) Work given up attended by others	37.7	36.3	37.3	46.9	39.1
(b) Continuing Work shared by others	39.5	31.1	37.3	46.3	34.3
(a) Expectation of people from WRs	67.3	83.9	73.4	73.7	74.3
(b) Self confidence in fulfilling expectations	23.3	46.1	29.0	34.9	32.6
Aspiration level					
(a) Contesting again	46.2	46.6	35.3	34.9	40.7
(b) Contest at higher level	6.3	11.9	6.7	10.9	8.7

Traditionally these women are expected to perform their role within the household and shoulder the caring and nurturing responsibilities even with their other work. *But with panchayat work in post constitutional panchayats, more than 30% have reported sharing of their continuing household and livelihood work by other members of the family and almost 40% have reported sharing/performing of tasks and responsibilities which they had to give up. And no one is ridiculing these male members now.* Let us compare it with what was being expressed by the husband of a woman sarpanch of an all women panchayat in Maharashtra (Datta : 1997) I mentioned earlier. She (Padmavati Kare of Mauje Rao in Pune distt) received her husband's support in the household work when she had to be out for panchayat work but he complains "I used to make Pao Bhaji (chapati bread and vegetable dish), bathe the children, feed and drop them to school" people were always teasing me "oh, the sarpanch's husband.' Are the chapatis ready yet? "And my wife would be gone gone for days at a time when she had to meet the mamlatdar at Indapur.

Finally I told her, do what you like, so long as you mind the kids." And this was when Rajiv Gandhi had already initiated debate for 30% reservation for women leading to finally introducing a constitutional amendment. Not too many husbands were willing even in the early nineties to share house responsibilities so willingly. *The amendment has begun a change of*

legitimacy and mandatoriness to women's new non-traditional role in panchayats which helps the supporting husbands to share responsibilities without the fear of ridicule and makes others to at least reconsider and think.

Women's self confidence and aspiration levels are other indicators of their empowering process. More than 70% women (74.3%) reported people's expectations from them in terms of village development with justice, solution to individual problems, benefits of govt programmes etc. *More importantly, more than one-third expressed self-confidence in meeting these expectations. Interestingly, ST women showed the more self-confidence in this respect and SC women showed similar confidence levels except in one state of U.P.* More than 40% (about 41%) women expressed aspiration to contest elections again and almost nine percent to contest positions at higher level of panchayats and also for state/national legislature. In fact some women have contested for state/national parliament in the last election in MP and Rajasthan in 1998 1999.

Women's autonomy and dependency is often seen particularly in the northern states in their lack of unescorted mobility and in observance of seclusion and veil. We noted that while about 59% are still observing veil for various social reasons e. g. respect of elders, those reporting observance of veil in panchayat meetings was only about 43% and observing outside their village about 35%. As regards escorts. Almost 70% in M.P. and 60% in Rajasthan reported not using escorts to attend panchayat meetings but in U.P. an overwhelming majority of more than 75% (76.6%) reported use of escorts.

The most important shift we note is in their status, their identity, new recognition, respect, consultation and being sought out for help and assistance.

Table 15
WRs perception of change in their status
(Percentage of Women Representatives)

Nature of change reported / perceived by WR	SC	ST	OBC	General	Total
Perception of change in status in / with					
(a) Family	68.6	80.3	67.9	71.4	71.6
(b) Neighbours	67.7	80.8	71.8	74.9	73.4
(c) Others in community	68.2	78.2	71.0	73.1	72.4
(d) Govt. offices	61.0	77.7	57.5	65.7	64.8
(e) Persons	68.6	75.6	73.4	73.1	72.6
(f) Other caste persons	62.3	66.3	65.5	67.4	65.2

As we see (table 15), more than 70% see the change in their status in the family, among neighbours, and among own caste persons and more than 60% also see it in govt. offices and other caste persons. Women across the three states and in different districts indicated how they see new recognition and respect. How the husbands give more respect and consult them about various issues, how the villagers give respect, invite to weddings, come to them with their problems. In the community where these women so far had the identity only as someone's wife or daughter/daughter in law this identity of their own person and name is a big step. The SC sarpanch in one panchayat stated how she tells people not to come to meeting after drinking and sends them back if they do so, how people of all castes come to visit her for work now which would have been unimaginable earlier. They identify and explain indicators of respect - e. g. they call me panch saheb. We must also see this as a

refreshing contrast to women's non-entity in pre amendment panchayats. As the study of the pre amendment "all women" panchayats (Datta : 1997) recorded, the responses of the gram sevak - the village extension worker - when asked - Does every one attend the gram sabha (the general meeting) of the village. He replies - Everyone. When pressed - he said - everyone. Men - Yes, Women - No. He could not even see the anomaly of an all-male sabha (meeting) in a village with all women panchayat. As one of our collaborating researcher observed that a major socio political change has been seen there when a powerful thakur upper caste male has to seek redressal / development work from the SC woman sarpanch.

Women in our case studies have been seen effortlessly aware of women's most crucial needs whether of drinking water facilities or measures against alcoholism. They have also brought out the serious social and political constraints they face and how they have coped with them. One of them has shown how she faced the political and legal problems created due to the factional politics of the ruling party and how she got a decision from the High Court in face of her opponents who were strong financially and politically and were able to have an array of lawyers. The somewhat unusual opening paragraph of the High Court's judgment reflects her tenacity. The Court judgment began and I quote - "*Gone are the days of yore when a woman was required to play a secondary role in society and surrender to the injunctions and mandates of it's high priests and tolerate the community commands with Himaylayan calmness and pacific poise. Here is a petitioner who has refused to accept the infringement of her right to continue as the president ZP Bilaspur and has called in question the warrantableness of the order passed by the DEO and the sustainability of the order passed by CEO.*" She won three court battles despite all the odds against her.

Women in panchayats and for that matter in politics are being blamed for not being sufficiently articulate, ambitious and active and even being accused of being proxy for their male relations. Her case showed that being the opposite is also not trouble free unless she can build alliances, modify and adapt strategy keeping in view the extent of power of the oppositional forces and time her responses and actions appropriately.

Our case studies have also shown the male resistance and anxiety with women's success in life, the politics of earlier dominant male panchayat representatives to keep out experienced women and trying to continue their own hold by getting their own women candidates elected. There are other cases which illustrate the beginnings of interest in panchayat work, learning skills, developing confidence and leadership skills though initially elected due to male family members' initiative. They have helped poor families to access govt housing scheme and effectively intervened in the case of wife battering and alcoholism. Another, an illiterate dalit woman sarpanch was approached by the villagers to contest the election due to her boldness. She has learnt the panchayat work, manages by using the services of the panchayat secretary, has acquired enough confidence and support to frustrate the efforts of the male vice chairperson to bring 'no confidence' motion to remove her.

Emerging Leadership

We see rural women's new leadership emerging in these grass roots institutions. Data on their perceptions, recognition, respect, enhanced status, confidence levels, increased political aspirations and community's perceptions and evaluation are markers of an empowering process. Transformative potential of their new role is seen in assertion, recognition, new identity, respect, status, questioning, mobility and attitudinal shifts. Family has come out as the most supporting social institution particularly at the village level even though the family members have been quite often seen as taking over or influencing their working. Such comments mostly fail in allowing for a learning process

for these new entrants to politics and power. Most of the women interviewed have in fact shown a capacity for growth and learning.

Matters of Concern and Action

What are the matters of concern? To begin with, why is it that despite the constitutional amendment saying “not less than one third” members/chairpersons positions have to be reserved for women to contest, not even one state legislation has considered reserving anything more than this one third. Why is it that the national consensus reflected in the amendment is not followed by strong and large scale training support in all the states to measure up in quantitative coverage as well as in coverage of critical issues, processes and not only skills and procedures. There is lack of understanding of the potential for alliance between different women’s collectives. These women need and deserve state support, solidarity and networking with other women’s organisations. Support must be given to women’s local organisations and alliances between all different collectives of women and training programmes incorporating skills, knowledge, issues and concerns of women, how to address them, how to organise, cooperate, participate, manage and build alliances, how to network with other women’s collectives, social practices adversely affecting women and how to deal with them, how information and knowledge is to be sought, stored and retrieved and how to maximise strengths and overcome vulnerabilities. Rural women have shown that they can use the new political space created for them. There are markers of change, empowerment and leadership despite the multiple handicaps and burdens they have initiated and which they continue. It is the state and the civil society which have to support them in organisation, training, networking with information package and questioning the myths. They must also bring up data and experience without bias but with empathy and perseverance.

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