

**A DECADE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
THROUGH  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN INDIA**  
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*Women's Empowerment in the Context of Seventy-third and  
Seventy-fourth Constitutional Amendment Acts: An Assessment*

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## INTRODUCTION

South Asia has been a paradox as far as women are concerned. This region has produced powerful women leaders — like Indira Gandhi and Srimavo Bhandaranayake — even before the Decade of Women (1975-1985). But women in South Asia have also been extremely vulnerable in the past and continue to be grossly marginalized in the ongoing process of development. The continued existence of a few powerful women leaders — like Begum Khalida Zia, Benazir Bhutto and Sonia Gandhi — in a vast ocean of disempowered women has brought out, most starkly, the need to promote and emancipate women at the grassroots. Therefore, the bottom-up approach envisaged for the participation of women in local self-government, introduced in India by law in 1992, has been a step in the right direction.

In this paper, we will first present some of the existing frameworks for conceptualizing empowerment, and its impact on the evolution of government policies in India towards women. The second section will review some of the key government approaches and schemes for women's empowerment. In the third section, we will draw from the lessons learnt and the possibilities ahead arising out of the constitutional amendments to empower the local institutions and elected women representatives in the last decade. The final section will sum up the challenges and achievements regarding women's empowerment through decentralized governance and decision-making, and bringing about gender-based redistribution of socio-political and economic power in Indian society.

## CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

A literature review on gender and empowerment points to the paradigm shifts made over time regarding definitions and approaches for measuring and assessing women's empowerment. To begin with, it is useful to bear in mind that from around 1950 until the Decade of Women, the welfare approach predominated. Since then, women's development has been conceptualized by equity, empowerment and rights-based approaches, with varying emphasis on concerns like the condition/situation and the practical/strategic needs of women.

A major drawback in the *welfare approach* was that women were net recipients of (or consumers) and not participants in (or owners) the agencies and programmes created for their own development. The welfare approach was also jettisoned because of its very narrow definitions of 'women's issues' (i.e., health, education and violence against women), and for assigning to women domestic roles only (i.e., as wives, mothers and homemakers).

With the Decade of Women (1975-1985), scholars began thinking of distinguishing the practical gender needs or interests of women from their strategic gender needs or interests — e.g., Molyneux [1985] defined these needs, whereas Moser [1989] elaborated them. For instance: finding food or fuel for the family is a practical gender need; women's issues addressing practical gender needs, which if fulfilled, could lead to an improvement in the condition of women.

But as is well known, for a lasting improvement in the condition of women, it is not enough to provide palliatives through ameliorative measures in health, education and

violence prevention. The gender gaps in health and education undoubtedly need to be closed without delay, but restricting one's efforts to doing only this may still leave women high and dry in an untransformed society. It is likely that an ideological struggle for transforming social structures may still need to be waged, and a moral universe that values gender equality may still have to be created.

The concept of 'strategic gender needs' was floated around the Decade of Women, and from this, gender planning. The two main objectives of gender planning were eradication of gender discrimination and adoption of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming meant that the 'Ladies Compartment' approach of having one Gender Unit or a single Ministry for Women be abandoned, because land reforms, fisheries development, trade, school curricula, road construction, taxation, conflict resolution, etc., were all as much the concerns of women as of men. Not only this, all these issues seemed to affect women differently from men.

So, scholars demanded that each government programme undertake gender analysis as a part of its normal operations. To monitor this process and also to suggest the direction/pace of transformative change, a high-powered, well-endowed separate women-focused agency had a role, and had to be created where none existed.

Strategic gender needs were identified as ones that challenged the existing division of labour and catalyzed change in the position of women by ending the domination of women by men. To illustrate — to transform the position of women, it may be necessary to undertake changes in property rights and also alter the extent of time fathers devote to child rearing. As one scholar remarked, 'to change women's position, we must address the way gender determines power, status and control over resources'. [March et al.: 1999]

The welfare approach limited its objectives to delivering food, family planning, health care, etc. These objectives were laudable in themselves, because they improved the condition of women. But, as already stated, this was not enough. With the Decade for Women came the concept of *Women in Development (WID)*, and with it attention shifted from merely improving the condition of women to also enhancing their position. It was widely understood that one did not naturally follow from the other. Special efforts were needed to enhance the position of women by meeting their strategic needs, and approaches (like equity, empowerment and rights-based ones) were specifically devised to do so.

The *equity approach* valued equality and recognized that women sought equality in their three primary roles in society — i.e., as reproductive, productive and community workers. It sought State intervention to ensure that the strategic needs of women were met in all these roles. As expected, the stress in this approach on 'strategic needs' caused a backlash in the name of traditions/customs, and the stress in government-sponsored 'equity' was temporarily replaced by anti-poverty and efficiency approaches. The anti-poverty approach concerned itself merely with the role of women as economic producers, and the efficiency approach tried to meet the practical needs of women through their own interventions in their three primary roles.

This one-step-back from an equity approach was, however, more than compensated by the conceptualization of the *empowerment approach*.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Empowerment has been defined as a *change* in the context of a woman's life that enables her increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. It gets reflected in external qualities such as health, mobility, education and awareness,

empowerment approach had three salient features. First, its greatest virtue was giving due consideration to the practical needs of women, while focusing on their strategic needs. Second, the approach emphasized the heretofore neglected point that improvements in the condition and position of women were ends in themselves, rather than just being the means to achieving some bigger development goals. Third, in contrast with the State-dependence envisaged in the equity approach, the empowerment approach emphasized self-reliance and a bottom-up method of women's development.

The diversity of interpretations about the definition, nature and scope, and means, processes and methods of measuring empowerment, makes it easy to intuit but complex to define. [Shetty:1992] Experts like Mohanty [2000] feel that the concept of empowerment does not ensure a new egalitarian relationship, because it does not lead to exercising power in the entire society. The concept also implies that some outside agency empowers different groups through its various actions.

Together, the equity and empowerment approaches have been called the **Gender and Development (GAD)** concept.

Recently, activists have tried to turn to a *rights-based approach*, even in women's development, for three simple reasons. First, GAD had little focus on men and this was a major shortcoming considering that a majority of women were ground down by poverty and patriarchy both. Second, the rights-based approach was an umbrella term into which concepts of welfare, anti-poverty, equity and empowerment all found their due place — and where there was room to accommodate others. Third, this approach not only declares its goals and enunciates the factors for empowerment, but is conscious of the fact that for people-centred development to be sustainable, and for the enjoyment of human rights, an enabling environment has also got to be created. The rights-based approach has been highly commended because it has the moral authority within society — which can be invoked to achieve human rights — and the State cannot shirk from its responsibility because the enforcement of these rights is legally essential.

Critics of the rights-based approach argue that the approach ignores efficiency criteria, since it does not deal with responsibilities. Also, that individual rights and community-based rights may clash with each other, particularly in the context of developing countries. [*Human Development in South Asia: 2000*]

Recently, the *normative/capability approach* — a broader version of the rights-based approach — is gaining wider acceptance to explain the empowerment of women. In a rights-based approach, the role of the State is accepted in a limited way only. In the normative approach, one includes affirmative support for a range of human functioning. [Nussbaum: 2003] The capability approach is defined as entitlement to gainful employment opportunity, access to health care and education, and leading to enhancement of social status. In celebrating the concept further, Nussbaum notes that the normative approach not only includes women's entry into governance in the broader sense — namely administrative, managerial, professional and technical positions — but also conditions that influence women's internal development, as well as conditions of the material and social environment which influence their ability to turn ideas into action.

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status in the family, participation in decision-making, and also at the level of material security. It also includes internal qualities such as self-awareness and self-confidence. [*Human Development in South Asia: 2000*]

## **WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: REVIEW OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES**

### **Overview**

From time to time, the Government of India has formulated various policies, particularly after the publication of *Towards Equality Report – 1974*, to enhance women's visibility in the economic, political and social spheres. We critically appraised those policies to find out to what extent the objective has been met:

- For the first time, the Sixth Five Year Plan Document (1982–87) contained a chapter on Women in Development. Special emphasis was given to education, access to health and family planning, employment and economic independence.
- In the Eighth Five Year Plan Document (1992–97), the approach shifted from being equal partners in the development process, to that of empowerment of women. Sectors such as employment, education and health were given due importance.
- In the year 2000, the Government of India reviewed its commitments made at the Beijing Conference in 1995.
- A committee for monitoring gender mainstreaming was proposed — to be set up in the Department of Women and Child Development, but function under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The committee was given the mandate for monitoring the implementation of more than 47 beneficiary-oriented schemes. A 'dual strategy' has been adopted for mainstreaming the gender issue:
  - mainstreaming of gender concerns in all development activities has been emphasized; and,
  - programmes exclusively meant for women have been designed and implemented in order to overcome the constraints faced by the women.<sup>2</sup>

The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) gave information about the schemes exclusively meant for women. This commitment was noteworthy, because it was the first time the plan devoted a full chapter on women's empowerment. Some of the special features of this commitment were: finalization and adoption of a National Policy for the Empowerment of Women; and, the inclusion of a women's component plan to ensure not less than 30% of funds flow to women from other developmental sectors. Other strategies to empower women were: formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), universalization of special mid-day meals for women and children; and, to increase access to credit through the Development Bank for Women Entrepreneurs, etc. In other words, the plan attempted convergence of existing services, resources, infrastructure and man/woman power available in women-specific and women-related sectors.

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<sup>2</sup> Government of India, *Platform for Action – Five Years After – An Assessment*, 2000.

[Government of India, *Annual Report: 2001-02*] It is interesting to note that the *Mid Term Appraisal of Ninth Five Year Plan* indicated action taken and progress made on the women's empowerment front.

The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07) again reviewed the strategies adopted in the previous plans. It also set up two working groups on the economic and social empowerment of women, which in turn have suggested various recommendations, including:

- The plan recognized the role of the market and the expectations of women. So it suggests adopting an approach that fulfils people's entitlement.
- Again it was revealed that social sector spending was on a declining trend. So it recommended stepping up investment substantially in the social sector, such as in health and education.
- Finally, it also recommended that the grassroots leadership should be harnessed properly to reach out to the maximum number of people.

A women's component has been incorporated in all plan documents, and explicit references made to earmark not less than 30% funds/benefits to women-related sectors, particularly from the Ninth Five Year Plan onwards. But a review done by the Planning Commission showed that only 43% of gross budgetary support in 15 ministries / departments have been spent on women. In other soft departments, like family welfare, health, education, women and child, and Indian systems of medicine, 50% to 80% of the plan expenditure was directed to women. [*Economic Survey: 2002-03*]

For the first time, the Government of India tried to do a budget analysis from a gender perspective in 2001–02. It was done by the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP). Taking those figures as a base, the Department of Women and Child Development analyzed the annual budget of 2002–03. It was revealed that allocations for women-specific schemes showed an increase of 3% within one year — from 32.6 million rupees to 33.58 million rupees. The survey also claimed that pro-woman schemes, in contrast to women-specific schemes, showed an increase of 23%. However, the 2002–03 survey did not elaborate on the significance of the two terms, 'women-specific' and 'pro-woman'.

It is of concern that there has been a steep decline in the share of development in total revenue expenditure — from 72% in 1980–81 to 63% in 1995–96, taking the consolidated budgetary position of all the states together. A major factor contributing to such a decrease has been increasing debt burdens, due to an increase in interest rates for public borrowing. [UNDP study quoted in Gopalan: 2002] Of course, the study does not tell specifically what happened after 1995–96. But it can be inferred that the above pattern of contracting development expenditures would be continuing, because the states are still struggling under deficit financing.

## Empowerment Policy

The Government of India announced a National Policy for Empowerment of Women – 2001, to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women belonging to weaker groups, including Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes. This policy reiterated the commitments made in the Ninth Five Year Plan in a more focused way, namely that poverty eradication schemes should be implemented in an improved manner keeping the ‘women’ component in mind.

It also reviewed the impact of globalization on women. It was pointed out that studies conducted by the Department of Women and Child Development showed ‘there is a need for reframing policies for access to employment and quality of employment’. The Empowerment Policy – 2001 also highlighted the efficacy of resource management, but it ignored the critical element of addressing land and gender issues (land being the main resource base for people).

The policy criticized development policies adopted so far for gender equity on the following basis:

- household as a unit of planning
- sectoral approach to planning

In this approach, gender is treated as an additional category, rather than an integrated one. For example, the government takes the household as a unit in giving loans or in allotting Indira Awas Yojana. But in practice we know that family includes very strong hierarchical and iniquitous gender relations. Similarly, each sector of the government takes decisions regarding women without consulting other departments. Hence the policies become overlapping, or never get implemented properly. Finally, the policies are never formulated keeping a gender perspective in mind. Hence the gender component always get marginalized or diffused within the programme.

Finally, in the report *Towards Equality – The Unfinished Agenda – Status of Women in India – 2001*, Sarla Gopalan takes stock of the balance sheet on gender equality, since the first report was issued in the mid-1970s. She concludes that: “Our performance has been a mixed one. There have been efforts of advancement. There have been some gains. There have been retrogressive trends. And there have been barriers to advancement”. The Government of India has tried to empower women economically, as well as in social sectors, with some positive results.

However, in the Indian context, land still carries an important socio-political and economic value in society. The share of agriculture in Gross Domestic Product is more than 40%. Indian families neglect women in general, and the girl child in particular, mainly because of land rights. Agarwal [2000] points out that land rights are never given to girls. Even though land is important, one notices that land reform has taken a backseat in the formulation of policies. Government policies so far have touched only the edge of the problems faced by women in accessing their economic rights, including land ownership rights.

## Micro-Credit

Poverty alleviation has been an important part of India's national policy. Since women constitute the majority of the poor, access to micro-finance was thought to be an important factor to reduce the incidence of poverty, because micro-finance gives access to and control over economically productive resources.

Before it caught the imagination of the world, Self Employed Women's Association in India (SEWA) first started as a cooperative with the objective of empowering poor women by providing them with access to credit and financial services to reduce their dependence on traditional moneylenders. By 1997, SEWA had a membership of 220,000, 262 producer groups and 72 cooperatives. [United Nations: 2000] In 1983, Bangladesh also started a new experiment through the Grameen Bank to give financial resources to poor women. In contrast to SEWA, Grameen emphasizes group financing. The UN report indicated that the Grameen Bank has been the largest rural financial institution, with 2.3 million borrowers, 94% of whom are women. Moreover, its one-time loan repayments exceed 98%.

The Government of India started its first programme on micro-credit — called Development of Women and Child in Rural Areas (DWCRA) — in 1982. The idea was to start micro-enterprises by the women's groups. Even though it worked well in Andhra Pradesh, the approach was top-down and people's participation was lacking in general. People did not identify themselves with the assets created. [Saxena: 1998] This was part of the poverty eradication initiative called Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).

After reviewing IRDP, a new programme, Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), was launched in April 1999. SGSY aims at establishing a large number of micro-enterprises in rural areas, keeping twin objectives in mind (i.e., the ability of the poor and the potential of the local area). Unlike earlier initiatives, SGSY has tried to encompass various elements, namely: organization of the poor into Self-Help Groups (SHG); capacity building and training of SHG; selection of key activities and planning of activity clusters; infrastructure build up; appropriate technology; and, marketing support for selling products. SGSY also had a focus on selecting beneficiaries through the gram sabha. Unlike earlier programmes, SGSY has put more emphasis on the organization of the poor at the grassroots level, through a process of social mobilization to alleviate the incidence of poverty.

At another level, in 2001 the Indira Mahila Yojana scheme for economic empowerment, or access to micro-credit, got expanded to include components like awareness generation, achievement of economic strength through micro-level, income-generating activities. The scheme also includes provision for establishing the convergence of various services, such as literacy, health and rural development. The scheme got renamed Swayamsidha with the government's intent to develop local skills, availability of raw materials and, most importantly, community spirit among the poor. The above thinking reflects the plausible impact of market forces.

There is yet another scheme catering to the development needs of rural women. The Swashakti Project was centrally financed, and aimed at facilitating the setting up of revolving funds for giving interest-bearing loans to beneficiaries at the formative period.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Government of India, *Annual Report*, Department of Women and Child Development, 2001–2002.



### *Constraints of the micro-finance approach*

Major funding agencies for micro-credit programmes have been the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) and other nationalized banks.<sup>4</sup> According to RMK, out of an estimated 168 million poor people, women would constitute 60-80 million of the people requiring credit. However, RMK and other banks like NABARD and HDFC had covered the credit needs of only one million women by the financial year 1998/99. RMK feels that there is a lack of good and capable intermediate-level, micro-finance organizations, and regardless, would not be able to meet the credit requirements of the poor since the amount required is so huge — i.e., meeting 30% of the requirement would amount to 130 million rupees for three years. [RMK website] The RMK and other key agencies for micro-finance are clearly unable to fulfill the credit needs of women.

### *Impact of micro-finance on poverty alleviation and women's empowerment*

There are regional variations in the use of funds from RMK. For instance, Maharashtra has used the maximum amount of money, followed by Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. [See Table 1] Andhra Pradesh, however, had the largest number of borrowers in 2000–2001. According to Menon [2002], about 55 lakh poor women were enrolled in over 4.23 lakh SHGs in Andhra Pradesh. The corpus fund per group in 2001–02 was Rs. 28,368. Each woman was supposed to save Rs.337. The recovery rate was 98%. In many cases it seems that there has been skill formation, which is desired by the government. In addition, the socio-economic status of women has been raised because of skills acquired. Similarly, it was noticed in Kerala that the successful members attended the gram sabha meetings, and their partnership in decision-making processes was strengthened. [Sebastin: 2002] At the same time it was noticed that male relatives were using up the hard-earned money of women.

The most important point about micro-credit financing is that information does not reach the poorest people. So the poorer states like Orissa and Uttar Pradesh are yet to take advantage of the scheme. Yet another problem with the programme is that the amount of financing given to poor families is not adequate to tide them over during crises like earthquakes, droughts and cyclones. It is also clear that the amount of micro-credit given to poor families does not meet their total credit needs. So the poor still go to traditional moneylenders. [Menon: 2002]

The experience of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh supports similar stories of income generated by women being used by husbands, and the women not having any control over their money. In addition, the Bank does not offer training to women in business management; nor does it link them with the market. Finally, there is no gender sensitive training given to other family members, so they can appreciate women's efforts. Consequently, the women are doubly burdened with domestic chores, reproductive responsibilities and income-generating activities. [UNIFEM: 2000]

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## **Health and Nutrition**

As mentioned in the capability approach, women and children should be healthy and active so that they contribute towards empowerment more meaningfully. In that light, let us analyze the government's effort to improve the health status of its female population.

According to the 2000 Platform for Action assessment report, there was a paradigm shift in health policy after the Cairo Conference on Population in 1994. Instead of having a target-oriented approach to health issues, the government adopted a needs-based approach. The idea was to reduce maternal and child mortality so as to stabilize population growth rates. In order to improve the nutritional status of women, the government introduced Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).

The Department of Women and Child Development describes the programme as its 'flagship'. In 1975, the scheme started in 33 blocks, but got extended to 5,652 projects (4,533 rural, 759 tribal and 360 urban slums). The beneficiaries comprise 332 lakh children, and about 62 lakh pregnant and lactating mothers. The number of beneficiaries increased by 36% between April 2001 and September 2002. [*Economic Survey: 2002–03*] The *Mid Term Appraisal of Ninth Five Year Plan* pointed out that 82.9% (Rs 6473.08 crores) of the total budget of the Department of Women and Child Development was spent on this. This scheme has made some dent in improving the nutritional status of women and children. The 2000 National Family Health Survey pointed out that the states which did not do well in ICDS had a higher percentage of anemic women.

Gopalan [2002] has tracked the pattern of investment on health and family welfare through plan outlays. From the First Plan (1951–56) to the Ninth Plan (1997–02), the allocation to the health sector remained between 1.75% and 3.33%. Notably, there was a declining trend in the estimated outlays for this sector over successive plans. On the other hand, there was a slight increase in the allocation to the family welfare sector, although the range was only between 0.01% and 1.81%. By focusing more on reproductive and child health, the health problems of women in other age groups have been disregarded. Moreover, these have emerged as vertical programmes without much integration between health and other sectors.

In addition, even though all the State acts of panchayats mention the involvement of panchayatiraj institutions, these institutions always get sidelined. [Mohanty: 2002] Recently however, the national Department of Family Welfare has been trying to rectify this gap by involving the panchayatiraj institutions in the sector of health service delivery through capacity building. [*Role of Local Government Institutions: 2003*]

Finally, while addressing health issues, other problems such as social tensions due to economic pressures, migration, break up of joint and nuclear families, etc., should also be looked into. Government schemes, however, treat health problems primarily as medical problems only. [Gopalan: 2002]

## **Education**

Even though the right to education has been mentioned as a fundamental right in the Constitution, it took 45 years to recognize the disadvantageous position of women

and female children, in so far as access to education was concerned. In 1992, the National Policy on Education highlighted the question of women's equality through education for the first time.

Several attempts — including the Total Literacy Campaign, Operation Blackboard, Mahila Samakhya, Lok Jumbis, District Primary Education Programme and mid-day meals — have been attempted to attract girl children to enroll in schools. All those efforts have yielded some results. For example, the female literacy rate increased from 39% to 54% between 1991 and 2001. However, the adult female literacy rate (i.e., 15 years and above) in 1997 was 47%, compared to 70% for males. According to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development, 2000–01, India may not be able to reach 75% literacy by 2005. [Gopalan: 2002]

The Government of India had spent only 6.6% of the total plan expenditure in 1999–2000, although it had promised to spend 6% of the Gross Domestic Product. [Platform for Action: 2000] However, it is worthwhile to note that the special literacy programme meant for women has created some excitement, particularly in rural areas. According to Saldanha [1995], women have tried to shed the traditional symbols of subordination. For example, women in Sindhudung district, Maharashtra, got so inspired that they decided to ride bicycles en masse. Similarly, women belonging to Dumka district, Bihar, lifted their veils after attending the literacy camp. Finally, women of Nellore district could shake up N.T. Ramarao's government by agitating on the issue of *arrack*. [Mohanty: 1999]

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Thus we find that from time to time the government has taken up various socio-economic programmes for women's empowerment. However, a rights-based or capability approach requires that besides getting access to health care and education, the women should also be able to access political institutions. In the next section, we will discuss what has been done so far on this front and examine the impact of the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth constitutional amendment acts on the status of women in the local government institutions.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

### **Overview**

Local government institutions, or more specifically the panchayats, are not new to Indians. But the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992) contained unique features — such as five-year tenure, direct elections, reservation of seats for women and other marginalized sections of the society — meant for bringing the administration to the doorstep of villagers.

A decade has passed and almost all the state governments have conducted panchayat elections. Some States have conducted these elections for a second time. The time has come to assess the performance of panchayatiraj institutions (PRI) in delivering the desired power and decision-making to the hands of people at the village level.

Mathew [2002], in assessing ten years of PRI, came to the conclusion that these institutions were not allowed to fulfill their potential of achieving decentralized decision-making. He cited several factors that have contributed to the minimum functioning of these institutions, such as parallel structures (e.g., Janmabhumi, Users Committee), paucity of funding, rampant corruptions and lack of political will to make the grassroots institutions function independently. The author also noted that all the central schemes, including health and education, do not get routed through panchayats in many places.

As well, parallel structures like Janmabhumi have provisions for implementing the government welfare schemes. In many places, the micro-credit programmes sideline the panchayats and municipalities.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that PRI and municipalities have elected three million representatives, of which almost one million are women. Twenty-nine different subjects have been assigned to the panchayats in rural areas and 18 to municipalities in urban areas (e.g., agriculture, family planning). Several centrally-sponsored schemes, such as Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojna (JGSY) and Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojna (SGSY) and Indira Awaas Yojna (IAY) are routed through the panchayats; women constitute around 43% of the total beneficiaries in these schemes.

Various state governments are trying to activate gram sabha for ensuring social audits and accountability. Simultaneously, the central government is trying to amend the existing acts to bring more effectiveness to the system.

The fact that such a huge political structure has been created, both in rural and urban areas, is by itself a great step forward for the decentralized decision-making process. In addition, this has led to the institutionalization of local democracy by allowing different actors — such as women, members of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe — to participate. [Mohanty & Seldon: 2003] Related to the above institutional changes, a new elite has emerged in the rural and urban areas. Of course, in some places the old elite has grabbed power and used the new elite as pawns. But the new forces like access to education, rapid growth of the service sector, and access to government services by the economically-backward classes, have helped break the stronghold of the old elite.

### **Innovative Strategies to make Panchayat more vibrant**

The People's Planning Campaign in Kerala, Right to Information Rajasthan, Gram Swaraj in Madhya Pradesh, and to some extent the micro-credit programme through Swarnajayanti Swarajgar Yojana (SJSY) discussed earlier, are some of the innovative strategies that have emerged because of the new PRI system. All these strategies led to the active participation of local people in general, and women and members of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe in particular.

#### *People's Planning Campaign*

During the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), the people of Kerala got enthused about participating in formulating the plan document for their area. The other actors were the state government, which spent 40% of the total plan expenditure through panchayats and municipalities, and transferred infrastructure and staff to the PRIs.

Unlike other states, local governments can be dissolved if and only if an independent ombudsman can recommend the dissolution.

Voluntary organizations, like Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad — a cadre of retired skilled personnel including engineers, doctors, professors and other professionals. — assisted with the financial and technical needs of the villagers. Cost-benefit analysis was made for and provided to each panchayat, depending on the availability of resources and needs of the area. The volunteers also provided training in project planning, implementation and monitoring. Because of participatory planning at the local level, there was a 10% increase in the availability of financial resources, since the material and labour came free to some extent. As a result, the funds allocated for the shelter meant for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe increased by 30%.

In addition to a comprehensive plan, the campaign also provided a forum for women, known as the 'Women Component Plan', in which 10% of every project was committed to projects benefiting women. These projects were vegetable gardening, sewing cooperatives, mobilization of anganwadi, personnel and the establishment of community centres for women. [*Human Development Report: 2003*]

The programme not only involved men, but also women, particularly in the villages close to towns. As a result, the village assemblies, or gram sabha, started functioning in a more participatory manner. Coupled with the people's plan, women's participation in SHGs made the women stakeholders and they took active part in the gram sabha. [B. Mohanty ed.: 2000] The people's planning campaign showed remarkable results in terms of universalization of pre-primary education, and improvements in the quality of education, health care centres, rural electrification, etc. [Issac: 2000]

Some constraints did occur. The departments and functionaries transferred to local government institutions resented the move. Vertical programmes of the Central government, such as various poverty alleviation schemes, have proved to be difficult to meaningfully integrate into local plans, partly due to the unwillingness of the bureaucracy and partly due to the inflexibility of the schemes themselves. At another level, even foreign funding agencies who talk about decentralization have given encouragement to such parallel programmes. According to Isaac [2000], only a small number of local bodies have taken part in the people's plan. The majority of them are still undecided.

### *Right to Information*

Yet another innovative strategy, dating from the 1980s, got a stimulus after the Seventy third and Seventy-fourth Constitutional Amendments. Known as the Right to Information, this strategy has a tremendous potential for bringing accountability, transparency and social audits to both rural and urban areas. Like the people's planning campaign, the Right to Information campaign contributes to strengthening the process of decentralization.

The main initiator of the campaign was Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). This organization, along with villagers, started public hearings on the master rolls (i.e., list of beneficiaries for each scheme, amount received and spent, not only at the panchayat level but also at the block level). [Roy: 2000] In many places, irregularities in utilization of funds were unearthed and the persons concerned returned the money.

The Rajasthan government was the first state to pass a law on the Right to Information. Other states, such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Delhi, Karnataka and Maharashtra followed suit. [Mathew: 2000].

The Right to Information Bill has been passed, but it is yet to become an act. Interestingly, since the year 2000, a lot of discussion has taken place on the proposed bill. According to Godbole [2000], the earlier version of the bill was titled 'Freedom to Information', which meant it was not a fundamental right. The bill faced a lot of resistance from the bureaucracy for obvious reasons. Hopefully the new act, when it comes into force, will be implemented by all the state governments.

### *Gram Swaraj*

In an effort to empower the gram sabha, including the panchayats, the Governor of Madhya Pradesh announced the beginning of Gram Swaraj on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2001, at the behest of the Chief Minister. The idea was to allow gram sabha to take decisions regarding important matters relating to the village. Before launching the project, the government had set up a task force to discuss various aspects of the Gram Swaraj. The government had to amend its Panchayatiraj act to introduce the new concept. One of the important clauses that was introduced in the new act was to ensure one third of the membership of the gram sabha are women.

Three years have passed since the Gram Swaraj project was launched. The government is trying to make suitable corrections to ensure the smooth functioning of the gram sabha — e.g., in the current year, the government of Madhya Pradesh transferred public assets worth Rs 10,000 crores to gram sabhas. The respective nodal officers handed over the relevant documents to the chiefs of the panchayats, as well as to the presidents of Village Development Committees. The public assets which had been transferred to the gram sabhas included official buildings, water resources, roads, community halls, education guarantee buildings, primary and middle school buildings, veterinary hospitals and health sub centres. The role of the gram sabhas is to manage the projects and harness the public assets.

Along with the spirit of the Gram Swaraj, the government has raised the limit of the sanctioning power of the gram panchayat from Rs.3 lakhs to Rs.5 lakhs. This will facilitate panchayats playing a greater role in planning and implementing the rural development schemes. Similarly, the sanctioning powers of *janpad* and district panchayats have been raised further. For example, the system of technical supervision and evaluation has been changed to allow the inclusion of an NGO person, as well as the engineer to supervise construction work. [*Panchayati Raj Update*: August 2003]

\* \* \*

Thus we notice that the above innovative strategies contribute towards the effective functioning of PRI, as well as urban local governments. Almost all these strategies, including micro-credit programmes, have created a special niche for women to participate.

## Women in Panchayats

In the Constituent Assembly of 1950, as well as while writing the 1974 Towards Equality Report, women leaders rejected the notion of 'quota' in the political decision-making process. After a decade or so however, the National Perspective Plan (1988-2000) categorically recommended 30% of seats reserved for women in panchayats. Finally the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments Acts (1992) had a provision of reserving not less than 33% of the total seats for women, both at the functionary as well as the membership level.

Before we analyze the impact of such moves, we refer you to the chart below that depicts the political rights given to women in India from an historical perspective. It is interesting to note that Indian women got adult suffrage in 1950. In 1952, Indian women first contested an election. In the year 2000, the percentage of women at the ministerial level was 10%. However, at the parliamentary level, India has given only about 8% of the total seats (544) to women in the Lower House.

### *Women's Political Participation*

	India
Year of rights	
a. To vote	1950
b. To stand for election	1950
Year first nominated / elected for parliament	1952
Women in govt. at ministerial level as percent of total 2000	10.1
Seats in parliament:	
- Lower House	8.8
- Upper House	10.3
Local government institutions	33.3

[Source: UNDP (2003), *Human Development Report, 2003. Millinnium Development Goals: A compact among nations to end human poverty.* (Oxford University Press, New York).]

However, because of the quota system, women's representation in local governments has turned out to be quite significant — namely 33% or one million women per tenure. The State-level picture shows that in the second tenure in many states, 33% representation of women was not achieved. The percentage of elected women representatives has ranged from 40% in Karnataka to 22% in West Bengal. The declining trend in some of the states is a cause for concern. Could this be that states are withdrawing from their commitment to adequate women's representation, or that the data has not been the dissaggregated along gender line making it difficult to check the consistency of data?

However, it is of note that within a span of 10 years, about five to six million women have come to active politics, directly and indirectly, because of reserving seats in local government institutions. [Buch: 2000]

### *Socio-economic characteristics of women-elected representatives*

Even after 10 years of the panchayatiraj system in operation, not a single macro study has been undertaken to throw light on the socio-economic characteristics of women elected to the above institutions. Micro studies conducted in several parts of northern India showed that the majority of women belong to lower socio-economic strata. [Buch: 2000] In Orissa, it was also noticed that the ward members belonged to low socio-economic strata, but the presidents of the panchayats, as well as the members of the higher tier panchayats, belonged to higher castes. [Mohanty: 2003]

Interestingly, the age composition of elected women representatives gives an interesting pattern in the urban and rural context. In the urban setting, the majority of the elected women representatives of Chennai Municipal Corporation were between 40 and 50. [Ghosh: 2002. But in the rural context, it was noticed that the southern and eastern states elected women belonging to younger age groups, but the northern states went for higher age groups particularly in the first term. But in the second term, younger women got elected even in the northern states. [*Panchayati Raj Update*: 2003]

### *Proxy Women*

In this context, it is interesting to note that several words like ‘pradhanpati’ and ‘sarpanchpati’ have been coined to describe the status of ‘proxy women’. The term proxy women can be defined as those who are never given any space in the decision-making process by their male family members.

Ektra [2003], which had conducted micro-studies in northern states, admitted the presence of such proxy women (31% of the total). Sudha Pai [1998] also pointed out that even if women belong to prosperous and majority caste groups, those factors may not enable them to function properly. However, Pai concluded that even contesting for the election and becoming ‘pradhanis’ had made a difference in their lives.

Ektra gave factors that are responsible for not having ‘proxy women’. For instance, if Mahila Mandals or committed NGOs work with the elected women representatives then they become active.

We have noticed that the Government of India has been trying to make women visible through several of its schemes for last two decades. Some of the elected women representatives come from this background, or have family supporters. In those cases, elected women representatives participate in the panchayat more effectively.

### *Engendering Development*

Related to the concept of ‘proxy women’ is the question of whether women elected to panchayats and municipalities would engender the decision-making process. Ghosh [2002] points out that the women candidates contesting municipal elections in Chennai did not focus on women’s issues in particular. Ektra [2003] agrees with Ghosh in pointing out that they did not take up any gender issue specifically, although paid keen attention to infrastructural development (e.g., water sources).

Others like Dayal [2003] and Nussbaum [2003] are of the opinion that the experiment of reserving seats for women in panchayats has yielded some good results,



because the women have not only learnt political skills but also have become effective supporters of women's interests.

Other micro-studies from Orissa, and Bengal show that the women elected representatives have been looking after gender issues, given the strict guidelines of the functioning of panchayats. [Mohanty ed.: 1999] Those activities include the speedy disbursement of rice and wheat through the Public Distribution System (PDS), widow pension, low cost shelter, encouraging the girl child to attend school, and construction of bathing ghats. The fact that women of the villages do not feel intimidated to approach functionaries is itself a great achievement towards engendering development.

### *Women's Agency and Social Transformation*

As early as 1995, feminists like Madhu Kishwar observed that the community leaders of the villages came together and decided to field women candidates for the panchayat election. As a result, an all-women panchayat got formed in Maharashtra. She tried to argue that it became possible because the men of the villages became sympathetic to women's issues. [Kishwar: 1996]

It can be pointed out that women do not take a confrontational strategy to work more efficiently. The example given is the achievement of women in bringing warring community leaders together. Of course, there is the chance of ulterior motives by the community leaders 'to pull the string from behind'. But several micro-studies show that it never worked that way. The women who got elected in the Maharashtra panchayat became real leaders at a later stage.

Again interestingly, the campaigning mode of women elected representatives is very different from that of males. Ghosh [2002], for example, observed that the mode of campaigning for women candidates was very informal and they visited every household even in municipality elections in Chennai.

The Institute Social Sciences' own study in Orissa (1997-2001) showed that some of those women got invitations to attend football tournaments or other public functions. Besides, the government officials while inspecting the villages looked for them. These factors have an impact on shaping their political personalities.

At the family level, change occurs provided they get the husband's support — e.g., the inlaws/husbands help them to finish the household chores and look after the younger siblings. [Mayaram: 1996] Some of the women print name cards, discard veils, wear dresses matching the national flag, etc.

Along with the change of self-perception, a process of social mobilization involving women has started. As we have noticed earlier, the women have become somewhat visible because of economic and health programmes. The process of visibility has been quicker because of the Self-Help Groups and micro-credit programme. Combined with a level of political representation, a synergistic relationship and a process of social mobilization has started. This offers immense potential to transform Indian society and challenge the age-old feudal patriarchal order.

## **SUMMARY**

### **Challenges**

Even though the process of social mobilization has the great potential of challenging the patriarchy, there are still several constraints for women:

- First, there is the societal attitude towards women in general, and the girl child in particular. This attitude towards females gets formed through various ways — rituals, family upbringing, beliefs, media and even the collective wisdom of a local area. Each aspect has to be negotiated and reworked. This negotiation will be easier provided girls/women become asset-holders in their families.
- Second, women also face institutional hurdles, since panchayats as well as the nagarpalikas have become implementing agencies, instead of decentralized decision-makers, with limited financial resources. Further, these institutions have come under the influence of national and state politics (representing both muscle and money power). Women being first-timers to this process are not competent enough to exercise the necessary powers.
- Finally, the kind of resistance that was shown the reservation of seats in parliament could be described as the tip of the iceberg in terms of the steps the patriarchy will take to prevent women from being powerful.

### **Conclusions**

In the last 50 years, the government has been trying to mainstream gender issues through various economic/socio/political policies and programmes. It can be argued that among those, the most empowering policy has been the 33% seat reservation for women in the panchayats and municipalities through the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth amendment acts. As a result of these acts, there has been a process of institutionalizing grassroots democracy, and a new elite has emerged with responsibility for supervising, as well as implementing, the programmes related to health, education, employment, shelter and anti-poverty schemes.

The elected women representatives are engendering the development process at the grassroots level, with enabling support and capacity building by civil society agencies and women's groups. Despite deep-rooted systemic, cultural and political resistance, the above assessment shows that women have demonstrated the potential of challenging the iniquitous power relations in the public domain. The representation of six million women in the PRIs, directly and indirectly, has given an impetus to the processes of social mobilization, and women are reinventing gender roles in private and public spaces. Interestingly, due to their increased visibility the gender-based distinction between the private and public space is becoming blurred.

Women's representation in the PRIs as a critical mass has enabled us to look at a synergistic framework for understanding empowerment, which builds on the capabilities of the women, their families and the larger communities.

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**Table - 3**  
**State-wise Sanctions and Disbursements Under the**  
**Revolving Fund Scheme during 1999-2000 and 2000-2001**

*(Rs. in Lakhs)*

Sl. No	State	No. of NGOs		No. of Borrowers		Amount sanctioned		Amount Disbursed	
		99-00	00-01	99-00	00-01	99-00	00-01	99-00	00-01
1.	Andhra Pradesh	2	8	840	6053	22.00	380.00	51.00	115.00
2.	Himachal Pradesh	2	1	3000	85	30.00	6.00	10.00	26.00
3.	Karnataka	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.00
4.	Kerala	-	2	-	750	-	55.00	20.00	15.00
5.	Maharashtra	-	2	-	5800	-	190.00	-	139.00
6.	Orissa	-	1	-	600	-	30.00	20.00	15.00
7.	Rajasthan	2	1	2425	250	45.00	25.00	-	25.00
8.	Tamil Nadu	5	3	3138	2857	115.00	170.00	20.00	100.00
9.	Uttar Pradesh	1	1	2000	6000	20.00	50.00	30.00	25.00
10.	West Bengal	-	2	-	1500	-	100.00	16.00	50.00
<b>Total</b>		<b>12</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>11403</b>	<b>23895</b>	<b>232.00</b>	<b>1006.00</b>	<b>167.00</b>	<b>515.00</b>

*Source: Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Annual Report 2000-01.*