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**PRIA**

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## **Women's Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions**

**An analysis of six states**

**(Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh)**

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## INTRODUCTION

Women all over the world have virtually been excluded from the realm of politics. "Although women constitute half the population, only 3.5% of the world's cabinet ministers are women, and they hold no ministerial positions in many countries of the world. All political systems, regardless of ideology, or form, routinely deny women formal political status<sup>1</sup>." A narrow definition of politics deems all those activities as political, in which political actors engage with conventional political institutions, such as political parties, parliament, trade unions, and governments. This definition is very limiting because it excludes arenas where women have played active political roles – the Nationalist struggle, the Tehbhaga movement, and the Telangana struggle against feudal exploitation, to name just a few. Within these movements, women stepped outside the confines of their home – their private space – and moved into the public space to take on issues and confront the sources of power that affected their lives.

"It is now a well recognised proposition in women's studies/movement that all spheres of lives involving any relationship is political, that many millions of women are silently waging a struggle against the patriarchal and feudal forces that seek to confine and contain them. That, however, weak a woman may appear to be, she has much political awareness, and that it is not the lack of political consciousness of her human or political rights, but the vicious circle, the trap into which she is placed and from which she is not able to extricate herself that is responsible for her low participations in formal politics<sup>2</sup>."

Therefore, politics has to extend to include the interdependence between the public and the private spheres. Whatever influences or affects women's identity and their roles in either sphere have to be considered political. If women's participation in the political sphere and their role in democracy could be viewed without the artificial divide between the public and the private, then we could begin to see the ways in which women have been part of the political life in this country.

Numerous reasons have been advanced to legitimise the lack of women within the political sphere – both within the Parliament as well as local bodies of self-government. Primary among them being – (a.) women cannot be equated to socially backward communities as women are not a homogeneous group, and (b.) women's interests could not be isolated from those of other economic and social strata<sup>3</sup>. Although that might hold true, women need to be active members of formal political institutions so that inhibitions arising from their minority status will disappear faster, leading to increase in political participation. The presence of more women in legislatures would possibly lead to changes in the direction of debates and policy. Yet, the presence of women within the formalised governance machinery of India has been singularly limited.

<sup>1</sup> Bisakha Datta, 'And Who Will Make the Chapatis?', *Stree* (1998)

<sup>2</sup> Susheela Kaushik, *Women and Panchayati Raj*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi (1993)

<sup>3</sup> *Towards Equality*, 1975

**Table 1: Representation of Women in the Lok Sabha**

YEAR	TOTAL SEATS	NUMBER OF WOMEN
1952	499	22
1957	500	27
1962	503	34
1967	523	31
1971	521	22
1977	544	19
1980	544	28
1984	544	44
1989	517	27
1991	544	39
1996	544	40*
1998	543	43
1999	543	547

\*The President nominated a member

Over the last 47 years, only 5.83% of seats in the Lok Sabha has been won by women. These few women gained entry into the formal world of politics either through dynastic advantage, or because of their proximity to the male leaders, or because the political party exhibited political acumen in selecting a woman candidate on caste, class, and religious lines. In most political parties, the women members are by a large thin on the ground if not invisible in the actual decision-making bodies and rarely influence the more significant party policies. Most often, they are relegated to the 'women's wing' of the party, and made to concentrate on 'women's issues' such as dowry and rape.

The women's movement in India hardly gave any priority to the issue of women's participation in electoral politics before this decade. This issue was discussed at the 1990 National Women's Conference held at Kozhikode in Kerala. The possibility of forming a women's party was also discussed. Subsequently, many NGOs and networks were formed around the issue of women's political participation. "But autonomous women's groups still remain uncertain whether a continuing struggle within formal political structures is more effective than the struggle for women's rights from outside the system<sup>4</sup>." If women are marginalised in politics at a national and state level, they were practically invisible at the village level, which are more tradition bound. The mandatory creation of space for women at the panchayat level came about with the passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act in 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Bisakha Datta, 'And Who Will Make the Chapatis?', *Stree* (1998)

## WOMEN AND PANCHAYATI RAJ

Although *panchayats* existed in India long before British colonial rule, the formal system of local self-government — Panchayati Raj — came into being after independence. When the Panchayati Raj was introduced in 1959, very few women contested or got elected. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) had recommended that besides the 20 members of the Panchayat Samiti, there should be two women, 'who are interested in work among women and children', as co-opted members. A similar provision was suggested with regard to the village *panchayat*. Following this recommendation, a few states did make provisions for women's representation. The co-option principle was undemocratic, however, and was also dependent on the largesse bestowed by political parties or the dominant social group. Therefore, women's representation became mere tokenism.

In 1976, The Committee on the Status of Women in India recommended the establishment of statutory all-women *panchayats* at the village level, with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children, as a transitional measure. However, this recommendation has never been adopted statutorily anywhere, although such all-women *panchayats* emerged in some places for short while.<sup>5</sup>

In April 1993, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act (Amendment) came into force, and accordingly one third of the total seats in the state's local self-government institutions were statutorily reserved for women. Along with this reservation, there were also other changes brought into the Act, notable among them being:

- *Panchayats* would be considered political institutions in a truly decentralised structure
- The *panchayat* would be accountable to the *gram sabha*, constituting the voters of the village/villages
- There would be direct elections to all three tiers of governance
- There would be a separate election commission as well as a finance commission for *panchayats* in every state
- It was obligatory on the part of the centre and the state to provide adequate funds for the *panchayats* to enable them to function properly.

At a simplistic level, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment assured women a place within political processes, but what it did, more importantly, was to create the possibility of change within the political discourse in the country. Women, hitherto, were exposed to a style of governance created and led by men; and all their reference points for institutionalised politics was the framework that had been structured around male needs and aspirations. Whether they were co-opted and in the process corrupted by the dominant political structure or their electoral victory, and subsequent responsibilities empowered them, was not of concern at that point. What was of importance was the fact that women were legally empowered to occupy seats of power and control that went beyond the confines and decisions taken within the home.

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<sup>5</sup> See Bisakha Datta, 'And Who Will Make the Chapatis? A study of all-women panchayats in Maharashtra', *Stree* (1998)

## THE STUDY

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), New Delhi, has undertaken a number of initiatives on Panchayati Raj in general and women *panchayat* members in particular with its network of regional support organisations (NCRSOs).

Over the last 15 years, PRIA has promoted people-centred development initiatives within the perspective of participatory research. As the cherished mission, PRIA endeavours to create opportunities of sharing, analysing and learning among formations of civil society. It is engaged in independents and critical analysis of societal trends, issues of developmental policies and programmes to enable constructive dialogue across diverse perspectives, sectors and institutions. The programme on local self-governance with its five components – training, research and documentation, micro-planning, information dissemination, and influencing government – is a step in the direction of grassroots development.

Research findings at the micro level suggest that women are coming out from the shadow of male dominance. With the passage of time and interventions in the form of training and orientation, elected women representatives are taking on their responsibilities in a coherent manner. The primary objective of this study is to provide data to evaluate and analyse the status of women in Panchayati Raj as well as to understand the reality of the impact of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment on rural women's lives.

The six-state study of women in *panchayats* represents a microcosm of what is happening at village, block, and district levels all over India. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has enabled 7,16,234 women to enter the political arena; and some of them have even created a political space to be able to voice their needs, concerns and priorities, while many of them are still trying to grapple with the power and authority thrust upon them. The experiences of the women – often their first taste of political power – throw up certain issues, patterns and concerns that need to be addressed.

**Table 2: Sample size of six-state study**

STATE	SAMPLE SIZE
Haryana	124
Himachal Pradesh	133
Kerala	156
Maharashtra	107
Orrissa	123
Uttar Pradesh	136
TOTAL	779

## FRAMEWORK

This study primarily concerns itself with elected women representatives, at all three levels, across six states. It attempts to place within perspective the scenario within which women have stood for elections and won, and the social and political climate within which they operate. Since this is the first term that women have served within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), there is also the effort to place on record the odds against which women have struggled and succeeded. Throughout the study, the data

has been analysed, along with profiles of serving women members, to provide a background for the data collected.

*Several issues were examined as part of this study:* Some of these issues were women's role within PRI and their growth as political beings post-election / assumption of power. Has there been a change in women's status and overall position in society, along with their ability to influence and control situations at the inter-personal level? Has there been a change in power? What factors contributed to their internal and external growth, and was it just a structural change that enabled the change, were also some of the issues discussed.

There are two types of power – that which is derived from men, and power that is derived independently of men. The former consists of the power that women may enjoy because of who their fathers and husbands are. The latter includes women's ability to control decisions about their productive and economic activities. So how far have women moved? While they are being elected, they could be denied fundamental autonomy in the personal or 'private' sphere, which would impinge on their public sphere. This would hold true if we accept the maxim, 'the personal is the political'.

Physical mobility might not be restricted in terms of not being able to step outside the family, but they would very rarely have the freedom to move around without their father's or husband's knowledge and consent, even if it is in the company of other women. The study also attempts to analyse the empowerment of the elected women representatives as operating within three dimensions:

- Personal:** Developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression
  
- Relational:** Developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it
  
- Collective:** Where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than could have been done alone

## METHODOLOGY

To take into account the regional variations in development, states were selected on the basis of their Human Development Index (HDI) for the year 1994<sup>6</sup>. The HDI for India has been calculated to be equal to 42.79. The two states of Uttar Pradesh (35) and Odisha (37) are below the national average, while Himachal Pradesh (50), Haryana (50), Maharashtra (55) and Kerala (63) are above the national average. These states represent the geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of India. Data collection was through a structured questionnaire that was administered to elected women representatives of all castes and at all three tiers of governance. Women and men conducted the interviews. Although a structured questionnaire was used, the respondents interpreted the questions without any prompting by the interviewer. The qualitative data was collected informally with the interviewer chatting to individual women at their homes. These discussions covered a whole range of issues which went far beyond the narrow confines of panchayats and their governance. Very often, the women had very personal stories to tell about their lives, which have not been included within this study. However, much of the analysis owes a lot to these conversations.

Very rarely were problems encountered in data collection. The women were more than willing to talk and share their lives. There were instances of the husband joining in the discussions and speaking for his wife. He was always given an ear and then the woman was interviewed separately. What was amazing was the ease with which women were able to talk about the politics of the village, along with their life and the rich contribution they made in enabling a greater understanding of the issues of women in *panchayats*.

## FINDINGS

Many of the women interviewed during the course of this study were first time entrants to the field of formal politics. Added to this is the fact that this is the first term that is being served after the passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. The data reflects a lot of the indecision and inability of the women to assert control, as well as the prevalent socio-economic inequities due to the dominant patriarchal structures.

## THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

**Table 3: Decision to contest the elections**

Informed by	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh
Self	6.5	18.5	10.3	4.9	9.1
Husband	12.1	6.7	13.5	46.3	35.8
Other male Relative	12.9	3.0	1.3	15.4	25.4
Female Relative	1.6	0.7	-	0.8	-

<sup>6</sup> K. Srinivasan and Abusaleh Shariff, *Towards Population and Development Goals*, Oxford University Press, 1997



NGOs	-	0.7	9.6	2.4	0.6
Others	61.3	51.1	51.3	8.9	3.4

*Data not available for Maharashtra*

*\*Others include a whole cast of people including people in community*

The decision to contest the elections was most influenced by the husbands, especially in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Odisha. When the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment was passed, very few women were aware of what these elections meant, and therefore the decision to stand for the elections was thrust upon them by others. Conversations with the women revealed that a large percentage of them came from families where male members had been elected representatives of the *panchayat* previously. Therefore, the decision to field their wives had more to do with retaining the seat and the power within the family.

Himachal Pradesh had a larger percentage of women who contested the elections because they felt that they would be good candidates. This could be attributed to the fact that women in this area have fewer restrictions on them and literacy levels in this state are higher than the national average.

Dev Kumari Thapa, a Ward Member of Khaniyara Panchayat, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh, stood for elections on an unreserved seat and won. "I would have contested for the post of the Pradhan, but the seat was reserved for a Schedule Caste woman."

Lakshmi Devi is the Sarpanch of Pakasma Panchayat in Rohtak district, Haryana. This *panchayat* is dominated by the Jats and the Sarpanch is also from this community. The Gram Panchayat has 16 members (excluding her) of which six are women. The Sarpanch is 45 years old and illiterate. She contested the election since it was a reserved seat. Her husband was elected as a Panch and is the Upsarpanch of the Panchayat. He is the de facto Sarpanch since Lakshmi Devi attends no meetings and is not involved in any of the *panchayat* activities. People in the community address him as 'Sarpanch Sahib' and even the Block officials treat him as the Sarpanch.

Quite a few of the women who were elected have strong political connections through marriage or their maternal family. They represent the upper class within the village. The Sarpanch of Kosli Panchayat, Rohtak district, Haryana, is Urmila Yadav. She is a widow with two children – a son in the Air Force and a daughter who is married. Her husband was in the Air Force too and she has travelled considerably outside the village. She studied up to Class X at her maternal home in Indore.

Urmila Yadav lives in her husband's ancestral home in Kosli village. In this village, each family has one male member serving in the armed forces and can boast of numerous Victoria Cross and Military Cross awardees. Urmila was a Ward Member of this Panchayat prior to her election as Sarpanch. She is also the President of the Kosli branch of the Akhil Bhartiya Mahila Parishad and an active member of the Congress.

The family was also instrumental in preventing women from filling their nomination papers in spite of the reservation introduced. Neela filed her nomination for Kallapanahalli Panchayat, Kariamangalam Block, Karnataka, with the strong backing of the women's *sangham*. Some of the men in the village decided to use her son to get her to withdraw her papers. Neela's son, an educated unemployed youth, was offered a job in the local milk co-operative on the condition that his mother would

withdraw her papers at the last minute without the knowledge of the *sangham*. Succumbing to pressures from her husband and enticed by the prospect of her son getting a job, Neela had withdrawn her papers, when it was too late to take any corrective measures. It is another story that Neela's son did not get the job<sup>7</sup>.

Men from Kallapanahalli also tried to keep Nagarithinam from contesting the elections by influencing her husband. They pointed out that if she got elected she would start to disrespect her husband. Convinced by this argument, the husband tried to persuade her from contesting the elections. When she insisted on pursuing her political interests, he drank heavily and beat her up<sup>8</sup>. Within the community of elected women representatives there are also those women who stood for elections because their circumstances forced them to take that decision.

Surekha Dhamishte, former Sarpanch of Vadgaon Dhairi, Maharashtra, is presently a member of the Zila Parishad. She is a widow with three children. After the death of her husband, her in-laws denied her ownership of the property. Her family, who live in the same village, supported her. She approached the Sarpanch for help, but he did not intervene with her in-laws. Surekha approached an organisation working for women and they assisted her in filing a case in court. After this incident, she was determined to acquire power so that she could assist other women in distress. She became the Sarpanch in the next election. She faced a lot of opposition while working, but enlisted the support of a political party. After her success as Sarpanch, she contested for the post of Zila Parishad member and won<sup>9</sup>.

#### **Tale 4: Contested because of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment**

Would have contested on unreserved seat	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh	Maharashtra
Yes	17.7	38.8	25.0	12.2	10.9	14.0
No	82.3	59.0	73.7	87.8	89.1	86.0
N.A.	-	2.2	1.2	-	-	-

Source: PRIA research

Women have entered into the political arena largely because of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. Wives and daughters were pushed into the governance machinery only because the seats were reserved for women and the men of the family who traditionally held sway over local politics found their power slipping away from them. Local communities and *mahila mandals* (women's groups) also mobilised women into contesting the elections. This reservation also paved the way for many families who were hitherto far away from any decision making.

Son Devi, the Sarpanch of Jakhala Panchayat in Rohtak district, Haryana, is a Dalit and heads an area with different castes living together. She is illiterate, wears a veil (*ghunghat*) when interacting with the men of the village, and yet is able to achieve all

<sup>7</sup> F. Stephen, *Empowering Women in Gram Panchayats Through Training* (to be published)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Seema Joshi, *Study of Women PRI Members in selected Gram Panchayats in Pune, Thane, Raigad & Latur districts of Maharashtra*, Society for Participatory Research in Asia

the work a Sarpanch is meant to. She travels to the Block Office, interacts with the government officials, gets roads made in her area, arranges for tube wells to be dug, meets with the men to discuss the need for more veterinarians in the area, and is very confident about the role she has to play. She had no knowledge about the Panchayati Raj systems prior to the elections and only contemplated standing for the election because the seat was reserved.

Shimburi Devi is the Panch of Bhangdoli Panchayat in Alwar district, Rajasthan. She is a folk singer and has attended numerous awareness camps organised by NGOs. When the post of the Panch was reserved for a scheduled caste woman, the local community asked her to contest the election<sup>10</sup>. Sushma Mahajan, Pradhan of Dohab Panchayat, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh, stood for the election on her husband's insistence. The previous Pradhan had been her brother-in-law. Sushma had never been involved with any village activity and her election as Pradhan has pushed her into public life. She now has to manage the household as well as the affairs of the village. She is called out at all time of the day and night to solve village disputes. It is true that her husband does offer advice and guide her occasionally, but the woman has now grown out of the traditional role of being confined to taking decisions within her household and has made the quantum leap to addressing developmental needs of the community.

A lot of the women interviewed, felt that they had won this election only because the seats in their particular area had been reserved for women, and that they could not stand for election from a general seat. Some of them thought that only men could contest the elections. Not being exposed too much outside the family, women feel inadequate in addressing larger issues of community development. There is a constant fear that they would be unable to deal with the rigours of the double work – at home and outside.

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION

**Table 5: Women's sources of information**

Most interaction with	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh
Father	-	-	4.5	4.1	-
Husband	55.1	52.3	74.4	62.6	70.6
Father-in-law	2.6	5.5	-	0.8	8.1
Brother-in-law	3.8	4.7	0.6	1.6	5.1
Brother	-	-	7.1	0.6	-
Son	15.4	3.9	1.3	4.1	9.6
Others	-	-	12.1	-	5.1

*\*Data not available for Maharashtra*

As discussed earlier, many women stood for elections because the seat was reserved for a female candidate. Most of them were unaware of the roles and responsibilities of the post they contested. Areas where there were NGOs or government machinery keen on educating women about their rights, the candidates

<sup>10</sup> Institute of Social Sciences, *Panchayati Raj Update* (August 1999)

had some knowledge prior to the election. Most of the women have been trained after the election.

In this scenario it is only obvious that the woman's greatest source of information for the world outside her home as well as PRI functioning would come from an immediate family member and that too male. In all the states, the husband was the most important source of information, followed by the son. There are many reasons for this. Social interaction with men is very limited for women in villages. Male relatives become their de facto source of information about the world, especially their husbands. Patriarchy obviously has a big role to play in this, because the wife is expected to respect and adhere to the wishes of her husband. For men, mobility is not an issue, and therefore, they are able to gather information from various sources. Illiteracy also has an important role to play. Many men have mastered the rudiments of their mother tongue and are, therefore, able to access the newspapers or whatever written word reaches them. They then transfer this knowledge to the women. It is not necessary that accurate and value free information is passed on each time. In many villages, the men gather around the *chaupal* or the village common to trade information. During this process, information is continuously altered. By the time the women receive the information, it has passed through so many changes that there is very little resemblance between the original thought and what they receive.

Her husband, who was a Panchayat Secretary for many years, assists Murti Devi of Bisoha Panchayat, Rewari district, Haryana. She recognises his support and admits that she would have been unable to work had it not been for the fact that her husband was there to assist her.

The Pradhan of Abdullapur Panchayat, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh, Santosh Kumari is a 40-year-old woman with a high school education. She is quiet and unassuming and seemed to know every little thing about her village. She stood for elections, primarily because the seat was reserved for women, and admits honestly that she will not contest the elections again. Her husband works in the Block office and has been a Panchayat Officer. It is fairly evident that he is the one who advises her. The family is well off. They run a grocery shop in the village and have other petty businesses too.

Under ideal circumstances, both the husbands could play a decisive role in enabling their wives to learn more about the systems, and in turn play a decisive role within the *panchayat*. However, after meeting Santosh Kumari, it did seem as though she was a mere figure head, and all the decisions were being taken elsewhere and then voiced through her. Other than being the main source of information for the elected women representatives, husbands and sons also play the role of protector. Very often, when women have to go for meetings or move out late at night, they are accompanied by male relatives, who in most cases are their sons or husbands. During the course of the study, many women could only be met in the presence of a male member of their family – a son or husband – even when the interviewer was a female.

Usha, 25, is the Sarpanch of Gavgada village in Maharashtra. She is a post-graduate in economics and is married with two children. Her husband is a high school teacher. She lives with her husband's family. The interview was conducted in the presence of her in-laws. Usha contested the elections at the behest of her husband and father-in-law. She said that she was fully supported by them in her work. Later, Usha took the interviewer to a friend's house and there the truth was told. She said that she is hampered in her work as Sarpanch, because she is not allowed to take any

independent decisions. She has to consult her husband and father-in-law each time. The fact that she is highly educated is not taken into account at all<sup>11</sup>. However, depending on husbands for information need not necessarily be wrong. If one were to acknowledge the fact that women would turn to those they trust the most, then the husbands would be expected to provide the support. What ends up happening is that this assistance does not come without strings attached. Men see this opportunity as one where they can both influence their wife as well as the community. For the woman, the fight to retain autonomy becomes too fraught and she sacrifices her position for the sake of harmony at home. There are numerous women who have been assisted by male relatives and have moved ahead to take control, ownership and responsibility for their position themselves.

## PROFILE OF ELECTED CANDIDATES

Most of the women who stood for elections and won were in age group of 25-40. At this age child bearing and rearing responsibilities are considerably lessened. It is interesting to note that there are very few single women who have stood for the elections and won at the age of 20-21. An interesting case is that of Rani, the Sarpanch of Khaniyara Panchayat in Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh.

The seat of the Sarpanch in Khaniyara Gram Panchayat was reserved for a scheduled caste woman and the community encouraged Rajni to contest the elections. She comes from a large family and has completed her graduation. When she was elected, she was 22 years old. Initially, her father supported her in her work and now she manages all the activity on her own. The other members of the Panchayat are much older, yet she is able to hold on her own among them. What actually works in her favour is the fact that she can manage all the activities of the Panchayat, including all the running around since she does not have any family responsibilities.

In Haryana, approximately 70% of the elected women representatives were found to be over 40 years of age. In the context of this state, where the average age of marriage is 18 years, most of the elected representatives fall into the category of mothers-in-law. By and large, daughters-in-law have been kept away from the political process and unmarried daughters do not find themselves in the voters list in this state. Rigid social norms and taboos prevent the daughters-in-law from sitting and speaking in public. In fact, these women are prevented from attending the Gram Sabha, and even if they do, they are not encouraged to speak.

Conversely, 45% of the women representatives in the Panchayat Samiti and 60% in the Zila Parishad level are below 40 years of age. The women have occupied the posts of members and chairpersons at these levels. They were also found to be far more articulate and involved in panchayat affairs compared to their counterparts at the Panchayat level. The reasons for this could be that the women who contested these elections were educated, were active in social work in the area, had previous links with political parties through the men in their family, and therefore, had support from a political party as well. At the Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti levels, there is little involvement with Panchayat level activities. Therefore, it is possible that older women were nominated and elected at the Panchayat level, because the men saw

<sup>11</sup> Seema Joshi, *Study of Women PRI Members in selected Gram Panchayats in Pune, Thane, Raigad & Latur districts of Maharashtra*, Society for Participatory Research in Asia

them as non-interfering and their age prevented mobility, which favoured male rule in the long run.

The nature of work at all three tiers of governance varies greatly from each other. There is far more involvement with village level politics at the Panchayat level and it considerably reduces as one moves upwards. A younger, educated and mobile woman would be more threatening to the male power lobby in a village than an older woman. If control were to be maintained by men, they would rather have women who are not that active and would not question authority. In addition, there are lesser chances of personal attacks on older women since they would have proved their adherence to tradition by being wives, mothers and grandmothers.

Bishoha Panchayat in Rewari district, Haryana, can boast of a 90-year-old Panch, who is deaf and immobile! The only possible reason for her election could be the fact that she comes from a family where her brother was the Sarpanch of the village for 35 years and her niece is the current Sarpanch.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE ELECTED WOMEN

**Table 6: Change in status\***

Change in Status	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh	Maharashtra
Yes	19.0	37.0	79.5	29.3	75.4	75.7
No	81.0	63.7	20.5	68.3	24.0	24.3
N.A	-	-	-	-	0.6	-

\*Status as perceived by the women. No value was attributed to this word by the interviewers.

With the exception of Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, all the other states show that there has been no change in the status of the women elected. If **Table 6** above were to be linked with **Table 7** below, it would become very clear that it is only in Kerala that women are able to do their work effectively as members of Panchayat bodies, and therefore, they perceive a role conflict. For most women in these states, they have not fully understood the roles and responsibilities of their posts, and therefore, the amount of time they have to spend on non-household work is minimal. In Kerala, the elected women perceive a role conflict because of the nature of the work they do within PRIs.

It takes them away from their traditional roles. A number of them also talked about the multiple roles they are required to play in society – wife, daughter-in-law, and elected representative of the people. Status has to be viewed as that bestowed upon women by people outside the family as well as their rise in status within the home. Work in the *panchayat* might improve the way in which other women view her in her community, but within the home, she would still be juggling her multiple tasks. In quite a few states, the women expressed their desire of having a daughter in the house. This could be viewed as an attitudinal change, resulting from the change in women's status, but the truth is that women want daughters so that the household work would get done while she was away at work outside her home.

In this context, status is being seen as a multi-dimensional entity or as woman's overall position in society, and the ability to influence and control at the interpersonal level. Normally education and employment are the two indicators that are used. But

better education or engagement in paid economic activity may not necessarily be indicative of / lead to greater autonomy or better status.

## THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DIVIDE

**Table 7: Post-election role conflict among women**

Role Conflict	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh	Maharashtra
Yes	38.2	12.7	57.7	7.3	12.1	27.1
No	61.0	87.3	42.3	91.1	87.9	72.9
NA	0.8	-	-	1.6	-	-

Source: PRIA research

The role conflict is most keenly felt only in Kerala because it seems to be the state where women have taken on their roles as elected representatives with the knowledge of what their responsibilities include. The general lack of knowledge and the fact that in a lot of cases the men have been directing the activities, makes most women feel that there is not much conflict with her family. There are, however, numerous women who stated that they find it extremely difficult to juggle their activity as PRI members and the work that is expected of them at home.

Dhaneswari Devi, Pradhan of Kajlot Panchayat, Himachal Pradesh, says, "More time is spent in *panchayat* related activities. This is resulting in the neglect of my family life." Shushma Mahajan, Pradhan of Dohab Panchayat, Himachal Pradesh, says that she does find it difficult to complete all her household work and then do work for the Panchayat. She feels that her family life is suffering, a statement endorsed by her son who will not eat his food until his mother has served him.

Indubai, 35, is the Sarpanch of Markal Panchayat in Maharashtra. Her's is a nuclear family. She works as an Anganwadi teacher and her husband is a farmer. She contested the election on her husband's insistence. "I am burdened with my household work as well as the Anganwadi work and hardly get time to work as a Sarpanch. My husband takes care of my responsibilities in the Gram Panchayat and I feel there is nothing wrong in it. He informs me of the work<sup>12</sup>."

Usha, the Sarpanch of Gavgada village, finds that every issue and decision of the Panchayat is linked to family prestige and honour. She is expected to protect the family status first and attend to her duties as Sarpanch later<sup>13</sup>. Quite a few of the women did not perceive a role conflict because of the supportive environment at home. Other members of the family or the husband have stepped into take over some of the tasks of the woman, thereby enabling her to do her work.

The father-in-law ably supports Asha Sapkal, the Sarpanch of Khapkal village, Maharashtra, in her work. She is extremely active in the village and has also been a member of the Gram Panchayat. Her father-in-law is a *Kirtankar* (a folk artist who

<sup>12</sup> Seema Joshi, *Study of Women PRI Members in selected Gram Panchayats in Pune, Thane, Raigad & Latur districts of Maharashtra*. Society for Participatory Research in Asia

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

presents religious and mythological tales through songs) and he has used this medium to convey new values and create awareness among the villagers<sup>14</sup>.

Dev Kumari Thapa, is a Ward Member of Kahniyara Panchayat, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh. She is 48 years old and her husband is an ex-army man. She does all the work that is expected of her as a Ward Member. Her son assists her in her household chores.

## PERCEPTION OF SELF

**Table 8: Social conditioning**

Would have done better if she were man	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh	Maharashtra
Yes	70.0	33.8	41.7	82.1	78.5	66.4
No	29.2	64.7	57.7	17.9	21.5	33.6
N.A	0.8	1.5	0.6	-	-	-

Source: PRIA research

With the exception of Himachal Pradesh and Kerala, women from the other states feel that they would have been better at their jobs if they had been men. This assessment of their work has more to do with social conditioning than their ability to perform and fulfil tasks.

If one examines the roles played by the elected women representatives, it is evident that they have been successful in doing all the jobs that men have been doing within *panchayats* and more. But the recognition they have received for their activities has been so limited and there is a constant refrain of how certain tasks cannot be fulfilled by women.

The Pradhan of Khaniyara Panchayati has to travel a lot to Shimla, the state headquarters, since a public interest litigation was filed against slate mining in the Panchayat. This requires that she is out of her home for days on end and is negotiating with government officials as well as power lobbies within her village. She does not find this difficult and is determined that she will win the case so that her *panchayat* can restart the mining and provide employment to the local community.

Kailoshobai, the Chairperson of Nahad Panchayat Samiti, has had to fight a land grabbing group that was taking over *panchayat* land. She received threats to her life, but continued the war unabated and has been successful in reclaiming the land. A male member of a *panchayat* in Haryana said that women are unable to resolve disputes because they cannot use muscle power against the warring groups. In another state, the men felt that women find it difficult to access the Block office, because their villages are far away from the Block headquarters and any mode of public transport is almost non-existent.

A ward member of a *panchayat* in Himachal Pradesh recounted a story of a time when a policeman came to her house and said that he had matters to discuss with her husband. The policeman waited for a long time and the Ward Member kept asking him what the issue was. After a couple of hours, the policeman deigned to reply to her query and said that he had to get some papers signed. She discovered

<sup>14</sup> Ibid



that the papers had to do with her work as Panch and yet she was not being consulted. She eventually signed the papers. The policeman was amazed that she was illiterate and was aware of the matter he had come to discuss. She felt that had she been a man, he would not have shown this kind of disrespect and would have discussed the matter with her immediately.

For most women, the greatest fear is that men in the community would spread malicious rumours about them if they worked late or interacted with other men in the community.

The Pradhan of Rachialu Panchayat in Himachal Pradesh said that according to the rumours in the village, she was supposed to be having an extra marital affair with the Panchayat Secretary. She also added that she was fortunate that she had an understanding husband who did not take these rumours seriously.

Traditionally, women have been seen as the upholders of the family's virtue, the guardian of traditions, the feminine counterpoint to the aggressiveness of the male. Whenever they have done any tasks that have questioned these assumptions, they have been assaulted or deemed immoral. What has never been questioned are the assumptions, because that would mean a re-examination of traditions and everybody feels very threatened by any attempt to undo existing power structures. The work done by women is no different from that of the men in the *panchayat*. It is just that very often women have to transgress their ascribed gender roles, and therefore, appear radical. This feeling of being different from the norm has been internalised by the women, and therefore, they tend to feel that had they been men, they would have been better at their jobs. What remains unsaid by the women is that the social structures need to change, which would then enable them to perform their functions effectively.

As Kamal Thakur, Panch of Solu Panchayat, Maharashtra, said, "Women are going to suffer from male dominance when they express their real abilities. I have no other assets, but my brain – my ability to think. I use it to confront men and organise the women."

Dev Kumari Thapa, Khaniyara Panchayat, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh, stood for election as a Ward Member from an open seat and defeated her two male rivals. She is active, vocal, articulate and very confident. She works hard and is well liked by her community. Yet, she says that being a woman is a handicap. "At times, I am stopped from doing something the way I want to do it." "There is much that men can do that a woman cannot. For instance, I cannot go out to intervene in a quarrel in the middle of the night. A man can," said a 48-year-old woman, who is a matriculate and has travelled out of her village with her husband, an ex-army man.

## INVOLVING WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY

**Table 9: Inspiring other women\***

Encouraging other women	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh	Maharashtra
Yes	60.3	93.3	69.9	45.5	82.8	89.7
No	39.7	6.7	30.1	54.5	17.2	10.3

\*As perceived by the elected women representatives

All the women we met during the course of the study felt that their very presence within the PRI was a sign to other women that they too could aspire to such positions. Some of the women have actively worked through Mahila Mandals and informal meetings at making women aware of their rights as Gram Sabha members. Kamal Thakur, Panch of Solu Panchayat, Maharashtra, often discusses the role of the Gram Panchayat in the Mahila Mandal. She informs the women about how to access various schemes for their benefit, as well as their role within the Gram Sabha. She has earned the confidence and support of women in her community through these interactions<sup>15</sup>.

## RECONTESTING THE ELECTIONS

**Table 10: On contesting elections again**

Will contest again	Haryana	Himachal Pradesh	Kerala	Odisha	Uttar Pradesh	Maharashtra
Yes	41.9	66.7	55.1	43.1	79.1	66.4
No	58.1	24.2	44.9	56.1	20.9	33.6
N.A	-	9.2	-	0.8	-	-

Source: PRIA research

Majority of the women felt that they would like to re-contest the elections. The reasons for this were very varied:

- Almost all the women saw a growth in personal self-esteem because of their election.

- The training given to them as elected members made available information and knowledge about the *panchayat*, their village and the world around them and opened up many avenues.

- Election to the *panchayats* has resulted in many women being approached by political parties. Women, who see their future within governance systems of the country, align with political parties so that they can go on to contest the elections at the state level. Quite a few of the women interviewed did see the possibility of standing for elections at the state level.

- Their role as Sarpanch or chairperson has enabled the women to overcome some of the social barriers, which has made them more confident.

- The world of politics has become de-mystified, making women aware that they too can work with men and become effective leaders.

Shimburi Devi, Ward Panch, says that she is no longer afraid of the BDO or, for that matter, of the junior engineer, Gram Sewak or the Panchayat Secretary. She does not cover her face with the *ghunghat* and is able to discuss matters with them freely.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

She feels that the training programmes organised by NGOs instilled self-confidence in her. She would like to contest for the post of Sarpanch in the next elections<sup>16</sup>.

However, some women did indicate that they would only stand for election if unopposed. This came from quite a few women Sarpanches who felt that they had worked hard to improve the standard of life of the villagers and, therefore, the community should re-elect them. There were also women who thought that they would not be able to contest the next elections because the reservation would be lifted and then only men could stand for elections. This was a very prevalent notion and their seemed to be a lot of diffidence among the women to contest an unreserved seat. It was almost as though they felt that no one would vote for them if there were a man competing against them.

There does seem to be an apparent contradiction between the fact that the women felt that they would have been able to discharge their duties more effectively if they had been men and their reasons for re-contesting the elections. If they were truly disempowered as women representatives then they would not contemplate standing for elections. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that the women do not see themselves as ineffective leaders, but they do find it difficult to effectively play the multiple roles thrust upon them. It is in this context that the personal and public life merge into each other for women. Men are able to compartmentalise their lives and are supported in this by social norms.

## CONCLUSIONS

Why and how were these women chosen to stand for *panchayat* elections?

With the passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, seats within *panchayats* were reserved for women and the villagers found themselves having to nominate women to contest the elections. The selection of candidates was based on arbitrary reasons.

- Proxy candidates for their husband's or a male member of the family who had occupied that seat earlier
- Was an active social worker and was felt to be able to represent the community's needs
- Where the position was reserved for a Dalit or a Scheduled Tribe candidate, the selection was made on caste/tribe lines
- Women from the rural elite were preferred
- Age was a visible criterion in many places. Women who were above the age had greater mobility, faced less sexual slander, did not have the workload of the younger women or could assign their work to other women at home
- Literate women were preferred, but given the low figures for women's literacy in the country, this was a challenge
- The woman expressed a desire to contest the elections

### ***Programmes undertaken***

One of the main reasons for advocating the entry of women into politics is the expectation that women would raise issues that were traditionally ignored in politics – health, education, violence, etc. Through this study, however, it was found that most of the women addressed almost the same issues that men traditionally addressed through the *panchayats* – building of roads, latrines, sinking tube wells, repairing of

<sup>16</sup> Institute of Social Sciences, *Panchayati Raj Update* (August 1999)

bridges/buildings. There did not seem to be any innovative approach to addressing other needs of women. Women's inequality or social customs remains unchallenged to a large extent through *panchayats*. If there has been any dent in these fields, it has happened more as an offshoot of the presence of women in *panchayats* rather than as a conscious effort made by the women to redress the problems. This could be because the models of good leadership at *panchayat* level have been those set up by men and they have no alternative models or political culture to emulate or promote, but are under constant pressure to fall in line and conform to the existing norms. Instances of women raising the issues of health or violence through the *panchayat* do exist, and this has been possible because of the support of an intervening agency or the training that has been provided to the women.

### ***Formal and informal mechanisms used for the implementation of programmes***

The women, in most cases, have used existing government schemes for implementation of all programmes at the *panchayat* level. What has differed was the method by which they have turned their attention to the crucial issues facing their *panchayat* or village. Dhaneshwari Devi, the Pradhan of Kajlot Panchayat, invited the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh to visit her village. The road to Kajlot is a mountain track and is extremely hazardous at night since the mountainside is not illuminated. Since the nearest medical centre is far away from the village, the aged and the medically ill have a problem accessing the road. The government has not built the road since some of this area falls within the purview of the armed forces who have not given security clearances for the road to be built. The Pradhan organised a public ceremony for the Chief Minister and instead of presenting any decorative memento to him, the village gave a beautifully framed note to him. The note just said, "*Hamen sadak chahiye* (we need a road)". It is another matter that the road has still not been built and that the Chief Minister has also changed!

Chailo Devi, the Pradhan of Kand Bagiyara, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh, needed to draw the Chief Minister's attention to the fact that her village needed a road and certain other amenities. Repeated efforts to meet him met with no response. She learnt that the Chief Minister would be passing by her village enroute to a meeting. With a few other women from her village, she decided to block the path of the Chief Minister's cavalcade. The security officials tried to move her off the road, but she was adamant that she would only move after she had spoken to the Minister. When the Chief Minister finally came to her, she told him that when she was administered the oath of office, he, as Chief Minister, had exhorted all the newly elected members to do their duty for the people who had elected them. She felt that building a road was crucial for the community that had elected her and if he did not heed her request, she would submit her resignation letter. The Chief Minister had no option but to listen and the road was sanctioned.

Most women accessed the Chief Minister's fund or the relevant Member of the Legislative Assembly's (State) fund. This was done either directly or through other male members of her family after meeting the concerned individual or finding a personal connection to the individual.

### ***Programmes introduced by women in PRIs***

Elected women representatives have worked on issues focussed on the needs of the community, which have included issues of water, electricity, education, pensions for aged and disabled. These are not just areas of concern for women; they involve the entire community.

Shanti, Sarpanch of Madhopur Panchayat, Kushinagar district, Uttar Pradesh, is a 36-year-old teacher. The graduate teacher belongs to the Other Backward

Community category in a village predominantly inhabited by the Scheduled Caste category. Under her leadership, the Panchayat has been able to gain control over a piece of *panchayat* land that had been encroached upon by the village Youth Club run by Nehru Yuvak Kendra. She called a Gram Sabha meeting and placed the records that proved that the land belonged to the *panchayat*. The Nehru Yuvak Kendra took the matter to court, but the case was resolved in favour of the *panchayat*. This was achieved because of the unstinting work put in by the Sarpanch and the Gram Sabha.

The Sarpanch conducts and presides over the Gram Sabha meetings twice a year. In addition, informal Gram Sabha meetings are held every month and people come to discuss their concerns. Under her leadership, the Gram Sabha has become an effective forum for addressing development issues in the Panchayat and for enabling interaction between the Panchayat members and the community<sup>17</sup>.

A 1990 study shows that 33% of villagers surveyed in Gujarat said that the one issue that attracted the attention of their *panchayat* was education. Another 33% of the same villagers said that ensuring a regular and clean drinking water supply was given top priority by their *panchayat*. This was in a male dominated *panchayat*<sup>18</sup>.

Where there have been NGOs working or elected PRI members have been part of an organised women's movement, the issues raised by the members have included issues of health, sexuality, domestic violence, etc. RUWSEC, an agency working in Chingleput district of Tamil Nadu is working with PRI members to improve the primary health care centres run by the government. Their areas of work include addressing issues of power within the home and outside, as well as the lack of control women have over reproductive health issues<sup>19</sup>.

Shimburi Devi, Ward Panch of Bhangdoli Panchayat, Alwar district, Rajasthan, when asked what she has done for women, replied, "The majority of the people in Bhangdoli belong to the Scheduled Castes. They work as agricultural labour. Almost all the men are addicted to liquor as it was freely available in the village. This created problems for the women. They sought my help. I requested the police to stop the unlicensed liquor shop. But nothing happened. Then the women staged a *dharna* before the shop. It worked and the shop was closed down."

### ***The importance of women within governance mechanisms***

Despite the similarities between traditional male-headed *panchayats* and the new ones where women have roles to play, many rural women believe that women within PRIs will benefit them greatly. Most importantly, they provide role models for other women.

For issues that border the personal – such as violence and health – women in the community would find it easier to access *panchayats* headed by women or where there are women Ward members.

Of course, it is not necessary that the benefits of having women in *panchayats* would benefit all women, since women are not homogenous entities. They are also divided

<sup>17</sup> *Rhetoric or Reality: Women's Participation and Leadership in Gram Panchayats: A study done by PRIA and NCRSOs*, August 1997

<sup>18</sup> M. Shiviah and K B Srivastava, *Factors Affecting Development of the Panchayati Raj System*, National Institute of Rural Development, 1990

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Deepa from RUWSEC

on class and caste lines. Personal rivalries, relationships with other family members, male influence and the pressure exerted by the community would also determine the level of benefits that women would receive. Unless the elected women representatives make an effort to include all women in all processes, some women will continue to remain beyond the purview of possible benefits.

It would be naïve to assume that women in the *panchayats* would be able to raise all issues. There are a variety of pressures and factors that influence the woman's ability to raise issues. Foremost among them being the influence wielded by their husband and the family. Issues of dowry, domestic violence, reproductive health care and alcohol affect women the most, but men have an active role to play. Raising these issues would require a great degree of confidence within the women, since it would inevitably be seen as a threat to the existing traditional roles thrust upon women.

Attempts to meet the practical needs arising out of a gender division of labour like securing access to land, water, fuel and so on benefits the family without confronting male interests and are welcomed by men. Strategic needs arising from women's attempts to confront gender roles, division of labour, alcoholism and domestic violence usually confront male interests and are resisted.

Issues that challenge existing power systems will only be raised if the woman has – (a.) understood her own internalisation of oppression, (b.) she is interested in using her position to alter the nature of the community she lives in, and (c.) she has the courage to take on the community. Being elected and understanding her role within the *panchayats* does not necessarily equip her to take on sections of the society that are anxious to maintain the status quo.

There is also an assumption that all women are incorruptible and will always work for the benefit of others. What of those who have visions of going into politics at higher levels? They will not be willing to tackle issues that will cause them to be unpopular with the electorate. Or what of women who are willing to accept money or other favours in exchange for not raising an issue?

## **PARTICIPATION BY WOMEN**

The participation of women within the political processes at the local self-governance level varies a lot depending on the context within which they are live and work. At the *panchayat* level, some women ward members and *sarpanches* are vocal and get their work done. Numerous instances have been cited throughout the report. Yet the active participation of women within the village still remains limited. Very many areas still have caste *panchayats* where women have no voice and public life is denied to them. Leadership has been thrust upon women in the limited sense of being an elected representative, but beyond that there is not a positive environment for women.

Although there are elected women representatives within the *panchayat*, the participation of women within the Gram Sabha remains a totally male affair in most cases. This is not the fault of the women, but is indicative of the social milieu within which these women operate.

- Participation in a Gram Sabha meeting held in the afternoon or early morning could mean that a poor woman would lose her wages for the day. Depending

on the season, women cannot drop their work in the fields – sometimes an hour away from the village – to attend meetings.

- Men collude together to prevent women from raising any point for discussions at meetings.
- Government officials, in spite of knowing that all the villagers have the right to attend the Gram Sabha and participate freely, come with their own agenda and very often do not allow the women to speak.
- Depending on where they reside, mobility is severely restricted due to the unavailability of transport.

Numerous instances have been cited where the Sarpanch's husband conducts the meeting and takes the decisions and the woman is just a figurehead. In the recently concluded Gram Sabha meetings held in Haryana (October 2, 1999), observers noticed that the rules for conducting a Gram Sabha were violated. In district Fatehabad, numerous meetings were presided over by the Panchayat Secretary or the husband of the Sarpanch. Women who came to attend the meeting were not allowed to raise any concerns and were asked to affix their thumbprint onto the register. This is in spite of the fact that a number of meetings were held with the women to apprise them of their roles and responsibilities<sup>20</sup>.

Interactions with a lot of women *sarpanches* revealed that the Panchayat Secretary, who in most cases is a man, or the Up-Pradhan, interferes a lot in the meetings and very often does not allow the woman to conduct the meeting and address issues and problems of the village. During the course of this study, the members of the Khaniyara Panchayat were met during one of their monthly meetings. The young woman Sarpanch ably conducted the meeting and was heard by the other members. The Up-Pradhan of the Panchayat was the first to greet us and wanted to know how he could help. If allowed, he would have been the source of our information about the *panchayat* rather than the actual Pradhan.

The Panchayati Raj Act still remains a mystery to most women and men. Certain basics are known – elections are held once every five years, the Sarpanch is the local administrative head, there are reservations for women. Beyond this not much is known. Very many women are still under the misconception that women can only contest the election on a reserved seat. They do not know that it is mandatory for the Gram Sabha to be held twice a year (or four times a year in the case of some states). Elected members learn from the Panchayat Secretaries – if they are lucky – or from their male family members. Even if they do get information, a lot of unlearning and learning goes on simultaneously. The Sarpanchs tend to learn because they have to run the *panchayat*, while the Panchs remain removed from a lot of the activity.

It is not enough to say that women are not aware of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment or that there is not adequate participation by women in *panchayat* activities and meetings. It is essential to understand the reasons for this apparent lack of involvement. Rural women almost completely lack the freedom of movement. Traditions and customs bind them down. Travelling out of the village on her own is unheard of and in the company of men other than her immediate family members is sacrilege. In addition to these hindrances, the lack of basic infrastructure also becomes a problem. Very many villages are not directly connected with main roads and women have to travel many kilometers before they can avail of some form of transport. There is also no

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<sup>20</sup> Personal conversations with staff of PRIA, who were observers at the Gram Sabhas conducted

guarantee that the concerned official will be present in the office when she gets there. In case she has to wait at the office there are no basic amenities available – toilets, drinking water, waiting room, etc.

Illiteracy is a major hindrance for almost all the women and combined with the lack of mobility, they are rendered rather incapable. Sarpanches who cannot access the financial statements or written directives from the Block are dependent on their members for all information. Women, too, have internalised the fact that because they are illiterate they would be unable to participate in meetings. Social customs and taboos further restrict women's participation in *panchayat* activities. Women have to keep their face covered, they cannot speak if their elderly male relatives are present in the room, unmarried and married women cannot interact freely with men, they cannot travel on their own – a long and endless list. For these traditions to change, women have to fight established patriarchal norms and very often, these battles take too much out of them. In many cases, men actively aid the continuation of these traditions so that women cannot overcome these barriers. There are numerous women who have done so, but they are more the exception rather than the rule.

## EMPOWERMENT

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment created a space structurally for women and the impact of this can be measured in terms of the number of women who have contested the elections across the country. What is difficult to define, or even measure, is the empowerment of women because of the Amendment.

If empowerment is seen a process by which women overcome the challenges of the patriarchal system within which they live, then it is difficult to maintain that the Amendment has achieved it for women. What has emerged through the study is that women have felt empowered at different points through their experiences of governance and this has been at various levels. At a personal level, a number of them have challenged their roles as mere care givers and have entered the public sphere and worked along with men. Elected women representatives were unanimous that they have definitely gained some prestige by winning an election but were, in most cases, unable to quantify that gain. The act of sitting on a chair, affixing their signature on an official paper, interacting with the village community consisting predominantly of men, getting work done through government officials, dealing with finances – all of this is empowering.

In terms of social recognition and respect, a great many of them have had to leave aside their personal concerns and take on the needs of their community and village, and this has led to an increase in their own ability to handle issues. In addition, it has made the constituency look up to them. Women within the community have seen a woman Sarpanch and have felt that this is a role model they could emulate. Young girls in the village are watching the lives of women around them being transformed and are eager to learn and emulate their mothers, aunts, and other female relatives. Most women have mentioned their increased access to knowledge, information and awareness as a major gain for themselves. Mobility has also increased in a number of cases and with it a confidence has crept into their lives. What is difficult to measure is the impact upon the personal lives of these women. For some, the power equations within the household has changed with the men of the family taking on more responsibilities of household chores and respecting the decision making capacity of their wives. What has been of critical importance is the fact that women within *panchayats* have, to some extent, been able to perceive the ways by which they have been denied their rights. This form of a critical gender consciousness has



only come about because of their involvement, albeit peripheral in some cases, within the political machinery at the village level. They have also had to interact with the other women in the village to understand their needs as well as to retain their support in the community.

The fact that a large number of the elected women have been illiterate and have had to face constant comments on it has ensured that they now take the education of their daughters seriously. Since empowerment is a process, then the present elected women representatives of *panchayats* represent the start of the process. They have been around only for five years, a short period to record impressive gains. It is still too early to comment on the efficacy of the Amendment to alter the political consciousness of women, but a beginning has been made and there can only be movement forward.

## IMPLICATIONS

Reservations for women within PRIs have paved the way for the entry of women in the country's political system from the grassroots level. But if this has to be of value to women, it is critical that efforts are made to include them actively at all levels of decision making as well as provide them with the information and knowledge that is required to make them better planners. Illiteracy is one of the main problems that affect women's capability to acquire information. It would be futile to suggest ways in which that can be overcome since the government and planners are aware of it and are making efforts to alter the situation. What needs to be done, however, is the creation of methods and a pedagogy that makes learning interesting and fun for women.

Training then becomes an integral part of the mechanisms that need to be adopted to enhance women's participation within governance. Over the years, there has been countless programmes – both government and NGO sponsored – to make women representatives aware of their rights and responsibilities. These trainings have provided the women with information about PRIs, but in many cases it has not addressed the issues of gender inequality or challenged the existing socio-cultural norms. For any training to have a transformative impact on women's lives, it is crucial that the training is rooted within the framework of women's empowerment.

Women's empowerment is, "A state of being that reflects a certain level of critical consciousness about external realities, and an awareness about their internal thought construction and belief systems that have a bearing on their well-being in terms of gender and social equity. It also refers to a state of determination to use one's physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources to protect, nurture and sustain values that guarantee gender equity at personal, household, social, political and other institutional levels.<sup>21</sup> This definition identifies transformation of values as a core attribute and includes within it transformation at a personal as well as a public level.

Therefore, women have to be provided with an analysis of the situation they are in as well as an understating of the mechanisms of government functioning, along with the rules and regulations of the Panchayati Raj Act. For this form of a training to be successful, it is crucial that the trainers themselves are aware and concerned about

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<sup>21</sup> F. Stephen, *Empowering Women in Gram Panchayats Through Training* (to be published)

gender issues and share the goal of empowerment of women and marginalised communities.

Training can be effective if it is integrated within the lives of the community and, therefore, a possible vehicle could be the *Mahila Mandals* or women's groups. Women are not working in isolation and it is imperative that the other women are part of this process. If elected women representatives are going through a transformative process by which they are questioning accepted beliefs and norms, it is necessary that other women within the community do the same. The idea behind these training is the creation of a critical mass that will support and form the base for a change in the culture and functioning of political institutions. In addition, women entering the political system within the next couple of years will be accountable to and supported by a mass based women's movement.

It is not only the women who need an understanding of the socio-political structure, but also men. Therefore, they have to be included within the gamut of training too. An effective way of including the youth of the community and creating collective awareness is the formation of children's *panchayats* at the village level. This would introduce the concept of Panchayati Raj at an early stage and enable them to be better leaders when they grow up.

At the national level, after 52 years of independence, there are only 47 women representatives out of a total of 543. This is in spite of the fact that the percentage of women winning elections is going up. At the village level, in terms of their sheer numbers, there are many more women who can be mobilised to become effective leaders and work on issues hitherto untouched by men. For that to happen, however, a political culture has to be developed, which will view women as individuals capable of governance and not just as wives, daughters or daughters-in-law of politically powerful men.

## CASE STUDIES

The six case studies documented present the reality of the world of women in PRIs. All the issues discussed in the study are recounted in their entirety. These 'her' stories have to be taken into account by women, planners, development practitioners and political parties if any substantial changes have to be brought into women's lives. Although most of these stories come from Madhya Pradesh, they could very well be the voices of women from the other states of India or other parts of the world.

### Case Study 1

Balukhedi is a Panchayat in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh. In terms of population, this is the largest Panchayat in this district. Because of its proximity to Sagar, numerous colonies and new housing estates have come up in this village.

With the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, the Sarpanch's post was reserved for a scheduled caste woman. Shrimati Durgabai was elected Sarpanch on the basis of her quiet demeanour and unassuming nature. She has studied up to Class V and is the mother of six daughters and three sons. Durgabai was totally unfamiliar with the working of the Panchayat and stood for the elections only because her husband and her family encouraged her. Her husband's family is very active at local levels of governance – being a Block member, and mayor of the Sagar municipality.

The Balukhedi Panchayat consists of 21 members including the Sarpanch – 12 men and nine women. The panchayat owns the block of shops on either side of the main

highway and earns revenue through the auction of these shops. In addition, it raises money by charging a toll tax on the usage of the road. Various government schemes are also accessed for the village.

Few months after the elections, a controversy arose in the *panchayat*, which completely polarised its members. The issue centred on the auction of the shops, the collection of toll tax and the usage of the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana money. The members of the Panchayat accused the Sarpanch of misappropriation of funds – in 15 days' vouchers worth Rs. 95,000 were filed and they felt that she was refusing to address the charges. In addition, members of the Gram Sabha also felt that the Sarpanch did not present the expenditure statement to the village and nor were decisions regarding work and finances taken with the consent of the villagers. Durgabai was also accused of preventing the no confidence motion against her from being presented in the Gram Sabha due to technical reasons. Most people felt that their grievances were not addressed at the Block or Zila levels because of the Sarpanch's contacts.

Durgabai feels that all these accusations have been levelled against her because she did not give a percentage of the total money received by the Panchayat to the other members and because she is a woman. Members frequently asked her to get them money for development work within the Wards and she centralised the procedure so as to prevent any form of corruption. She has done numerous development work for the village like the building of roads, electrification of the village, got the Balukheri village Panchayat to be declared a '*nagar*' or town Panchayat since the total population exceeds 20,000.

The local people, who earn their livelihood through labour or from small businesses, feel that the Panchayat is full of prosperous people and, therefore, do not feel connected to the Panchayat at all. The people who have moved into the apartments and colonies that have recently sprung up are not concerned at all with the politics of the Panchayat, or in its functioning. They contend that they earn much more than the Panchayat can ever do and, therefore, do not look to the Panchayat for any support. Durgabai was elected as Sarpanch because of her quiet and unassuming nature. The people in the community assumed that she would not take her responsibilities seriously because a Sarpanch's job requires a lot of interaction with people. The job has forced her to be active and take decisions that could affect some groups negatively. Hence the community now feels that she is not the quiet person that they knew and elected. On the other hand, Durgabai feels that she has learnt a lot after her election.

### **Case Study 2**

The Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh organised a Mahila Sammelan in Bhopal where chairs were laid out for the Ministers and mats were laid on the floor for elected women representatives. When the meeting began, one of the women representatives stood up and questioned the Chief Minister, "You keep talking about women and women's equality. You talk of reservation for women and we are in politics now, the people have elected us. Is there a shortage of chairs in Bhopal?" The next day chairs were brought in and the Chief Minister thanked the woman representative for having raised the issue. The woman who raised this question was Rummebai Invati, a 37-year-old member of the Kurai Block Panchayat in Seoni district, Madhya Pradesh. She was elected in 1994.

Rummebai, a Gaud tribal, lives at Pathrai village in Seoni district. She is married and has three daughters and two sons. Her husband mainly earns his livelihood by working in the fields. When she got married and came to the village in 1972, she was

the most educated among all the daughters-in-law of the village. She was encouraged to study in her maternal home and very often she was so engrossed in her studies that she would forget to do her household work. One day, her mother asked her to give her some water to drink and Rummebai ignored her because she was busy reading. As a result, her mother became angry and beat her up. Upset with her mother, Rummebai stopped going to school and before she knew it, she was married off.

The entry into *panchayat* level politics was relatively simple for her. She had gone to the house of the Sarpanch during a meeting and started reading a notebook that noted the names of the people who were employed in some local project. The Sarpanch grabbed the copy away from her, but decided that he would suggest her name for the post of a Panch during the next elections.

Rummebai got elected, but did not have a clue as to what post she was elected to, her role within the *panchayat*, which party she belonged to, and so on. "I worked as Panch for many years and when elections were declared in 1994, the seat in the Kurai Block Panchayat got reserved for a tribal woman. Everyone nominated my name and I was elected unopposed. Initially, I was overcome with a feeling of a great load, since I had no idea what I was supposed to do. But I felt that if people have vested their support and belief in me, I ought to work for their benefit.

"With my election to this post, a sense of enthusiasm and dedication was borne in me. I would walk to the Block office to find out the dates of meetings and when I attended them, I would raise the issues of the nearby villages as well as women's issues. People started appreciating my work and my confidence grew. As a result, I would end up working late hours at the Block office and coming home late at night. The previous administrative officer understood my problems and would ensure that the official jeep would drop me home after a meeting or he would accompany me home. The distance between my house and the Block office is quite far, so he would send the jeep to pick me up on a couple of occasions. Initially, everything went off well, but slowly rumours about my character began to crop up in the village. People started talking about me. The conditions worsened and the jeep stopped coming. The Sarpanch started taking me for the meetings on his motorcycle. Sometimes he would drop me or the Secretary would. Maybe the Secretary did not like my going to these meetings and talking to the men. One day while going for a meeting, he overturned the motorcycle and I fell down and broke my leg. I was laid up for two months. Slowly, I stopped receiving any information about the meetings.

"The situation got worse. My husband had tuberculosis and was always confined to his bed. We had to rent the outside room to the Patwari to earn money. He used to help me once in a while. This increased the rumours about me. My name got linked with him. My brother's paternal cousins objected to this linking of names and then to teach us a lesson, they cut our crops and broke our house. The news spread to the police station, the Tehsil and to the Block. These rumours can be heard today too. These incidents really shook my family up. My daughters failed their school exams. I stopped going to the meetings. I thought I would receive some support from the Block office, but the previous administrative officer was transferred and the new officer was not bothered whether women attended the meetings or not. Now I am not even informed about the meetings.

"When we had just been elected, each Block Panchayat Member was to be given Rs. 1 lakh for doing work within his/her respective *panchayats*. The announcement was made and before I could get access to the money, I was made to inaugurate a

building that had already been built some time ago. I realised now that this was done to disgrace me.

“You must remember that I entered politics and showed a lot of courage by staying on. It is not easy being a woman. It does not make a difference because I am an Adivasi Gaud. The men say, ‘If you go, who will cook our food?’ women should have an equal status with men. What will happen to all of us? We will have to form organisations to support us. Digvijay Singh was right when he said that men would one day have to fight. I don’t want this to happen to us,” says the head of the Caste Panchayat of that area.

### **Case Study 3**

Thirteen kilometers from the Gohad tehsil headquarters in Bhind district, a winding path leads off the main highway for 3 km. This path leads to the Chamhedi Village Panchayat and headquarters. This Panchayat has 13 Ward Members and they are all women. The Jatav community is the majority group in this village. Land ownership is in a few hands and since there are very few livelihood alternatives, most people are dependent on agriculture for their living.

In 1994, the post of the Sarpanch of the Chamhedi Panchayat became reserved for a scheduled tribe woman and the community elected Shrimati Ramshri Bai. She is a 65-year-old widow who is illiterate. She is dependent on her son to do the entire running around for her as well as to assist her in her work. When her husband was alive, her life was limited to household chores and working in the fields, while her husband interacted with the village. After her husband’s death, she had to take on a slightly more active role within the village, but she never ever thought that she would become the Sarpanch.

In the first year, work within the Panchayat went off rather smoothly. The Sarpanch and her son maintained the accounts of the Panchayat as well developed working relationships with Block officials. Meeting a number of officials increased her self-confidence. Slowly differences began to crop up between the Ward representatives. People in two neighborhoods began to fight as to the placement of the new road that was to be built by the Panchayat. The Panchayat Secretary began to fudge the accounts, as a result of which she had to face problems at the time of the audit of the accounts. The Panchayat transferred the Secretary. The person got involved with powerful people in the village.

Two years after the election, the state government declared that the ownership of the mines of minor minerals would pass on to the concerned *panchayats*. This news was publicised through newspapers and television. The villagers were very happy since Chamhedi possessed a mine of stone chips as well as a contract for bones and leather. The Panchayat Members as well as the unemployed youth of the village felt that the village would now have earnings because of this new ruling. Till then the mines as well as the contract was given on lease to contractors by the *Khanij* department. The Panchayat called a meeting to discuss the details about this new law and to decide what would be the criteria for selection of contractors so as to increase the income of the Panchayat as well as provide employment for the village community.

According to the Sarpanch, details of this meeting was leaked to the contractor had held the contract for both the mines as well as the leather and bones till then. They stormed into the meeting and said that no one else would get the contract. The Sarpanch protested against this and she was physically manhandled and abused by

the contractor and his supporters. The matter was reported to the local police station, but it took a very long time for the case to be registered. The Sarpanch received repeated threats from the contractor. The police took no action. She went back to the police and registered her complaint. No headway was made and the Sarpanch realised that she would only find recourse with the law if the case was moved out of Bhind, and hence she went to Bhopal. The Chief Minister was met and he passed on a directive to the collector to see that appropriate action was taken. Still nothing happened.

The Sarpanch felt that nothing would change and in some senses she felt completely cheated, because no one was taking her position seriously enough. As a strategy, they approached the newspapers and got the case publicised and decided to go on a fast to call attention to the troubles that their *panchayat* was facing. On the day, the Sarpanch was to go on a fast, the contractor and his lobby surrounded her house and shot bullets in the air and threatened everyone. As a result, the fast did not happen since everyone in the village was very frightened of the contractor and their muscle power. She went back to Bhopal to follow up on the case, and in the meanwhile, the contractor was able to pass his application in the Panchayat.

Bhagwan Singh, the Sarpanch's son, is very upset with the whole incident. He feels that he worked with his mother so that she would have some support and so that no one would take advantage of the fact that she is illiterate. "Reservation in the *panchayats* began and my mother got elected. The moment we started doing work, the powerful people in the village started protesting. Because of muscle power and the threat of guns, our own supporters do not come forward to work with us. Our witnesses have been pressurised to withdraw their support by putting them under the purview of the Harjjan Act. We are tired of fighting all the time and being worried about our lives. All the officials promise to help us, but no help is forthcoming. We thought we would go on a fast in front of the Collector's office, but before we could do so, all the people who were supporting us were threatened."

The Ward Members in Chamhedi Panchayat do not know what to do or whom to support. They are of the opinion that in spite of Panchayati Raj, nothing has really changed and it is still the government officials who have maximum control. Although the government has transferred the mine ownership to the *panchayats*, the officials would like the contractor to retain control.

The elected women representatives feel cheated. Although they are called for meetings, they are not allowed to speak. All the male members of the *panchayat* take the decisions and the women are merely asked to sign on the papers. If the women ask questions about why they are being made to sign, they are shouted at by their husbands at home. A lot of them feel that they do not understand why they have been made members if no one is willing to listen to them.

Shrimati Ramshri Bai is very disheartened by the entire process. She feels that there is no value to the post that she has been elected to. Allegations about it being her son who takes the decisions is roughly brushed aside by her. "My son only

.....  
The fields – looking after their fields and animals, but the women themselves do not consider this as work. About 11.02% work on their own fields or do agricultural labour for others, 8.47% women stay at home but will go off to do agricultural work for others if the need arises, 3.39% do not own any fields, and therefore, are dependent on agricultural labour. These women very often have to migrate in search of work.

About 55.93% of men work in the fields and 7.63% do not own their own fields and are dependent on agricultural labour. About 14.41% of men have jobs and 16.10% work on fields as labour.

**Table 11: Gender-wise income break-up**

Income	Women	Men
Less than Rs.300	39.83	8.47
Rs.300 – Rs.600	27.97	46.61
Rs.600 – Rs.900	11.86	20.34
More than Rs.1200	2.54	7.63
No income*	13.56	5.08

*Note: All figures are in percentages; Source PRIA research*

\* In the case of women the figures shown indicate those women whose income is considered as part of the family income and in the case of men, this percentage of men have no income at all.

#### **In the context of the elected women representatives:**

- About 29% of them come from families with some form of political connections – either to the caste or village *panchayats* and 63.49% come from families that are not politically connected. These women have entered politics for the first time.
- Most of the women have stood for elections on the insistence and encouragement of their community (22%) or their husband (35%). About 55.96% of the women were very excited after having won the elections, but are conscious that nothing has really changed for them. Nearly 30-35% women know that although they have been elected they never go for any *panchayat* meeting and it is their husband who represents them at all meetings.
- Many women have no idea about their rights and responsibilities as Sarpanch or Panch. They feel that although their family supported them at the time of the elections, they have not done anything after that to explain the procedures to them. Quite a few of them feel that their only role within the *panchayat* is to affix their thumb impression or sign on papers that are presented to them. Most of them are illiterate and are dependent on the Panchayat Secretary or their husbands for information.
- About 25.42% women notice and remark on the change within their family after having been elected. They manage both the home as well as go for Panchayat meetings, as a result the people within the household have started respecting them a little more. Nearly 72.88% women said that nothing has changed for them within the family after their election.
- Approximately 36.44% women find it difficult to manage both their homes as well as *panchayat* meetings. About 61.02% said that their election made no difference to them, since they were not allowed to attend any meetings by

their men. The men of the household attended these meetings on their behalf.

- Nearly 44.07% women said that they would not encourage any woman to stand for election and 43.22% said that they would not re-contest.

**Reactions of the elected representatives to the panchayat functioning and their own roles:**

- “We are just called Panch and Sarpanch; it is our husbands who do all the work. It is their job and let them continue to do it.”
- “The men go out and meet people, therefore, they learn a lot. Women stay at home and, therefore, do not learn. If we do not have knowledge, we cannot work.”
- “Earlier my husband would accompany me to the block office, now I go there on my own.”
- “People in the village come to me with their problems and ask for solutions. Now I can sit with men and talk, something I had never thought would be possible.”
- “I was suddenly asked to stand for the election by my family. If it had not been a reserved seat, I would not have stood.”
- “I have gained nothing by becoming a Sarpanch. I have no special responsibility not do I earn any money. My job is just to sign and I do that.”
- “Women speak their minds; they do not worry about what other people are thinking or what is right and wrong. Men think too much before they speak, in fact they cover up what they really mean. Now that the government has given the opportunity for women to speak, we should take advantage of it.”
- All the men in the meeting are the elders of the village or relatives, I can't remove the veil (*ghunghat*) from my face, let alone speak. Anyway, even if I did speak the men would ignore all that I said. The men always put us down.”

**Male reaction to the elected women representatives:**

- “The government has forcibly reserved seats for women, therefore, they have to be elected. It will not benefit anybody, since they do not know what is to be done. After all we will have to continue to do the work.”
- “Women should be looking after the household. She does not understand the workings of the Panchayat, therefore, it is better that she stay at home. Even if she does go out, she has to manage the household too. If she can manage both, then let her try and do so.”
- “In spite of being elected as Sarpanch and Panch, the women do not want to do any work.”
- “It will take time for women to be good at their work. After all, a child too has taken the support of someone's hand before they learn to walk.”



### Case Study 4

The Pradhan of Kajlot, Dhaneshwari Devi, was elected on a woman-reserved seat. She has lived in the village of Chandmari (also known as Prem Nagar) since her marriage in the 1970s. Her husband owns a confectionery in Mcleodganj, just a couple of kilometers up from Chandmari along steep, winding roads.

Dhaneshwari originally contested the Pradhan's seat at the urging of her husband and friends. She already had a reputation for being a committed social worker and Mahila Mandal member in her village before she entered politics. Before her election, the same man (and later his son) had been Pradhan of Kajlot for over 25 years. Because the seat had been set aside for a woman, the erstwhile Pradhan was unable to run for another term in December 1995. Rather than urging a female member of his own family to contest (he considered it improper for women to do such work), the former Pradhan chose a woman to whom he was not related and put his full support behind getting her elected. Despite the former Pradhan's influence in the Panchayat, the candidate he had selected lost to Dhaneshwari.

Dhaneshwari, in addition to being a Pradhan, is a mother of three, a homemaker, and an active member of many local social groups, including the Indo-Tibetan Friendship Society. She used to be a dance instructor, and is currently active in the literacy movement. She estimates that she spends about two weeks per month doing work specifically related to the Panchayat. This includes attending meetings and functions, visiting the Block office to collect payments for *panchayat* projects, settling local disputes, and visiting her constituents. Dhaneshwari is highly active in social work and community-based programmes. She is the Pradhan of her village's Mahila Mandal. Her roles as Panchayat Pradhan, community social worker, and Mahila Mandal member, often become blurred. To her, they are all aspects of service to the community. When asked how she handles her multiple roles, she confidently exclaims, "I'm excellent in all of them, but I never get enough sleep!"

Dhaneshwari has made special efforts to combat petty corruption within her *panchayat*. Although she doesn't like to talk about it, her insistence on the straight and narrow has caused small amounts of conflict within the Gram Panchayat. For a time, five of the Ward Panchs refused to sign her resolutions in protest of her strict control over the Panchayat's finances. Dhaneshwari says that she believes it is often the case that women Pradhans are more successful than men – not because they do more work, but rather because they are more responsible and less prone to corruption.

Dhaneshwari Devi says that she has not had much trouble establishing herself as the Pradhan of Kajlot. People accept her, even though she is a woman. She says that when she was first contesting the seat, some residents of Ward 1 told her they did not want to vote for a woman because it seemed unlikely that a woman Pradhan would undertake the needed work in their ward – namely, the construction of a costly bridge. When Dhaneshwari became Pradhan, one of the first things she did was to obtain money to build a bridge in Ward 1, procuring a sum of Rs. 150,000. She says, "I took it as a challenge when they said a woman would not do it."

Within the Gram Panchayat, Dhaneshwari established herself early on as the 'leader' of the group. When it seemed that the Up-Pradhan might want to take up some of her responsibilities, she insisted on doing them herself. It is well known that in many *panchayats* with a female Pradhan, the male Up-Pradhan will often stand in

as her proxy. Dhaneshwari refused to let that happen in her *panchayat*, issuing certificates herself and learning about building materials and other important aspects of the job, which were new to her.

Dhaneshwari is an ardent member of the Congress Party, and has been able to forge working relationships with some of the Party's higher ranked members. Her connections with these individuals have been crucial to her ability to procure funds for development work in her *panchayat*.

### **Case Study 5**

In 1995, an advertisement appeared in all the leading newspapers of Madhya Pradesh, "*Laxmi Ujjla Sihor ki Collector nahin hai* (Laxmi Ujjla is not the Collector of Sihor)," with a photograph of a woman suggesting that although she is not the Collector of Sihor, she has the powers equivalent to one. Laxmi Ujjla is the Sarpanch of Lahusuria Parihar Panchayat of Sihor district, Madhya Pradesh. She is 45 years old, educated up to Class X and belongs to the general caste category in a *panchayat* dominated by the upper caste and Other Backward Castes. The *panchayat* has 20 women members including the Sarpanch, a decision taken by the Gram Sabha prior to the elections in 1994.

As a Sarpanch, Laxmi started out in the shadow of her husband who carried out all the functions of the *panchayat*. Gradually, she began to assert herself and stated going to the Block office to get information on the various schemes available to her *panchayat*. As her interaction with people grew and exposure to the outside world increased, her interest and initiative in *panchayat* activities increased simultaneously. She was able to establish her credibility as a leader by getting government schemes to her village – involving her *panchayat* in the Total Literacy Campaign, building a temple with community support.

Today, she presides over the Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings and takes the initiative in organising the women of her *panchayat*. She has been actively lobbying with the Prime Minister and Chief Minister to transfer a water tank that has been constructed on the *panchayat* land, but due to its size falls under the jurisdiction of the Block Panchayat. In connection with this issue, she has even taken some people from her village and met the Chief Minister. At a gathering to welcome the new collector, she said, "You published my photograph and said that I have the powers of the Collector, but two years of running around has not yielded any result. I don't want these powers, take them back." The battle for transferring the water tank continues, but Laxmi Ujjla has not given up!

**GLOSSARY**

Block Office	Intermediate tier within Panchayati Raj Institutions
Dalit	Category of people notified as Schedule Caste
Gram Sabha Panch Sarpanch / Pradhan Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe	All voting members of a Panchayat Ward Member of the Panchayat Elected head of Gram Panchayat As notified under the Constitution of India
Up-Pradhan / Up- Sarpanch	Sub-head of the Gram Panchayat. Selected by the Sarpanch and Ward Members
Zila Parishad	Highest tier of Panchayati Raj Institutions

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