

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

India has a long tradition of participatory local democracy (commonly known as village panchayat) but consistently low representation and involvement of women in such institutions reveal the sharp social inequality of our social and political system. The Constitution of Independent India stipulates equality of opportunity and absence of discrimination in social, economic and political lives of all Indian citizens but this inequality seems interminable.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, by providing one third representation to women in all elected bodies including one third of the offices of Chairpersons for those bodies has provided opportunities for the first time for women's participation in community development or, in short, political life of the nation. With the help of this statutory reservation women have notably and uniformly entered the panchayat processes since 1993. Consequently a series of pondering and contemplations have come to the forefront; what is the socio economic background of those women who have been elected in panchayats, what is the real nature of role performance of women panchayats, how women are reconciling their political and familial roles and what is the newer direction(s) of rural development they are imparting or capable of ensuring. This study humbly attempts to document and answer a few of such questions.

In Section 1 of this introductory Chapter the origin, nature and evaluation of recent thrust on Panchayati Raj are discussed. The rationale and pattern of statutory reservation policy enunciated by 73rd Amendment Act are documented in Section 2. The Section 3 focuses on the problems that women are likely to encounter while participating in panchayat process. The objectives of this study, the approach to the problems and structure of this dissertation are included in the subsequent Sections.

1. EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ

1.1 Genesis of Panchayati Raj. Since time immemorial village Panchayats in some form or other had been in existence in India. Indian villages were self governing community through autonomous Panchayats. Literal meaning of panchayats is panch parameswar or council of five

indicating God speaking through five head. However, numerical connotation was never so steadfast and practical implication was association of people in village affairs. The structure and functions of panchayats and state were clearly demarcated and each was virtually independent of other. The only limiting factor for panchayats was the payment of demands of the state. For centuries panchayats had been the center of social life and focus of social solidarity (Mathew; 1995; 1).¹

There were, moreover, caste panchayats. Hugh Gray² talked of caste origin of panchayats. With most cases panchayats were hearing, arbitrating disputes of caste members; administering justice, punishing violation of caste rules. For substantiation, among Ravas, a tribe of Cooch Behar district, panchayats consisting of elder members are known as MARAB SEN³. In each Bustee (locality) there is one Mandal (known as PARE) who calls the meeting of MARAB SEN which may declare judgement including fine and social isolation in any dispute between or among Ravas. In inter Bustee disputes joint meeting of MARAB SEN may also be convened.

Among Indian scholars there has been a tendency to eulogise and even revitalise earlier system of panchayats. But at its best, those structures were more akin to 'communitarian' image to resolve family or community disputes or inter or intra village disputes or manifestation of social composition in the form of caste panchayats All those obviously were without political overtone or democratic contours.

It was during British rule that the tradition of panchayats was ravaged. The introduction of landlordism and ruthless drive for revenue collection etc. shattered the corporate /self sufficing socio economic village life and with it panchayats as well. The British Government later on introduced its own brand of local government to deliver certain municipal services like health, education etc. However, it is realism that local government that India has today is a "British creation rather than India's own"⁴

During the Freedom Movement national leaders realised its importance and vehemently advocated for panchayats as a unit for economic and moral regeneration, for restoring democratic

1. We have broadly followed reference patterns like a) Author, year of publication and page number with in text for those authors who are listed in Bibliography and b) full reference in the format of Author, year of publication, (page no. when required) publisher and place of publication for those who are not listed in Bibliography.

2.Gray,Hugh (1988; 585). The Problem. in *Desai* (ed.)

3.Gupta, P.K. 1988. *The Toda Tribal in North Bengal*. Ratnabali. Calcutta. (in Bengali)

4.Rao & Hazarika. (1980; 1) *Local Government in India*. S.Chand. New Delhi

and self sufficient village life where soul of India really lives. Panchayat was accepted as one of the ideological planks of the movement. Gandhiji gave its philosophical height when he held “greater is the power of panchayats, better it is for the people”. It is a shame, however, that in the first draft of the independent Constitution of India no mention of panchayats was made and only as an afterthought it was incorporated in Art. 40. The wordings of Art. were very significant – “the state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government”. Also item no. 5 of the State List in the Seventh Schedule – curiously without naming panchayats – authorised state government to constitute and empower such units of local government. Thus it was indicative that separate legislation was required for implementation of this optional directive.

After centuries of slumber when India attained independence, all round socio economic transformation soon became inevitable contemplation. As a result of Technical Cooperation Agreement between India and the USA Community Development Programme (CDP) ⁵ as a concept and method was devised in 1952. Operationally the Programme was not spearheaded by the community itself but by the administrative machinery. Till 1959 the Programme was simply governmental to assist people ⁶. It was soon realised that if the Programme was to succeed and democracy to be real people’s organisation would be overwhelming in character and vitality. When B. Mehta Committee (1957) was asked to examine the CDP Programme it recommended a new pattern of democratic decentralisation in the format of Gram Panchayat (GP) at village level, Panchayat Samity (PS) at Block/ Sub divisional level and Zilla Parishad (ZP) at district level. Its suggestion received favour all over and Rajasthan, soon followed by other States, first adopted this model of democratic decentralisation. This structure is popularly known as Panchayati Raj, or PR for short, which is supposed to be the means for the end of community development.

1.2 In retrospect. The panchayat or third tier (Singhvi Committee 1986) or third stratum (Mukherjee; 1993) – a novel and nodal Indian experiment at grassroots participatory democracy - is to provide “political expression of village needs”, means to “attacking whole range of community problems” and the “mechanism through which immense resource could be

5. For brief but lucid account of CDP see Danda, A.K. 1984. Rural Reconstruction; An Indian Experiment. In Danda (ed.). *Studies on Rural Development. Experience & Issues*. Inter India. New Delhi. Dey, S.K. 1964. Community Development. Asia Pub. Bombay.

6. Dey, S.K. (1964; 49), *ibid*.

mobilised for development”⁷. However, its sailing has never been smooth and its potential yet to be realised.

The experience of PR has so far been a state of neglect and impoverishment. Without acquiring a status of dignity of a vibrant unit of self government ~~it languished~~ it languished for most part of its existence for various reasons such as absence of regular elections, prolonged supersession, variation in structure/authority, scant devolution of financial and above all lack of political will.

It is the common experience that everyone accepts panchayat and favours decentralisation but nobody is sincerely willing or able to translate that wish into concrete practice. One commentator (Mukherjee; 1994; 789) observed that local government has hardly advanced beyond its 1870 level. To other⁸ the seed of PR did not sprout and it remains unsprouted to this day. To other veteran scholar (Jain; 1988; 196) the inevitable failure is for “our approach and method”. More alarmingly when it was put to test the result was not community development but usurpation of power by dominant caste/ class, influential leaders for their own specific interests.

In the Constituent Assembly Debates misgiving was that if panchayat system was introduced in the then prevailing rural context local influential class might usurp all power and utilise that for their selfish motive and it has indeed come true. Micro studies have unearthed that decision making of PR is in the hands of rich farmers and traders in Gujrat (Hirway; 1986), domination of higher caste in Karnataka (Mathew; 1985), the downtrodden section utterly bypassed (Gurumurthy; 1987), it is viciated in Haryana by factionalism and is controlled by some leaders for their exclusive interests⁹, dominant leaders using power for themselves and not for the welfare of society¹⁰, PR decisions are made by political considerations (Dubey & Murdia ; 1976) and “ traditional classes continue to influence the formal rural power structure”,¹¹

Historical evidences suggest that when PR was being constituted by State Acts or even afterwards they were regarded as developmental agency with people’s participation for plans and non plans. Committees looking in to its workings visualised it as decentralised

7. Nicholson. Cited in Samanta. (1990; 89). The Political Economy of Panchayats in West Bengal. *Social Change*. Vol. 20(1)

8. Kurien. C.T. (1992; 167). *Growth and Justice*. Oxford University Press. Madras.

9. Singh, Sakuntala. 1994. *Grassroots politics and PR*. Deep & Deep. New Delhi.

10. Sharma. 1978. PR in Haryana. In Reddy (ed.). *PR in India*. Macmillan. New Delhi

11. Reddy, T.C. (1989; 389). Rural Leadership – Continuity and Change. *Indian Journal of Social Research*. Vol. 30(4)

administrative structure for implementing programmes handed down from above. And this view got entrenched during 1970's when central government bypassed and even undermined rural local government through direct centrally sponsored administration of benefits. Fallout of Indo Pak war, clamping of emergency etc. contributed to rapid centralisation of power that did not bode well for PR. Moreover, the success of Green Revolution encouraged a kind of 'technocratic rationalism'¹² that began to widen gaps between policy dispensation and reality.

1.3 Shift in Development Paradigm. Meanwhile growing realisations have stimulated our thought process. India really lives in villages. All round problems here are not only more conspicuous but also most pathetic. For rural development process, PR holds distinct potentiality and perhaps superiority. For smaller constituency size, PR provides physical visibility and identification of functionaries with the people. Its direct relations and bearing with people and their problems make it cable between democratic process and people's aspiration. As experience suggests, whenever PR has been actively involved the implementation of rural development programmes has been "decidedly better and selection of beneficiaries and selection of schemes .. satisfactory"¹³. Eight Plan document realised it when it noted that unless we have representative institutions at local level it is hardly possible to make any dent on primary education or health problems.

There has been 'revolutionary shift' in development paradigm. Earlier, unilateral role of state in political strategy of development was postulated for the conviction that economic development would eventually ensure political development. India for long endorsed this western conception. But now the paradigm itself has changed profoundly. For instance the thrust of Third UN Development Decade (1980-90) now upholds equality, social justice, decentralisation and participatory decision making. Development is now regarded as a process that needs democracy if any serious headway has to be made (Webster; 1992; 4-6).

Now the pattern of development has come a long way from mere economic growth to growth with equity and justice, from governmental initiatives to people's participation and involvement, from socio economic development to human resource development and from endowment to empowerment.

12. Shivia, M. (1989; 10). *PR - A Policy Perspective*. NIRD. Hyderabad.

13. Rao Committee Report. In *Kashyap* (1989; 214)

It is now realised that development of rural India can be substantial only through the process of decentralised planning and its implementation involving fully the concerned local people. Accordingly to make panchayats as living, vibrant, dynamic, 'center pillar of commonwealth' the constitution is amended by 73 rd Amendment Act 1992. This Act is supposed to have marked genuine departure from hitherto developmental orientation and reiterates that PR would be self governing institution.

India is now on a threshold of a historical transition of political and economic power to the grassroots where they really belong. Its political implication can hardly be overlooked. About 22.5 lakh elected representatives (another set of 7.5 lakh in Municipality) instead of present 5000 MP, MLA and MLCs are to govern rural India and for that matter India.

1.4 New Structure and Functions. This 73 rd Amendment Act, inserting a new part (part XI) in the constitution, enshrines constitutional certainty, continuity and strength to panchayats, directs states to legislate and constitute panchayats conferring powers and responsibilities necessary to make them institution of self government within 24 th April 1994.

From now on PR will have uniform three Tiers – GP, PS, ZP. However, for the states with population below 20 lakhs, Tier at block or PS may be dispensed with. Tenure is fixed for 5 years. Seats of each Tier be so distributed as to conform to ratio of population and number of seats throughout state. Seats be reserved for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs for short) in proportion to their population. One third seats and posts be reserved for women (including those included in SC/ STs) ¹⁴. All reserved seats for women, SC/STs shall be allocated by rotation. State may reserve seats for other Backward Castes. All seats to be filled by direct election (except some ex officio like MP, MLA and Chairpersons of lower Tier to higher ones) to be conducted by independent State Election Commission.

To the single most important provision of the Act – Art. 243 G– PR shall have power for the a) preparation of economic development and social justice and b) implementation of schemes

 14. Why 1/3 and not to proportion to population strength like SC/STs ? The contention is that it is for fear of male opposition in Parliament and 1/3 may well be a starting point. The possibility is that it will be extended gradually.

for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to including those 29 items listed in the newly added Eleventh Schedule by the amendment. Here significantly economic development and social justice components are interwoven. PR should have adequate funds for carrying out functions and states will make necessary grants, assign revenue of certain taxes and authorise it to collect and retain certain revenue it raises.

1.5 Self Government Nomenclature. A few points as to the nature and prospect of self government status of panchayats may not be out of context. The 73 rd Amendment Act has explicitly broken new ground by conceptualising PR as 'institution of self government'. But at the outset it should be made clear that the Act has not provided all the panacea. And the Act, coupled with dubiety of States, has really compounded some of the proverbial problems of PR. The historical reality is that from 1959 PR has its existence without sufficient powers and there is no compelling reason or instance to expect that states will be generous this time. Newly added Eleventh Schedule (confusion still is whether it is mandatory minimum or illustrative only) lists 29 items to be devolved to PR but these are developmental and governmental indeed. The disconcerting fact is that lists of assigned and discretionary powers, as listed in existing State Acts, far upset obligatory functions of PR bodies. For instance, West Bengal Panchayat Act as amended up to 1992 has charted most of the functions of Eleventh Schedule as either assigned (Section 20) or discretionary (Section 19) functions of GP Tier. In several states most important functions are either not thought of or prescribed in entrusted list.

The 73 rd Act itself excludes a big geographical chunk in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, District Council System in Manipur, Darjeeling ¹⁵. This is hardly tenable if PR is self governing institution. Also the mandatory aspect regarding constitution of panchayats has not sincerely been followed either. The Act itself stipulated that within April 24, 1994 states had to reorganise respective PR bodies. But PR elections in Tamil Nadu and Orissa were held only in October 1996 and January 1997 respectively and Bihar is still flouting this mandate.

 15.25% geographical area of India is still outside of PR fold according to *PR – A Development Report 1996*. ISS. New Delhi. (P. 155).

As to the financial and personnel aspects of PR pitfalls are both proverbial and unanimously conceded. Moreover the horizontal intervention of PR in the vertical jungle has confused the whole arena (Bondopadhyaya & Mukherjee; 1993; 8). The stifling overhang of enormous and still now expansive center and state administrative structure is a serious impediment to PR autonomy. It is sharply pointed out ¹⁶ that large number of subject matter enactments not only create vast bureaucracy down to the village level but also take away even an iota of autonomy. What has substantially come about is that these local bodies are only deciding location of project sites and departmental authority implementing all schemes on their behalf. There is no move towards reduction of power/ of those administrative structure to provide adequate space for PR. No attempt is made to identify and amend numerous Acts which go against appropriate devolution of power and making panchayats authentic institutions of self government ¹⁷.

Though it is highly stretchable (Mukherjee; 1994) and connotation nowhere spelt out explicitly, the term self government should purport that 'partial' autonomy over the subjects decided and devolved by state government and having the power in deciding own priorities, meeting those out of own resources and more importantly all those without outside encroachment(s). Anything short of institutional existence, functional autonomy and financial viability would be debasing.

Truly indeed the Amendment has made substantial gain only in structural aspects of PR – such as creation and continuity. As to the fundamental part of decentralisation of meaningful power not much headway seems imminent. States have just observed mandatory modalities like structure, tenure etc. and to some extent reoriented powers of different PR Tiers by amending their existing Panchayat Acts. But the ideological or status part of the Amendment has not been incorporated in any of the conforming State Act so far. Weiner once noted that in decentralised society elected leaders do not like to share power with others. Lukewarm attitude of states in making PR well and truly self government is still substantial.

16. Ramachandran & Jain. 1993. *PR in Coming Years. A Background Paper*. Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF). New Delhi

17. *Annual Report*. Task Force on PR. October 2, 1994. RGF. New Delhi . (preface).

2.RESERVATION POLICY FOR WOMEN.

2.1 Political Position. The account of women in India – constituting 407.1 million or 48.1% of population – is shrouded in subordination, silence and hopelessness. The plain fact is that they are marginalised and have inferior socio economic and political status. “ The subjugation of women is a fact of our daily existence”(Reiter; 1975;11). In the socio cultural understanding, their entity is only for household chores, child bearing and rearing activities. They have to follow definite and rigid set pattern of social norms where they are to obey husband/ elders as their master or ‘deity’¹⁸. They are socialised in such a specific way where they feel proud “to be women, to be wives and to be mothers”¹⁹. Their role outside of family has never been accepted in the same manner as men’s. If the overall position of women is below par, rural women, comprising 77% of total women, have more obscure and desultory status in relative and widest sense..The normative socio cultural structure of agrarian society – 4/5 of total people spreading over 30 lakh villages of which 9/10 depend on agriculture – imposes rigorously unequal position to rural women. High mortality rate, low level of life expectancy, hunger, ill health, illiteracy, overwork and exploitation are usually their fate. They are forced to be confined to four walls of hearth and traditional value and trapped in stereotyped roles.

Of all the spheres, however, seclusion of women from political power is singularly striking right from the inception of state society (Omvedt; 1987; 991). It is disconcerting that women’s overall representation in political decision making has consistently been marginal throughout the whole world²⁰. Compared to men women have the following percentage of public positions worldwide ; 4% each in Heads of State, Cabinet Ministry , 5% each in senior positions in national policy making and Labour Union and 10.1% in Legislative seats. Alarminglly, participation trend is crumbling - from 14.6% to 10.1% in just five years. In 171 countries, of the total 35847 parliamentary members only 3626 (10.1%) are women in 1993.

18 .For details see Srinivas, M.N. (1942; 195). *Marriage and Family*. New York Company. Dube, S.C. (1955; 141) *Indian Village*. Routledge & Kegan. London. Dube, S.C. (1990; Chap. 13). *Tradition and Development*. Vikas. New Delhi. Kessler. 1976.. Moreover, their socio economic and political position are discussed in Chapter. 2.

19 Cormac. Cited in *Bhoite* (1987; 3)

20. For world scene see Rule Wilma (1994; 689). *Women Underrepresentation and Electoral System. Political Science and Politics*. Vol. 27(4)

Similar propensity is found for Indian women as well. On an average up to 1996, only 5.41% members of the Loke Sabha are women –highest ever share is 7.7% in 8th Parliament. Similarly, in Rajya Sabha up to 1991 women share is just 9.38%. In state Assemblies they have woeful 4% average. In the Council of Ministers in central government they are virtually absent, only in 1961 they could cross 10% share. It is surprising that when women participated en masse in the Freedom Struggle and comprised about 10% of those imprisoned, after independence their representation never touches the critical strength of 10% in any legislature. If this overall scene is seen against increasing number of women voters and near parity in voting, scenario really gets harrowing.

Even in ‘progressive’ state like West Bengal women representation is in no way better. Under Left Front (1977-96) out of total 1470 seats only 59 or 4% women got elected in Assembly. Only 9.5% women were elected from here to lower house of Parliament. In State Council of Ministers just 5.2% are women - highest number being 4 in 1996.

One point needs scrupulous attention. There is no one to one correlation between any single variable – literacy for example (CSWI; 1974; 289) – and women representation, thus any generalisation is hardly possible. To cite one example, Kerala women have the highest sex ratio (1032 per 1000 male), 10% more higher education rate, highest physical quality life index and they “had (have) more influence over their own lives but they did(do) not enter public life more notably than other Indian women”(Jeffrey; 1993;11). Even here women’s work participation has not increased – in fact declining from 19.71% in 1961 to 16.62 in 1981 – and between 1957 and 1991 women representation in Assembly has on an average been 3.32%, highest being 5.7% in 1981 and 1991.

Given the terrible track records for women in India one strand of thought argues that equal right (as propounded in the constitution) will gradually ensure ground leveling. To other, because of specific needs and requirements there should have positive discrimination to wipe out differences. Hardcore feminists emphasis that without drastic restructuring of the universal gender discrimination based on patriarchy improving women’s status is simply impossible. Writers having Marxist leaning favour grand design insisting on restructuring and allocating the ‘base’. In contrast, the participatory approach or grassroots development movement focuses on enabling process where change or development is determined and implemented according to

needs of women. Women Movement and Groups now, by and large, tend to accept the latter methodology as an adequate means to ameliorate the conditions of teeming millions. In this process Indian experiment is for positive discrimination as legal equality has not proved suffice.

2.2 Question of Reservation. Consequently it is discerning that emphasis on women question has undergone profound changes. The idea of passive beneficiaries of governmental programmes for so long is now transformed into the idea of them as “victim of change”(Jockes; 1987; 5). It is now resolved ²¹ that more and more women should take on decision making and women’s empowerment and full participation in all spheres are fundamental for achievement of equality, development and peace.

As noted already, 73 rd Amendment Act 1992 has provided 1/3 reservation of PR seats and posts for women uniformly since 1993. Reservation is essentially viewed as women’s empowerment (Country Report; 1995, Mohanty; 1995). Empowerment ²² implies an enabling process for deciding by themselves future course of action by entering into power structure. This externally induced process confers women access to power, scope to change existing power configuration and to get rid of gender related shackles or stereotypes and entrenched patriarchy. And now 7.5 lakh women as members and 80,000 as Chairpersons are expected in 2.5 lakh GP, 6000 PS and 500 ZP.

Specifically for rural local government, statutory compulsion has provided a new lease of life for women. However, question of reservation for women had been dealt with by others before. Kalelkar Commission on Backward Classes in 1950’s opined for special protective policies for women taking them as backward class. The Mehta Committee 1957 suggested cooption of two women each in GP and PS from among those who were interested in the works among women and children. The Mehta Committee 1978 (p.198-99) advocated that two women for each GP and PS would be included either through normal election or coopting those who secured highest number of votes in elections. The Committee on Status on Women (CSWI)1974 rejected reservation outright for parliament and legislatures but recommended women panchayats

21. As emphasised by SAARC Ministerial Meeting 1986, New Delhi and Beijing World Conference Draft 1995.

22. The concept “empowerment”, originally taken from the writing of Paulo Freire, indicates crucial and collective all embracing enabling process and a deliberate transformation and distribution of institutional base of power relationship in a given society. For detail see Batliwala. 1993 and Antrobus. 1989. For critical estimate see Mohanty. 1995. On the Concept of Empowerment. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 17 June.

at GP levels as an integral but transitional measure. But it is believed that the Committee implicitly concurred reservation as basic policy²³. In Section 3 of para 7.117 it ordained political parties to frame policy and sponsor – starting with 15% and extending gradually to the proportion of population – women in elections. If parties sponsor women to any extent uniformly it would be reservation by any yardstick. Rao Committee 1985 also spoke of ‘adequate representation’ and reservation as women are under privileged..

The question of reservation is truly a ticklish question having both proponents and opponents. Women in pre independent period²⁴ and veteran spokespersons still today scoff at this idea. In the Constituent Assembly all 11 women did not talk of it even when reservation for SC/STs was being drafted. But women fora today articulate demands for greater electoral share and even demand for reservation in employment is not uncommon.

The opponents argue that it is not “attuning with our tradition”²⁵ as it implies that women are inferior and as such need special protection. This positive discrimination may in fact hide the reality and ruin the sense of dignity and autonomy (Country Paper; 1985; 57). Their position is inextricably enmeshed with general socio economic and political problems. Without curbing or curing root cause of inability or apathy reservation would be like putting cart before the horse. It is likely to reinforce the separate identity and hamper women’s integration to society. In India both men and women’s organisations have played pivotal roles in improving women status²⁶ and the connotation that only women will be befitting for women cause will be dejecting particularly for many men. Reservation definitely is not a panacea. Without reservation Sweden, as in other Scandinavian Countries, has about 40% women in Parliament and Cabinet. Moreover, most women are already to share double burden of domesticity and subsistence works. Political responsibilities would make them still more overburdened. Moreover, It is not so easy and forthwith to change the perception and strategies of parties to whom “putting

23. Its arguments in rejecting reservation for Assembly seats seem not convincing. To it women status could better be informed by joint efforts and if it was granted other sections might demand it. But joint efforts certainly need more women and reservation for SC/STs continue despite strong anti reservation stirs.

24. A section of women demanded it but later on dropped it for national cause. *Majumdar* (ed.), 1979.

25. Despande, N. (1989; 57). Participation of women in Political System. *Kuruksheetra*. February

26. Sen, H. (1958; 39). Our Own Times. In Baig, Tara Ali (ed.) *Women in India*. Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India.

women for winnable seats means a loser, one issue candidate” and not consistent with concern for everybody (Barbara; 1983;171).

Without attending to root cause of oppression like patriarchy in party structure or ambivalence of state ²⁷ towards women’s cause, sudden interest in women participation in PR is suspected somewhere. Reservation could well be one deliberate sop to fend off complete control of PR by women as had been tried out in Maharashtra through All Women Panchayats. Kishwar ²⁸ argues that confining women in certain seats, while shutting out others practically, would ghettoise women.

When reservation was being provided majority of opposition parties were apprehensive about the motive (not principle) of the move. They (BJP for instance) suspected that opposition parties might be forefended by cleaver manipulation of seat reservation. Mitra ²⁹ argued that in West Bengal Left Front favoured reservation to help it pruning corrupt element without arousing any dissent..

On the other hand as women are woefully underrepresented their needs like health, water, child care have been utterly neglected in development decisions. Where women activists are few, lip services and tokenism may be the only product of women’s participation ³⁰. It is now submitted that quantitative increase in number of women can contribute in highlighting women specific concerns. With their perspective and priorities they can bring about qualitative change in political goals. Reservation invests them with power and responsibilities that are distinct in themselves. It helps evolve self identity or individuality. It is the first base or bastion to ensure that rural women get a share in ‘development decision and development cake’ ³¹. Reservation affirmatively ensures that a minimum number of women receive benefits (Faith; 1989; 16). From the women activists standpoint (Shah & Gandhi; 1991; 24) while reservation is neither reformist or panacea for women cause nor revolutionary it allows possibility of struggling from within power base and permits services for women’s struggle for survival.

27. Agnihotri & Majumdar.(1995; 1869). Changing Terms of Political Discourse. Women Movement in India. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 22 July.

28. Kishwar, M. (1996; 2892). Women and Politics. Beyond Quotas. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 26 October.

29. Mitra, Amit. (1993; 34). Changing Role of Women in Bengal Panchayats. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 2(4). However, reservation of specific seats has to follow certain rules and only dispensible constituencies can not be so reserved.

30. Newland. Cited in Kumari, Ranjana (ed.) (1992; 11). *Women in Decision Making*. Vikas. New Delhi.

31. Majumdar, V. (1989; 2796). Resevation for Women. *Economic & Political Weekly* .18 December.

There is always perception gaps between men and women and women factors should be harnessed for the better. In the Chipco Movement decision makers and women's concept of developmental activities are found clearly divergent³². In the field survey³³ it was found that men's obsession was ownership of land and employment while it was physical constraints and social issues for women. Tribal women, for instance, conceive forest as their limb in sharp contrast to general commercial tendencies³⁴. The 1991 survey in Australia³⁵ has showed that 64% respondent believe that men enter politics because of personal ambitions and monetary benefits. And 54% hold that women are motivated to politics by altruism and concern for community welfare.

Induction of women is also favoured for what may be called cleansing cause. It is usually argued that women display consistency, inventiveness, they seldom succumb to authoritarian style of behaviour, exercise positive influence over males by restraining, disciplining and improving behaviour³⁶. As mankind has evolved women come to play increasing part in the direction of affairs and women's advantage is sometimes in dexterity but especially in patient and perhaps in persistence³⁷. They are basically honest, have profound managerial skill and perfect in balancing family budget and these qualities should be tapped to manage the houses of panchayats and exonerate it from financial irregularities and corruption.

It is true that unlike western countries, women in India and other South Asian countries have a long tradition in public offices without acquiring acrimonious public debate. It does not of course reflect on status of women. But now positive state intervention is thought necessary for rural local self government because it would serve to inspire genuine grassroots leadership of the most labiated section of the society. At the panchayat level it is more demanding to participate and decide policy because it caters to overwhelming majority of women. All round problems of women are more marked here and intimately related to those who need them most. Statutory

32. Sharma, Kumud (1987; 46). *Women in Struggle*. Occasional Monograph. CWDS (Centre for Women's Development Studies). New Delhi.

33. Mukherjee, Neela. (1994; 10). Rural Women in PR Institutions. *Kurukshetra*. June

34. Majumdar, V. (1989; 28). *Peasant Women Organise for Empowerment*; the Bankura Experiment. Occasional Paper no. 13. CWDS. New Delhi.

35. Cited in Kanwaljit (1994; 23), in Jimenez (ed.)

36. Tishkov, Valeril. (1993; 2837). Women in Russian Politics. *Economic & Political Weekly* 18 December.

37. Young, J.Z. (1979; 575) *An Introduction to the Study of Man*. Oxford University Press. ELBS Edition.

reservation would increase conceptualisation' (Leighly; 1991; 198) and would be conducive to the development and advancement of rural women. Political empowerment is to be the surest channel for overcoming traditional socio cultural and psychological impediments. With the statutory stroke thousands of women have now assumed panchayat posts. Though there is no definite chart or design, they, in the main, are expected to contribute in highlighting their needs/concerns and heralding new direction of rural development with their priorities. The induction of women revolves around the expectation that they will assume public roles not as the general members of the community but as representative of the gender they belong. However, given the contemptible social, economic and political status and of course their first ever entry, the main contemplation should include whether and to what extent women have so far been able to fulfil socio political expectations and whether it is at all tenable that women can do justice to the enormous trust reposed on them.

3. THE PROBLEM.

Gandhiji apprehended that the problem" only commences at the point when women begin to affect the deliberation of the nation". So the statutory reservation may have strenuous consequences for this submerged half at least in the immediate future. Socio economic and political position of rural women are comparatively and categorically retrograding in all sense. Also direct involvement with public activities and accountability makes the roles of women panchayats even more delicate than any MP or MLA. As pointed out, women have generally remained averse to direct participation in politics. The question now is whether they are drawn or dragged into PR arena.

Being in the periphery for so long are they really enthused or will be able to contribute their mite? How they overcome socio cultural constraints? Women do not have autonomy or freedom in decision making even in families and consequently will they be puppets in the hands of males in decision making process of PR? In the face of 'structural subordination' and 'national neglect' is it not to ask them to climb mountain instantly and without preparation? Being minority in decision making (with 1/3 share) how much they will be able to carry forward the mandate in the face of engrained values? Will there be any misuse of reservation by grabbing it

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by rural elite or influential families? Will reservation yield different result than SC/ STs both in its nature and extent? Reservation would obviously upset existing pattern of role model both in the family and outside. How they will and to what extent they will be able to cope with domestic and public role conflicts? How males will allow/help women when to males women at best can provide only 'supportive services' in politics? In view of lack of resource, conducive social situation and absence of patronage and because of party based election in PR women induction and performance can only be ensured through 'ascriptive' channel of parties. Here the pertinent question will be the role of parties. It has several implications. It is harped that women would act as composite group to accelerate women development. On the one hand, empirical evidences indicate that women do not form women front and favour exclusive women issues. On the other hand, as party representatives, is it not likely that they will succumb to all embracing party ideology and the fate of women development will depend on party lines?

4.OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Now the context both of panchayats and women have undergone profound changes. Panchayats being conceived as institutions of self government are called upon to be involved in rural development both intensively and extensively. Women, hitherto unaccounted factor, are also integrated to these efforts entrusted additionally with imparting women's perspective and correcting imbalances in development decisions. The gut issue, thus, is how far panchayats itself provides the arena and to what extent women are likely to avail the opportunity.

We intend to probe the participation of women in panchayats with the following objectives in mind:

- 1) to assess their socio economic and political background,
- 2) to examine whether domesticity is any stumbling block to their participaton.
- 3) to ascertain the nature and extent of their participation in decision making process of PR. The problem, if any, they face because of gender factor or attitudinal discrimination. And how far they have precipitated women development in the present functional context of panchayats,
- 4) to highlight factors which overtly or covertly promote or prevent them from playing efficacious roles,

- 5) to take note of perception and assessment of general male villagers about women's participation and performance.

5. OUR APPROACH.

We approach the problem with an open mind and receptive spirit and believe that women's political role is a part of manifestation of their widest possible roles. Now panchayat system is a 'miniature political system' or inseparable part of wider political system. Its functioning is certainly conditioned and coloured by community values, beliefs and extra panchayat social relations. Regarding values and norms it needs emphasis that they not only limit women's induction but also their performance and it is one of the reasons why women in general have remained passive. Also changes in this aspect hardly keep pace with changes in material aspects of our life, thus often creating dichotomous role performance. Tersely, any evaluation of women's role in panchayats has to be related to 1) the socio economic and psychological settings in which they live and work, 2) the structural and more importantly functional process of panchayat itself, 3) their individual endeavour, 4) and as it is in political process, to the perception, encouragement or otherwise of political parties and for that matter men in general. All in all we consistently treat women as subject (not object) of the inquiry and sympathetically as we know that they are here for the first time and certainly require time and experience to acquire competitive edge.

6. OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTER.

The introductory Chapter pertains to evaluation of Panchayati Raj in India, especially to recent changes introduced to its structure and functions. After examining reservation policy for women in panchayat seats and posts and specifying research problem, the objectives of the study are pointed out.

From the findings of extensive literature on women, the overall position of Indian women is traced in Chapter 2. It deals with the present nature of women's participation in panchayats in particular. In view of research gaps, it also identifies need for broader terms of reference.

Chapter 3 gives brief overview of physical, demographic, social and political settings of the district selected for the study. Social and political position of women there are also sketched in between.

Details of research methodology adopted for the study such as the universe, selection of samples, research tools and techniques are specified in Chapter 4. Few points which need to be taken into account for proper understanding and extrapolation are also indicated.

The social and economic background of women panchayats are perceived in terms of women's own and their families in Chapter 5. Women's political experience and expertise are also elaborated. It essentially reflects the kind of emerging women leadership in panchayats.

Useful information as to why and how women have joined in panchayat posts can be found in Chapter 6. In three separate sections it analyses whether and to what extent domestic engagements deter women's panchayat performance, nature of reception of women in panchayats by male colleagues and preference of women themselves as to exclusive women development programmes.

Various facets of women's participation in panchayat decision making process such as the nature and extent of their attendance in meetings, its actual impact on decisions are detailed in Chapter 7.

Information have also been collected from few male respondents. Their perception of women's social standing and assessment of women's performance in panchayats are presented in Chapter 8.

Functional expanse of panchayats and political or party control over panchayat decision making are likely to condition (and somewhere control) performance of women as they are to operate within these frames. The last Chapter highlights such significant aspects which will help to grasp women's roles in proper perspective. For improvement of women's participation few suggestions have also been submitted for consideration.