

CHAPTER - FIVE

5.1 Empirical Findings

TABLE - 1

AGE

RANGE	NO.	PERCENTAGE
18-25	31	22.14
26-34	44	31.43
35-43	28	20.00
44-51	22	15.71
52-59	15	10.72
TOTAL	N=140	100.00

Table 1 shows that maximum number of the respondents belonged to the age group of 26-34(44). Next maximum number belonged to the age group of 18-25. (31) It indicates that the younger generation is being involved in local politics in a more and more way. Again, no candidate can be elected unless he or she is nominated by the party. It can therefore be concluded that the political parties are also

showing interest in the younger generation. It should further be noted that the category of 35-43 also includes a large number of respondents (28), therefore, the middle aged people are also a considering factor in the local politics. It is further seen that 22 respondents belonged to the age group of 44-51 which shows that senior people are also engaged in local level politics and 15 belonged to the age group of 52-59. Naturally, there is no doubt that a balance has been maintained. Although younger generation has a dominating position at the local level politics but at the same time the senior people are also present in a substantive number.

TABLE - 2

MARITAL STATUS

MARITAL STATUS	NO.	PERCENTAGE
Married	68	48.57
Unmarried	44	31.43
Widowed/Divorced	28	20.00
TOTAL	N=140	100.00

It is seen that out of 140 respondents who were interviewed, 68(were married, 44 unmarried and 28 were either widowed or divorcee.

TABLE – 3

CASTE

CASTE	NO.	PERCENTAGE
Brahmin	21	15.00
Kayastha	24	45.72
S/C	18	27.14
S/T	13	12.14
TOTAL	N=76	100.00

If we analyse Table 2, which shows the place of caste at the local level politics in the district of Uttar Dinajpur, it is seen that the Kayasthas dominate the political scenario. Since for the purpose of analysis, only the Hindus were taken into account, out of 76 Hindus, 24 belongs to the Kayastha community while Brahmins also constitute a good number (21). The SC and the ST members also cover a substantial number. While there are 18 SC members, the ST constitutes 13. The simple conclusion that we can arrive at is that the Kayasthas are more influential in politics in the district of Uttar Dinajpur.

TABLE - 4

RELIGION

RELIGION	NO.	PERCENTAGE
Hindu	76	54.28
Muslim	58	41.43
Christian	6	4.29
Others	0	0.00
TOTAL	140	100.00

So far as religion is concerned, at the Village level politics, the Hindus dominate the political scenario. They constitute 54.28 percent while Muslims also constitute a substantial number. They are 58 in number. (41.43 %) From the practical point of view, the number is quite substantive. It is seen that there are 6 christian women who are involved at the local level politics in the Uttar Dinajpur district.

TABLE - 5
EDUCATION

LEVEL	NO.	PERCENTAGE
Illiterate	4	2.86
Primary	14	10.00
Middle School	71	50.72
Matriculation	45	32.14
Graduates	6	4.28
Post Graduates	0	0.00
TOTAL	140	100.00

So far as the analysis of Table-4 is concerned, it shows the educational level of the women panchayts in the district of Uttar Dinajpur. It is seen from the survey that out of 140, 4 did not have even minimum level of schooling. 14(10%) had the primary level education while most of the women members had middle level schooling. They are 71 in number (50.72%), which is slightly more than fifty percent. A good number of them had school leaving degree, their number being 45(32.14%). It is also seen that there are 6 six graduates which covers 4.28% of the total. There were no post-graduate degree holders. Therefore, we can come to a clear conclusion

that the women who participate at the local level politics in the district of Uttar Dinajpur are more or less educated or have the minimum level of schooling except a very few.

TABLE - 6

INCOME

RANGE	NO.	PERCENTAGE
1000-2000	53	37.86
2000-3000	41	29.29
3000-4000	23	16.43
4000-5000	9	6.42
5000-6000	7	5.00
6000 & above	7	5.00
TOTAL	140	100.00

A survey was conducted to find out the income level of the women panchayat member. Since all of them were either wife or sister or daughter of a family except only 2 who were primary teachers, the income belongs to the family as narrated.

It is seen that 53 of the members belongs to the income group of Rs.1000-2000(37.86%) The next maximum number belongs to the

income group of Rs.2000-300041) (29.29%). We find that the number belonging to the next group that is Rs. 3000-4000 is also a good number. It was 23 (16.43%) Between the incomes group of Rs.4000-5000, there are 9 members who constitute 6.42 %.We also find that the 7 members each belonged to the income group of Rs. 5000-6000 and Rs.6000 and above category. Of course, it was admitted that all the members' family have agricultural holdings.

TABLE - 7

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

IN YEARS	NO. OF PEOPLE	PERCENTAGE
NIL	5	3.57
1-3	72	51.43
4-6	48	34.2
7-9	8	5.71
10-12	5	3.57
13-15	2	1.43
TOTAL	140	100.00

Table -6 covers previous experience of the Panchayat members. It is seen that out of 140 members 5(3.57%) did not have any previous experience in politics. It was further seen that 72 of the members

(51.43%) had experience within the range of 1-3 years. Which is maximum in number. 48 members had experience of politics between 4-6 years while 8 of the members belonged to the experience group of 7-9 years, while 5 members (3.57%) belonged in the experience group of 10-12 years. The lowest number of members belonged in the experience group of 13-15 years. It can therefore be said that maximum number of the women members had a very little experience in politics.

TABLE - 8

MEETING ATTENDANCE

MEETINGS HELD	PARTICIPATION	PERCENTAGE
84	62	73.80

Table -7 covers data regarding attendance of meetings by the women members which is an indicator of their commitment and interest of the local level politics. It is seen that during the year 2008-2010, 84 meetings were held. The percent of attendance comes to 73.80. From the statistical point of view, the number is definitely high but so far as the local government is concerned, the attendance should be higher.

TABLE - 9

**AWARENESS ABOUT 73rd CONSTITUTIONAL
AMENDMENT**

AWARENESS	NO.	PERCENTAGE
YES	89	63.57
NO	51	36.43
TOTAL	140	100.00

Questions were also put regarding the awareness of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment of the Constitution of India which has made a reservation of 33% for the women. It was seen that out of 140, 89(63.57%) had some idea about the said constitutional amendment while 51(36.43%) did not know anything about the amendment which perhaps can be attributed to the fact that literacy level of the members were not very high.

TABLE - 10

ACCEPTANCE OF ADVICE

RELATIONS	NO.	PERCENTAGE
Husband	47	33.57
Father	23	16.43
Brother	28	20.00
Sister	3	2.14
No advice taken	39	27.86
TOTAL	140	100.00

Questions were also put as to regarding any decision making at the Panchayat level whether the women members take any advice from either husband, brother of father. It was seen that 47 out of 140(48.56%) depended on the advice of their husband, 23 on the advice of father, 28 on the advice of brother and 3 on the advice of sister. It was further seen that 39 out of 140 respondents did not take any advice in the matter of decision making at the Panchayat level.

TABLE - 11

PARTY MEMBERSHIP

MEMBERSHIP	NO. OF PEOPLE	PERCENTAGE
Member	76	54.29
Not Member	64	45.71
TOTAL	140	100.00

Regarding party membership, it was seen that out of 140 respondents, 76 were members of political parties while 64 had no membership of any political party. This shows that even without party membership a large number of women were fielded for the Panchayat level election by the political parties.

TABLE - 12

ASSOCIATION WITH MAHILA SAMITY

ASSOCIATION	NO. OF PEOPLE	PERCENTAGE
Associated	89	63.57
Not Associated	51	36.43
TOTAL	140	100.00

The Interview schedule also included questions regarding the association of the members with the Mahila Samity. It was seen that out of 140, 89 were associated with different Mahila Samity. Although 51 had no connection with any Mahila Samity. However, it shows that they had connection with social institutions prior coming to the political level.

TABLE - 13

ASSOCIATED WITH SELF-HELP GROUP

ASSOCIATION	NO.	PERCENTAGE
YES	104	74.29
NO	36	25.71
TOTAL	N=140	100.00

Self help groups are another institution of the association of the women in the social fabric. It was seen that out of 140, 104 were associated with the Self Help Groups, although 36 were not associated. It means that a substantial number had social exposure which ultimately led them to come to the political arena.

Apart from the information sought through the interview schedule attempt was made to get information of the areas as per the research questions which were framed to seek information and herein we have made content analysis of the same.

It is seen from survey in the areas of the study that prior to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the role of women at the Panchayat level in the district of Uttar Dinajpur was not very significant from the point of view that there were much less representation of the women at the Panchayat level. Since their number was much less, their voice did not find any substantive place in the decision making process of the local government body. In fact, number is always an important factor in the democratic set up.

So far as the local democracy is concerned, the emergence of women in the Panchayat system was mainly due to family compulsion. In most cases, the wife emerged in politics either due to the death of the husband or placement of the wife by the husband due to other social factors.

The nature of participation of women in politics at the Panchayat level is seen mostly in the Panchayat meetings and in some cases their involvement is seen in the major social problems.

That is to say that the participation level, in most cases is marginal in the true sense of the term. But it should also be pointed out that the participation level is also on the rise which is leading to women empowerment.

Attempt was made to find out the problems of rural women to play their role independently. It was seen that in most cases, the women did not have the educational and practical ability to go deep in the social problems which stood as a block on the path of the women to work independently.

It was further seen that the women Panchayats are mostly involved in the social development activities, family problem mitigation, drinking water facilities, village road repair and mostly they took major initiative in stopping the evils of liquor consumption in their localities.

Regarding the problems in the area of operation, it was seen that in major social problems, it was really difficult to tackle any situation without masculine help. Only the female members could not come directly in the social problems.

So far as male domination is concerned, it was seen that in spite of several constitutional provisions, male intervention and male domination was very much present in the total process.

So far as the future of women empowerment in the district is concerned, it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that in spite of several hurdles, the women are coming out more and more in the process, they are playing more and more positive role and being involved more and more than ever before. As a result, it can be said that they have a bright future with regard to empowerment.

It was further seen that the political parties are definitely playing more and more positive role. They are projecting more and more women than ever before. The political parties that operate in the scenario, are in a lenient mood to project more and more women representatives. Apart from that, several NGOs are also operative in this regard.

Although India is a secular country but even then mainly the religious factor is definitely instrumental at the local level politics in the district of Uttar Dinajpur. It was seen that it was mainly the Hindu and Islam religion that are operative in the district. Caste as factor is not very much instrumental.

5.2 WOMEN AT THE GRASS ROOTS:

SOME CASE STUDIES

In the following lines we will take up some case studies which will show that the women played a very positive role in the social set up. The successful case of Nirmala Das (50-year-old widow), Dhaneshwari Devi, Pradhan of Gram Panchayat and Surnam Biwi indicated that they have been carrying out many developmental works in their area. The elected women have made efforts for the construction of new primary school, village road streamlining, the electricity supply and drinking water in their villages. As women leaders have received full support of their husbands and family members, they could decide and execute the programmes in the rural areas. On contrary, some of them have also experienced resistance from others within the Panchayati Raj system.

Another illustration shows that elected women like "Krishna Devi" who has emerged as a leader from the Mahila Samity and brought other few women into PRIs as members. The political experience, organizing capacity and familiarity

with PRIs can facilitate women to work in the decentralized set up at the village level. The experience and position in the village level organization helped these women to take advantage of the reservations in the new PR system. The combined strength and collective action by the women in some parts have empowered them to get a positive and consequently a favourable bargain capacity during the Panchayat elections.

The women also mobilized against alcohol consumption in the rural areas and took drastic steps to close down the liquor shops. As a result, women have also agreed to panchayat elections only on closure of the liquor shops and its sales.

Thus, as Panchayat M e m b e r s , women have raised their voice on many social issues, which are affecting their lives.

More so, with the entry of women in Panchayats, interesting twist has taken place in population control movement. Many of the women members limited their family size and emerged as example for small family norm and putting their efforts for family planning. It shows women's initiation for the cause of nation building at grass root level. This is definitely a significant step forward for the women's involvement in the social

arena and ultimately in the political arena.

We can also refer to some case studies which indicate emerging positive situation at the grass root level participation by the women. A case shows Pro-active women who used her position for the promotion of women welfare in her area. On realising the need for maternity and infant care in the locality. Bhanumati Singh took substantive initiative to construct a Maternity and child Centre in the village.

Another case demonstrate that how woman like Fatima Biwi took initiative to check the high rate of school dropout in her village. She used all her convincing power to get more class rooms for girls in the existing school.

Sharmila Roy (25) who was born in a family where her father was a Member of the Gram Panchayat for 10 years, she has understood the system of working in Gram Panchayat. She proved herself as excellent manager in the village as she solved the water problem in the village. She initiated several other projects like family planning programmes, etc.

It manifests the advantage of women leader's participation in decentralised decision making to solve the local level

problems. Several social problems like repair of village roads, drinking water, electricity, school building for the village have been undertaken by the women member who discharged her responsibilities with great sincerity. So, the women leaders have actively taken steps to provide the infrastructure facilities in the rural areas as per felt needs and local realities, thus leading towards development.

Anwara Begum of Goalpokhar village worked in the area of poverty and who is an illiterate woman is also an ideal example for village development. It is seen that by taking advantage of her position and also with the cooperation of the newly appointed Panchayat Secretary, (Executive Officer) planned for the effective utilization of the piece of wasteland owned by the Gram Panchayat and developed a park which is being used-as common facilities for entertainment by the children and others. She passed resolution in the Gram Panchayat to collect nominal entry charge for using this facility and system introduced. It has helped not only to recover the investment made but also gradually strengthening the revenue of the Gram Panchayat in the long run.

These cases indicate how the women got elected to the

PRI, particularly to the Gram Panchayat can be innovative in approach and creative in thinking and enterprising in taking up activities for the welfare and development of their villages. It is the effect of the provisions and reservation made for the women in the new Panchayats Raj system for the decentralised rural areas.

A case shows that her husband initially controlled her in all the matters of the Gram Panchayat and the administration and custodian of everything at the village level but subsequently she tried to shed the control gradually.

These cases indicate that how the women in the PR system are functioning and also nature of influence by the men folk on their participation in the system. It also clears that only to protect their interest, the men wangle women's election to the position in the PRIs. On the event of women elected to the PRIs, they are working in opposition to them; hence the women elected have always been facing the problems in their participation and functioning. This phenomenon may be attributed to the inherent socio-economic weakness of the elected women leaders and also externalities working against her role and functioning.

There is also some other dimensions of the story.

A further case study reveals the fact that with the appointment of Panchayat Secretary, the Women Pradhans are facing a new situation. The Women are elected to the GP with backing of the CBO like SHGs in consultation with local dominant leaders. Hence, they have to listen to this local leadership and also depend on the Panchayat Secretary while taking decision, as they are less educated or illiterates. The study also shows that in couple of cases in which even a well-educated woman working with the Woman officer, is remotely controlled by the male. It is an example of how even the well-educated woman also face the operational constraints in playing their role and taking decisions in matters of Panchayat.

It is another major problem faced by the Women panchayats that the Panchayat Secretary in many instances does not properly guide the elected leaders. Rather, they take advantage of their position and refuse to cooperate in taking decisions. The Secretaries also hold charge of more than one Gram Panchayats, particularly in the case of women headed Gram Panchayats, the Secretary is not regular to the office and also delay in initiating and handling the welfare

and development activities. The situation normally has resulted in functional conflict between Women Members and Secretaries, as a result, the worst hit are the "people" with lack of facilities like drinking water, lights in the street which are under the purview of Gram Panchayats. Naturally, the people have to suffer a lot.

It is interesting to refer to some more cases. The cases indicate as to how political male leaders have controlled provisions made for SC women to enter Gram Panchayats. In Itahar, a Panchayat seat is reserved for SC Women for which local NGO has mobilised the people and fielded a SC woman in the election. At the same time, a political party canvassed against that candidate and asked forcefully to vote for an illiterate SC Woman who has been a nominee of that political party. By using muscle power, the candidate fielded by the political party, won the election. The idea of the local leaders behind the coup was to keep the Gram Panchayat under the control of male by electing an illiterate SC Woman. It clearly indicates as to how the women are kept far away from the seat of power and decision making authority.

5.3 MAJOR FINDINGS

1. It is seen that the women entered into politics due to mandatory provision of reservation.

2. A large number of the women are from nonpolitical background and entered into politics due to persuasion by their family members or pressure from the village community.

3. The important aspect is that the women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role and responsibility.

4. Women's experience of Panchayati Raj institution has transformed many of them. The elements of this transformation include empowerment, self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of information.

5. Further, women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and most of all by challenging men.

6. About 50-60% of women attend the Panchayat meeting regularly. Given the sure number, one might conclude

that the democracy has become more participatory than before at least at the grassroots level.

7. The increase in the female literacy rate can be attributed to the presence of the women in Panchayats and their willingness to get educated.

8. An interesting finding came out from the field experience. Even if women representatives depend on relatives, the power relations between husband and wife has already changed due to the reservation for women, the woman's husband gets a chance to come to the public sphere because of the wife and particularly monolithic structure is no longer seen in family relations.

9. The findings of the study show that women members of the Panchayati Raj institution could play an effective developmental role, if they are given adequate recognition and encouragement.

9. It is also seen that in most of the cases women are housewives, first time entrants into politics and most of them are illiterate or educated up to primary level.

10. It is further seen that majority of the elected women

panchayats, including younger women, were illiterate when elected to office. After two years in office, they demanded literary skill and generally felt the need of education for their daughters.

11. It was further seen that socio-economic background in general and political backgrounds in particular, are important determinants of shaping the nature and level of participation of members in political institutions. The study reveals that education and participation are interrelated.

12. It is therefore seen that women continuously need orientation, sensitization, capacity building, information and counseling through organizations. The ongoing experiments and experiences suggest that periodical training, orientation and sensitization can help the women leaders to perform the assigned role in a better way.

5.4 EVALUATION

As a mission Of Implementation of Part-IX of the Indian Constitution and PESA, 1996 while the State Panchayati Raj Acts have been enacted, State Election Commission and State Finance

Commissions have been set up. In order to give a democratic wrap, regular Panchayat elections are being held for providing reservation for SCs/STs/Women in Panchayats. But in spite of the fact, the results of actual implementation of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 have fallen far short of expectations on the ground level leading to non fulfillment of the constitutional promises.

Several problems are posing threats for the proper functioning of the system of Panchayats. It is seen that although the political decentralisation has been largely successful, with elections held regularly and with ample participation of the people, the aspect of decentralisation at the administrative and financial matters remains to be unfulfilled. Panchayats have not been given adequate responsibilities to levy and collect taxes, fees, duties or tolls. In order to allow it to work properly, the Panchayats should have been granted appropriate powers to generate their own resources so that funding do not remain as a stumbling block on the way to undertake works for developmental activities.

Apart from that, recommendations of State Finance Commissions have been either accepted partially or implemented half-heartedly.

Assertions in favour of democratic decentralisation are often founded upon the notion that the democratisation and empowerment of local political bodies will create institutions that are more **accountable** to local citizens and more **appropriate** to local needs and preferences. However, international experience has shown that even the most ambitious attempts at decentralisation have failed to overcome regional and local dimensions of poverty and inequality. Moreover, the power to decide local development initiatives is often highly dependent on a state apparatus that respects the autonomy of local political institutions.

Because of its size and its relatively ambitious efforts to decentralise government, India provides an important context for understanding the ways in which decentralisation can improve the performance and accountability of local government institutions. In 1993, the Government of India passed a series of constitutional reforms, designed to democratise and empower local political bodies – the Panchayats. Since this time, the experience has been highly variable, from state to state in India.

Therefore, there is no denying the fact that the

constitutional provisions have been made to enhance the role of women at the grass root democracy and enable them to take decisions in the Panchayat Raj Institution as elected representatives. Mostly, women leaders have come into politics and public affairs, as proxy of men who want to take advantage of the reservation system in PRIs. At the same time the women consult men at home and decide at office. So, indirectly men are participating in decision-making through officially elected women in the PRIs. Elected women leaders are not able to push their issues and needs in the meetings. They are disempowered even after getting elected and occupying only the positions not deciding in the PRIs.

The women participate in the Gram Sabha only in the absence of their husbands, otherwise they are preoccupied in some others work. Moreover, only to protect the vested interest and to follow up the activities, men keep the women in the meetings. Hence, in such context the women have to be taking decision as directed already by men. So, it is also another way of wielding the power from outside the PR system by keeping their women in the decision-making positions.

It is also worthy to note that a well-educated

women forced to contest for a position in the Gram Panchayat and got elected as a President of the Gram Panchayat, but she refused to accept the 'idea" given by her party to make adjustment in a development program and not approved the sanctions.

Resultantly, the party has threatened her family members and finally she was forced to resign from her position held in the Gram Panchayat. It indicates the interest of the political party and consequent maneuvering over the elected women to take advantage of the position.

It is seen that varied negative situations come up even after the constitutional provisions made for the women participation as elected representatives in the Panchayati Raj system. It indicates a variety of factors operating in the process and systems in democratic decentralization.

The factors can be within the individuals elected to the PRIs and can also be external factors operating within the Panchayat Raj system and from the community level. They may be enlisted as under:

Individual strengths

- High education - levels of the women Sarpanches and representatives;
- Prior experience in the public affairs through the involvement in the village level organizations like Mahila Mandal and Self Help Groups;
- Initiative and drive to act innovatively and creatively to solve the local problems;
- Adequate level of understanding of their roles and responsibilities;
- Decision-making capacity, specifically convincing talent to take others in the system with them; and aptitude to muster community participation to tackle the local issues.

In order to get rid of the situation, some Individual Weakness must be done away with. Most notable of them are:

1. Illiteracy and low educational levels;
2. Fulfillment of the family responsibilities;
3. Working within the social boundaries as the family and other male members put them in the Panchayat system;

4. Introversion due to the lack of communication skills;
5. Not able to understand their roles and responsibilities, partly due to non-guidance.

There should also be Favourable Environment and Opportunities for better role performance.

At the outset,

1. There should be family member's support at household responsibility and also extent assistance in the official work;
2. Support of other Panchayat members, mostly peer group women and relatives;
3. Community extent support and participate in Panchayat activities when their needs are taken care and problems are attended;
4. Active involvement of Government officials and functionaries by way of explaining the procedures and rule (maintain the administrative system).
5. Support of Common Interest groups or any strong Community Based Organizations working in the village.

Limitations and threats

1. Interference of Male family members and also from the caste group/ community in the official role and also in the affairs of Panchayat.

2. Caste considerations among other Panchayat members after getting elected to the position or otherwise caste loyalty.

3. Indifferent attitude and behaviour of Government officials and functionaries working in the system.

4. Misguidance or mostly, no proper guidance/support by the Panchayat Secretary in conducting Panchayat activities.

5. Apprehension of no-confidence motion by the other elected members in the system.

6. Mounting Pressure from the Political Party which has vested interest in the gender reservation for the positions of the PR system

It should be referred that the family, community and the State (represented by the officials) have together created a situation wherein elected women representatives are facing many operational constraints while playing their roles in the PRIs. They need to be endowed with capacities and incentives to tackle

the emerging challenges after getting into the PR system. Creating favourable environment would enable the women to play more effective role in the decentralised development.

Democratic politics is, in reality, the interplay of vested interests and PRI's great achievement has been to mandate a vested and mutual interest, between women and the political process. If the wisdom of grassroots organisations, especially the courage and clarity of women, is to become policy, it will not be through the art of intellectual persuasion but by the arrangements made within a political system for their voice to have power. Bringing women into power is thus a matter of equity, of correcting an unjust and unrepresentative system.

This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started in January 1994. A span of 16 years is over and we can make an assessment of the total situation regarding the impact of women's entry into formal structures of government. It must be said that the sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the

political system has made a difference. The percentage of women at various levels of political activity has increased dramatically. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience of governance of civil society into governance of the state.

In order to bring these women into politics was an act of positive discrimination. It was the pressure of law, combined with the political imperative of winning elections that changed political parties' perception of women's limited capacity for public office. But, crucially, PRI has helped to change women's perceptions of themselves. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. PRI has also given many women a greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. On the other hand, some women's involvement in PRI has helped them affirm their identity as women with particular and shared experiences. This self-perception arises from two sources: from women's own sense of their shared experience and from attitudes and imagery imposed on them by the men. It appears that gender can supersede

class and party lines. Women have opened up the possibility for politics to have not only new faces but also a new quality and a new dimension.

It must be said that the increase in the representation of women has not automatically led to a more gendered analysis of the issues confronting local government. Nor has it necessarily raised the profile of women's needs and interests in the policy agenda, given that elected women often act as proxies for men's views at the councils, being advised by their male relatives. But there is now a minority of women who are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness and visible changes in the articulation of ideas and leadership qualities exhibited by this minority have been noted in the different priorities and different values espoused by women in politics or the entry and survival of women in the political arena of the country.

The ways in which women, through PRI, are changing governance are evident in the issues they choose to tackle; water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. Women also express different values. Women value proximity,

whether it is to a drinking water source, a fuel source, a creche, a health centre, a court of justice or an office of administration. The enormous expansion of women's representation in decentralised government structures has highlighted the advantages of proximity, namely the redress of grievance and (most important of all) the ability to mobilise struggle at a local level where it is most meaningful. Thus women are helping to radicalise local government to a very significant way.

The path to the realization of the objectives is not free from throngs. The obstacles to the realisation of P R I's transformative potential are many. There continues to be a resistance to really devolving power and funds from centres of (male) power to the periphery. Women still face considerable handicaps to their involvement in politics; for example, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, lack of self-confidence and the opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views.

It should be said that there is thus a need to provide women with specific kinds of support, which go beyond

technical training. They need support to build solidarity amongst women, through strengthening links between women's organisations and elected bodies. They need information about innovative organisations, which enhance women's lives such as health providers and credit institutions. It is also necessary to strengthen women's sense of common identity by articulating the elements of a feminist consciousness and presenting it as the special quality of women's leadership. There has been insufficient elaboration of what that leadership has to offer which distinguishes it from men's leadership and which commends it as something special. Such an elaboration through feminist discourse and action is essential for this revolution to deliver the promise.

There is also a need for a more enabling environment, which would allow PRI to become a process for the empowerment of women, not to mention other social groups who have been left out of participation in representative governance. Such an environment would include legal frameworks and services as well as packages of technical support. Ironically, it is development assistance agencies, which often provide

vigorous examples of patriarchal obstruction to people-led development.

It should be equally remembered that there are also administrative obstacles to be overcome. The current administration framework has a departmentally-administered sectoral funding pattern which conflicts with the women-led, area-derived programmes arising from PRI. There is a need to cut through the existing system of development finance to find more flexible approaches capable of responding to the new priorities that are being expressed.

PRI has begun to transform the processes and priorities of local government in India as well as the women who have been brought into politics. But sustaining this transformation is a significant challenge, given the inertia and resistance of patriarchal institutions and values.

It is also seen that in most of the cases, women are housewives, first time entrants into politics and most of them are illiterate or educated up to primary level. It was further seen that socio-economic background in general and political backgrounds in particular, are important determinants of

shaping the nature and level of participation of members in political institutions. Therefore, it can be said that education and participation are interrelated.

Again, majority of the women members are illiterate and large percentages were from families in the lower socio-economic strata.

It is known that though women comprises about half of the Indian population they have been subjected to discriminatory social ethos resulting in denial of equality of status and opportunities in social, economic and political sphere. After the amendment was introduced and in many cases, the first term of PRIs is already over in many states, there is need to go back to the history and analyse the reason for the government to give this space and it's workability. There is no denying the fact that development of a nation requires maximum utilisation of human resources without any discrimination. A more developed society is a more participant one. So the participation of women in political process is a major step towards inclusive politics.

Agenda for Action

In the Indian social and political set up, the million dollar question is as to how can women raise their own consciousness and sustain the transformations of PRI? The support of the women's movement in India is critical. Many sections of the movement were initially skeptical about the real value of this "revolution". However, as they have become more familiar with these elected women, they have been overwhelmed by the vitality and the enthusiasm of the women and are now offering both moral and material support. This process is of central importance, and must be continued and reinforced.

There is also a need for a more enabling environment, which would allow PRI to become a process for the empowerment of women, not to mention other social groups who have been left out of participation in representative governance. Such an environment would include legal frameworks and services as well as packages of technical support.

Multi-lateral and bi-lateral development assistance also needs to be re-thought. Deep poverty is a social and political phenomenon as much as an economic problem and thus requires political and social change, particularly within the sites

of power. The quest for equity cannot come about without wider representation of all groups-, especially those currently denied access to power, and the presentation of all points of view in the process of decision-making. Revision of the current administrative and political structures, and their rules, is necessary in order to facilitate this broader representation and its translation into political power for those who are currently marginalised.

Therefore, bringing women into power is thus not only a matter of equity, of correcting an unjust and unrepresentative system. Political restructuring is the key to economic growth with justice. PRI is also demonstrating that transforming local councils into representative bodies which means that they are likely to be more environmentally protective, as the new members have a greater stake in their local natural resources.

It is seen that the women entered into politics due to mandatory provision of reservation. Most of the women are from nonpolitical background and entered into politics due to persuasion by their family members or pressure from the village community.

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PRI in India offers an opportunity to women to change the face of political leadership. But we still have to ensure that these are spaces where women can go to negotiate for power.

5.5 CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

After a survey of the above analysis we can clearly come to the following observations as a concluding part of the present thesis.

Women elected to the PRI have proved that they can make contribution to the rural development and also in the process of nation building. But it is a matter of great concern that the women elected to the PRIs are facing hurdles in their participation as functionaries to discharge their role and duties at the grass-root level development.

Women elected to PRIs are illiterates which make them unable to function and in the exercise their leadership.

A majority of the women get help for information from their husband. As a result, it has led to role conflict among women, both at home and office as elected leaders of PRIs.

It is also seen that the younger generation has taken keen interest in participating in local institutions of Governance. Few upper caste women came to PRI due to socio-economic status and political background of their family.

But the hard reality is that as seen from the survey that the

women themselves allow the men's interference and at the same time consider them as barrier for their participation. So, the paradox is that the women leaders are not clear about what is the problem in playing their role under the new PR system.

The prevailing norms in the rural society also serve as barrier for women's participation in public affairs. The family male member normally accompanies the women during their visit to any government office. So, interaction and discussion with officials take place by the male member, and accordingly, their visit to the particular office remain as "courtesy call".

The infra structural areas should also be highlighted. It has also been revealed that many a times women do not attend meetings due to socio-cultural factors like not being allowed to sit at par with their counterparts. More so, the male members comment and laugh at the women members so as to discourage and avoid them in the meetings.

A further case shows that the attendance of women members in Panchayat meetings is invariably very poor. The family members of women representatives who accompany them in the meetings take decisions in the Panchayats. The women only affix their signature by virtue of their official

position. It is nothing but to take advantage of the legal provision for the women and enjoy the power through them in the local bodies.

Again, even if women participate in the meetings, their suggestions and ideas are not given any weightage for taking decisions. It is revealed through discussion that mostly, male members dominate the panchayat meetings. The traditional system like "Purdah" mostly controls the women's participation. It indicates that male from the higher caste in the villages are ruling on behalf of elected women of the Panchayats.