Negotiating Privately for an Effective Role in Public Space: A Case Study of Women in Panchayats of Orissa, India

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I dedicate this thesis to the memories of my father-in-law, who passed away in my absence at home.

Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate the impacts of the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution on the lives of rural women in Orissa, India. The Amendment, which mandated 'not less than one third' women at all three levels of the Indian *Panchayati Raj* institutions, is considered to be an historical intervention of the State. Concerns and apprehensions were raised, questioning its practicability, such as the fear that quotas on such a large scale could never be filled or there would never be large enough numbers of women candidates, and if they came at all, they would be prevented from exercising any real power. However, far beyond expectations, millions of uneducated and poor rural Indian women have responded with great enthusiasm. I have undertaken an empirical study in eight *Gram Panchayats* (the institutions that work at the village level), in Cuttack Sadar Block in Orissa. My field study took place in two periods between July 2008 and February 2009 (with a gap of one month in between). I followed a feminist methodology with multiple methods, consisting of: participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews, with 38 participants. I attempt to focus on the different levels of barriers which my respondents face in their new roles and how they are negotiating with their families to overcome these obstacles. Drawing on my investigations, I suggest that my participants have gained confidence and expertise in the performance of their public roles and that quotas have provided them with an opportunity for this. They have negotiated within their private circles to overcome the age-old barriers of a patriarchal society and their negotiations have, so far, been hopeful. They have taken the male members of their families and communities into their confidence, which has helped them to overcome these constraints. Based on my participants' words, I argue that empowerment is context-specific and gender quotas have proved to be helpful for my participants in creating an enabling environment, which in turn helped most of these women to become more effective in a public sphere.

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Author's Declaration

This Thesis is an original work.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"If an ancestral treasure lying buried in a corner of the house unknown to the members of the family were suddenly discovered, what a celebration it would occasion. Similarly, women's marvellous power is lying dormant. If the women of Asia wake up, they will dazzle the world." (Mahatma Gandhi, Message to Chinese Women, July 18, 1947)

The personal is political

Nineteen ninety three was the year when I married and also the year the historic 73rd Amendment to the Indian constitution, mandating 33% seats for women in all three tiers[1] of *Panchayats*[2] was accepted by the union government. On the personal front, this was the year when I freed myself from an orthodox, conservative high class label after long struggles inside my family. At the same time, for the large number of women living in rural areas of India this amendment also guaranteed a new atmosphere of increased freedom in public spaces. My marriage is important for my study because I understand that if I had not taken the decision to marry out of my caste and class, as a result of which I had to face many problems, I could never have known and appreciated the struggles and challenges of rural women belonging to different classes of Indian society. When I married I started living in a rural locality, with rural people, for the first time in my life. In contrast to this, I was born and brought up as the urban educated daughter of a high class and high caste family.

My in laws belonged to lower economic group and lower caste than my parental family which became a reason for my lifelong disconnection from my parents. I

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[1] The rural local self government system operates over three levels, which is known as a three-tier system in India. There is the *Zilla Parishad* operating at the District level, the *Panchayat Samiti* operating at the Block level and *Gram Panchayats* which operate at the Village level. More discussions on these are conducted in the following chapters.

[2] *Panchayat i*s the name of the rural local self government in India.

started my married life with my husband and his family in an unusual way, without any support from my parents and family. In retrospect, I think that it played an important role to make me more experienced and open my eyes to the type of life that the common Indian woman is largely subject to. I never knew that women received less food to eat than men, never had any idea that women work so much from dawn to dusk in managing households and never knew that girls are considered a burden. I would not say I had complete freedom of choice before my marriage because I came from a rich family; rather that by seeing all the options, I became conscious of the discriminations I faced as a daughter. The innumerable small incidents which I had otherwise taken for granted when I experienced them flashed in front of me and I began to feel terribly disturbed. Questions as to 'why?'', 'how?' and 'where?' kept coming into my mind each day as I led a group of 50 young girls in the college where I worked as the programme officer of the girls wing of the National Service Scheme[3] and listened to their personal stories. I was teaching political science at the same time and my young girl student volunteers and I were very close. I became their mentor over many years and in 1997, one student, Sunanda, contested the election from a reserved seat as a *Sarpanch.*[4] I was present, at her request, when she started her campaign and on the first day high caste people of her village closed their doors as she was a girl from a scheduled caste[5]. I was shocked to witness this and was lacking in ideas as to how she might respond to this prejudice. After two weeks she rang me to inform me that she had won. I beamed with hope and congratulated her. This was my very first experience of empowerment. In the following years there were many challenges for her, but with the support of her brother and father and all the women of her village she brought a whole world of changes to that village and to community life. In the elections that followed, reserved or unreserved, the women of that village never hesitated to contest the *Panchayat* elections.

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[3] Popularly known as NSS, this is a scheme run by the Indian Parliament which is meant to make young students aware of social issues and help them find possible solutions.

[4] *Sarpanch* is the leader in a *Gram Panchayat*.

[5] The Scheduled Castes are a group of castes which are low in the Indian caste system and these are mentioned in the schedules to the Indian constitution.

It became of interest to me to follow the women who became involved in the politics of the *Panchayats* and there were many of my students who were aspirants to political power in village *Panchayats* after reservations and reforms were in place. My sisters in law (my husband's sister and his brother's wife) were also contesting elections at the *Panchayat* level, both of them being elected in their *Gram Panchayats*. I was able to observe women from circles close to me becoming leaders, facing challenges and I witnessed some of them gaining more confidence day by day. The women were having meetings among themselves where they would discuss village problems and their concerns about making their demands heard at the Block[6] level. Many times they discussed these issues in their houses during odd hours of the afternoon, some of them struggling to feed their babies, some attending to sick elders in between comments, and some with anxieties about handling an arrogant husband back home. I was the only married woman of this village with a higher educational degree and as I was working in the local college the women never hesitated to allow me to sit with them. For the first time, I noticed the dynamics of a lower class society: that lower class societies were more liberal to the women than the higher class societies and women from lower castes had more freedom than women from higher caste groups and that their male relatives had no objections in permitting the women to work outside their homes. The overall pictures of the nearby *Panchayats* were changing and within some years there would be changes in the social and cultural fabric of the villages and in the lives of the women involved.

There were of course also visible changes in my personal life as I began to experience a growing sense of feminist consciousness. My father in law, who was an illiterate man in his 90s, was always encouraging me whenever I had to go out. From a woman waiting for permission to leave the home, I was encouraged to become a woman able to make decisions for her family. I realised and understood the importance of gaining the support of one's family in rural India and how this leads to increased self confidence. It was all so new and so thought provoking for

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[6] A number of *Gram Panchayats* work under a Block which is known as a *Panchayat Samiti*. Leaders of each *Gram Panchayat* (*Sarpanches*) and the representatives from the *Gram Panchayats* (Nominees) attend the monthly meetings held at a *Panchayat Samiti* where policy decisions are made based on the demands of the *Sarpanches* and Nominees.

me. There were many similarities, yet so many differences among the rural women and myself, all of whom belonged to the same region of India.

The coincidences in my life and the lives of the rural women around me, which occurred due to this political landscape, made me interested in conducting an in depth study of those rural women who emerged from their houses to capitalise on seat reservations for women in *Panchayats,* believing that nothing could be more engaging for me than this. Orissa and more particularly, the district of Cuttack, became my obvious option for field study as I had lived there for many years. It was also important as I came to know that there was not a single study conducted on women involved in the politics of the *Panchayats* of this district of the region; that is, after the 73rd amendment[7] provided a 'not less than one third seats' reservation[8] for women. I did not want to work with the women of the particular locality in which my in laws lived, and instead chose to work with women from a distant *Gram Panchayat* but within the Cuttack District, so as to carry out the study as an unbiased researcher. A study on any aspect of rural Indian women today is multi layered and complex. I have worked among and with women who are unlikely to be able to read what I have done with their long interviews. They do not even have the slightest idea of what a PhD thesis looks like. Yet they all insisted on being named in my thesis in recognition of the work that they are doing. As a feminist researcher, I have always attempted to foreground their voices, although I am aware, in all honesty, that I cannot claim to be speaking for them. I have put great effort into writing about them using their own words alongside my own understanding of their lives.

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[7] Article 243(D) has been amended through this Amendment. The Article is provided in the Appendix.

[8] I have used 'reservations of seats for women' and 'gender quota' or 'quotas for women' interchangeably throughout this thesis. However, I am aware that there is a contextual difference between these two- 'reservation of seats' and 'quota'. Though it is known to be 'reservation of seats' in India, I chose to use 'quota', as the contemporary literature refers to the preferential treatment for women as 'quota' (Hust, 2002; Nussbaum, 2002; Jayal, 2006; Rai, 2008). However, the policies providing for the 'reservations of seats for women' or 'gender quota' fulfil the similar goal of bringing more women to political offices (Krook, 2010: 6).

The 73ʳᵈ amendment

My research attempts to examine the effects of this amendment to the Indian constitution on the lives of rural Indian women. At this stage, it is important to briefly consider what this amendment stands for as this is a very important part of my research. I suggest it is one of the most significant attempts at transforming the Indian polity in the direction of greater democratization and decentralization of power (Raman, 2002: 4). Coming into effect on the 24ᵗʰ April 1993, the purpose of the 73ʳᵈ amendment was to revitalize the three tier system of local governance in rural India known as *Panchayats*.

The amendment mandated a wider representation for historically marginalized and excluded groups like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women, thus deepening the roots of democracy. Following the amendment, people from the scheduled castes and tribes are now represented in proportion to their population in *Gram Panchayat* (village council) areas, in terms of membership and in proportion to their population in each state and in the position of the *Panchayat* chairperson; one-third of all seats are reserved for women generally in each *Panchayat*, that is, at the village cluster level, at the block level, and at the district level. Women from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have a similar one-third reservation in the positions reserved for these communities.

The reservation is to be rotated among the various constituencies and *Panchayats* to ensure the participation of a large number of women and enable women of different *Panchayats* to enter in place of the same women coming to power in each election. Regular elections are to be held every five years and financial resources are to be devolved by the setting up of state finance commissions and central finance commissions. The states have been mandated to make *Panchayats* institutions of self-government and to give them responsibility for planning and implementing schemes for economic development and social justice for which appropriate functions and responsibilities have to be devolved. The constitutional amendment was soon followed by state-level legislation in all states which brought the *Panchayat* laws into conformity with the requirements of the

constitution. However, even before this amendment was passed, Orissa had been the first state to hold a 33% reservation for women (in 1991) (Palanithurai, 2002: 56). So, there were already women who had been elected as representatives in all three tiers of *Panchayat* in 1993 when this act became effective in all other parts of India. The 73rd amendment only made the one third reservations of seats for women in *Panchayats* more popular with women increasingly coming to know about it due to a proliferation of advertisements in the media following its implementation by the Union Government. A unique provision of Orissa, the *Gram Panchayat* Act (1991) states that if the elected or nominated *Sarpanch* of the *Gram Panchayat* is not a woman, the office of the *Naib-Sarpanch*[9] will go to a woman. This is also the provision made for the Chairperson of the *Panchayat Samitis*.

In the very first round of elections following this important intervention, in 1994 and 1995, nearly one million women entered the threshold of local self-government political institutions (Raman, 2002: 4). In subsequent years this number has been seen to rise.

My research questions

The important research questions which I am trying to address here are multi layered. At the outset I am trying to investigate the story of these women in their own voices and consider how far they have gained access to resources as well as how far they were able to change their own self-image after these reforms were made in rural local self government units. To deal with this I will be looking at the following questions:

a. Have the quotas through the 73rd amendment Act been effective in creating a space for rural women in local governance and how instrumental have *Gram Panchayats* been in enabling rural women to exercise their power to impact on policy and direct decision making?

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[9] A *Naib-Sarpanch* is the Deputy Chairperson or the official who is the immediate subordinate to the *Sarpanch* in a *Gram Panchayat*.

b. What are the different barriers that exist in a patriarchal Indian society and how are these elected women representatives at the *Gram Panchayats* negotiating in both private and public spheres in order to perform effectively their roles in the public terrain?

c. Have these women started to break the silence and challenge the male-dominated norms of their society and how empowering has been the experience of women who are participating in these grassroots institutions so far, both in terms of transforming these institutions and for the women themselves?

I started my study in 2007 and undertook my field work in 2008 and 2009. It was the long 15 years since women came to power in *Panchayats* which offered me a good opportunity to study the changes this brought at a community level as well as the impact it made on the personal lives of these women. These were of course not the same women who came to power each time, but they were women from the same neighbourhood, from nearby villages and from the same network groups; they were definitely encouraged by the state's initiatives to bring women into local government institutions. This thesis largely draws on the words of my women participants who were elected representatives of the eight *Gram Panchayats* in Cuttack Sadar Block, most of whom had little or no education.

Summary of the chapters

This introduction to the thesis is followed by a chapter on the experiences of Indian women in politics in national, regional and local governments in the years following Independence. More specifically, I deal with the role of women following Indian Independence. Women who emerged in response to Mahatma Gandhi's call to be involved in the National movement were, in a way, fighting for their own freedom from a patriarchal society. This chapter presents a background to my study and deals with how some of the women leaders of the post-independence India carefully worked to involve more women in politics. However, the condition of ordinary Indian women did not improve during this period as women involved in politics at this early stage were mainly from families

with political affiliations. They were also mainly from the elite class. The question of women's reservations came up in the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974. The Report noted that in spite of equal rights and universal adult suffrage guaranteed by the Indian constitution, women's presence in the state and central legislatures had been declining steadily over the years. Along with a section on this report, this chapter throws light on the other important policy interventions that were subsequently made to improve the representation of women, especially in local government. The 73rd Amendment Act and its various implications are discussed in detail here.

To contextualise the study, the third chapter throws light on conceptual issues involved in the study. It discusses concepts like 'critical mass'[10], citizenship, political participation of women and political empowerment. I attempt to examine the relevance of the debates surrounding these concepts in the existing literature to my study and in doing so, I seek to explore the connectedness of quotas to the empowerment of women. I understand that quotas are important to create a 'critical mass' at the decision-making level, but in case of these rural women, how far this can lead to their effectiveness and how the women see their participation are my concerns. The existing literature on women in *Panchayats* evidences that *Panchayats* in Orissa have been less researched than in other parts of India. This chapter helps to place the present work in the front line, as well as filling in a gap in the timeline, as previous studies were mostly conducted within the first 10 years of the reforms.

Chapter four addresses my choice of multiple methods and methodology. Using a multiple method was the most viable way forward as I needed to study the participants from a very close angle. The methodology chapter deals with the obstacles I faced in accessing my participants and gives an account of my experience with the interviewees. I stayed in two locations for participant observation as it was important to build up a rapport with the researched and know them in their private settings. My field study ranged over five months in two phases and was interrupted by a severe flood. This chapter deals with my

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[10] The term 'critical mass' was borrowed from nuclear physics, where it refers to the quantity needed to start a chain reaction, an irreversible turning point, a take-off into a new situation or process (Dahlerup, 1988: 275-76) .

experiences of living and working with these women and the collection of empirical data. It deals with the power relationship operating between me as the researcher and my participants as the researched. I also discuss my ability to access these women and how I was able to gain their trust and co-operation, which was so vital for this type of ethnographic study. It also touches upon the operational structure of the decentralised system in Orissa and the implication of the reforms on this. It shows the line of control of the *Panchayat* institutions and how the *Gram Panchayats* can be controlled by the lower units of villages, as the lower unit derives its authority from all the adult members of the village. Detailed information about the methods that I followed in the course of my investigation, which consisted of participant observation, focus groups and in depth interviews, is presented in this chapter.

The fifth chapter of this thesis discusses the cultural, social and political contexts as experienced by the respondents in their villages. This deals with issues like representation and political participation of women from rural India. This also includes a detailed explanation of the obstacles these women have to face when entering the political arena. Therefore, the problems which they see as important for them come to take precedence over the theoretical issues around the participation of women or gender identity. This part of the dissertation prioritises women's voices about the barriers that they have to overcome at a myriad of different levels. A brief discussion on the issues of the representation of women also disentangles the hidden dynamics of the lives of Indian rural women which may be unknown to western scholars. For example, it exposes the lack of choice experienced by these women, for tradition forces them to live with their in laws on marriage, often in a different part of the country; therefore they experience an immediate loss of identity as political citizens in the early phase of their married lives. Indeed, it appears that their struggles with public space begin when they register their names in their new location as someone's spouse.

Chapter six considers the impact of political change on the lives of the participants. This focuses on how my respondents' participation in *Gram Panchayats* has led to a new sense of identity which may be experienced as a kind of empowerment for them. However, empowerment may be a misleading or much contested term for the feminist researcher. I have attempted to look at the process

of empowerment as my interviewees understand it today. Their effective participation has led to definite, positive impacts, taking different forms in the lives of the women under investigation. This has led to them changing their lifestyles and making them feel more confident in some areas, although they still feel a burden in some others as innumerable problems hinder their journeys. The participants consider problems like connecting to a political base in a new locality and the burden of their expected reproductive and productive roles, which plays out in their private lives, as their main obstacles. There is also an account of the strategies that these participants have followed in order to negotiate these barriers with family members. The family is a priority for women in rural India and gaining support from family members and male colleagues has helped them considerably in maintaining both their personal and public worlds. They have been able to create better networking opportunities among the groups of women who were involved in *Panchayat* politics, and helped each other raise their voices within and outside the family unit. This chapter also throws light on the extent to which this empowerment has influenced women's lives on a day-to-day basis.

Chapter seven deals with the outcomes of my participants' participation and the changes they brought to bear on policy decisions. There have been continuous attempts by the participants to bring about definite change in their localities. They have prioritised issues related to women and girls and highlighted the issues, or barriers, which impacted them when they first accessed the political arena. Identifying problems based on their own experiences, they therefore give much more importance to the education of girls, better health facilities and better communication for their villages. This allows us an insight into where the women's perceptions come from, especially as my intention is to use a bottom up approach from an actor's point of view (in this case, the actors being the participants of my study). I further discuss the different changing family dynamics in rural India and how they are embedded in the social structure.

The final chapter contains conclusions based on my experience as a participant observer and the long, largely unstructured interviews with my participants. The long hours of formal and informal talks I had with these women, inside their houses and in the premises of the *Panchayat* offices, have changed my ideas and perceptions about these rural women a great deal. It has been an enlightening

experience as much for me as for my participants. This concluding chapter also comments upon my own perceptions as an insider researcher and my experience of this research process so far.

I started with a set agenda and ended up giving more attention to my researched women's agenda. I have also attempted to articulate my problems as a feminist researcher and highlight where I went wrong with my preconceived ideas. Where I was unable to make further explorations, due to my lack of resources, and how I end up creating a sisterly bond with my study participants is also briefly considered. However, this chapter is mainly composed of closing reflections and the summation of the study findings. How I see this research leading to further questions or interests of scholars is discussed in the last section of the work.

Chapter Two: A Historical Perspective

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the background of the study. It includes a short description of the position of women in Indian politics before and after Independence and helps to situate my investigation. I attempt to unpack the different factors which finally resulted in the national government providing a policy for the reservation of seats for women in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions. In doing so, I also touch upon different structural interventions by the state and the role of women's groups. This chapter is broadly divided into two sections. In the first section I discuss the background from a national perspective and in the second I focus more on the Orissan scenario. I conclude with a diagrammatic representation of the *Panchayats* at different levels.

From National Independence to Reservations

The end of colonial power in India brought not only a new form of government but also a series of new ideas, which disturbed the previously silent waters of traditional Indian society. Social reformers realised that women's issues were important in preparing a society for progressive thought. All over the country, they have shown their willingness to fight issues such as *Sati,*[11] child-marriage, female infanticide, *purdah*,[12] polygamy and inappropriate consequences of widowhood, all of which were essentially hampering the lives of Indian women. Education for girls in India was thus considered important in this process of awakening. At the same time, these forces of change penetrating the private lives

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[11] *Sati* refers to a funeral practice among some Hindu communities where a recently widowed woman would, either voluntarily or by use of force and coercion, immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This practice has been declared illegal in modern India.

[12] *Purdah* here means women covering their heads or operating behind curtains (it is different from the Islamic *hejab*).

of Indian women have had their own effects. During the period of National movement, women's meetings to discuss their status and ways to improve their lives were started with the support of Indian men. Gradually women realised the need for different fora for discussing their views, and women's organisations started to work to improve the conditions of women. Fighting for their own freedom led them towards fighting for the freedom of their country. Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi's leadership gave them a new lease of life in terms of freedom and participation in the public sphere. The activities of women in India at that time were public, but not always essentially political. They were participating all over the country in activities such as organising campaigns against the injustices of colonial power and in favour of boycotting the use of foreign goods, and other public activities. The women of India made their own contribution to the National Movement which finally freed India from colonial power on August 15th, 1947. As Ray notes, '…nearly ten percent of the prisoners in the independence movement were women with babies in their arms' (1999: 9). Women were also involved in the relief work in riot-stricken areas following partition.[13] After Independence, with the introduction of the Indian constitution, women were theoretically guaranteed equality in all spheres. During these early years, the participation of women in electoral activities was fairly common, with a number of active women leaders involved in the National Movement. This prepared them for taking up their roles as equal citizens under the constitution of a free nation. Unfortunately, the number of women in political spheres of power gradually declined thereafter. Despite various promises by political parties and leaders at different times, women were systematically marginalised from the higher echelons of power. Nevertheless, elite women continued to work for the inclusion of women in politics, with women leaders in India showing concern about the barriers preventing the mass of women from entering into the field of politics. There were women leaders at national and regional level who put all their efforts into countering the political isolation of women. Women leaders in both parliament and the state legislatures often crossed party lines in support of women's issues. In more recent years, the constant pressure exerted by women's

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[13] Freedom for India came after partition of the country into two nations, India and Pakistan, formed on the basis of religion.

organisations and women leaders in the legislative bodies resulted in the empowerment of women being pushed to the top of the governmental agenda. This finally led to the reservation of seats for women in grass root democratic institutions. Reservations for women have been seen as the only possible way to ensure the participation of women in politics in the significant numbers that are important in a democracy. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts of 1992 to the Indian Constitution, which came into effect from 24th April and 1st June 1993 respectively, have emerged as the most important structural interventions by the state. The 73rd Amendment Act requires not less than one third of seats to be reserved for women in rural local bodies, while the 74th Amendment Act requires not less than one third of seats to be reserved for women in urban local bodies. This provision also extends to leadership positions in both these self-government units and provides reservations for women belonging to all groups, including the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups, both recognised by the constitution as belonging to the most marginalised sections of Indian society.

Rural local bodies in India are known as *Panchayati Raj* institutions, or PRIs. Following the historical Amendments to the constitution in 1993, the very first election of these bodies in 1994 finally brought about one million women to the decision-making level through the reservation of seats in *Panchayats* and other local bodies (Raman, 2002: 4). This number has increased over subsequent years. The phenomenon of the docile, submissive and mostly illiterate common women of India becoming assertive and articulate leaders of *Panchayats* and proving their excellence in dealing with the ensuing challenges of power has become an important concern for research.

Women in politics, over the years

The history of the Indian struggle for independence displays a gradual movement of Indian women into the national polity. At a time when most women were illiterate and unaware of their political rights or obligations or even the feeling of nationalism, their involvement in the independence struggle of the nation was quite unexpectedly high. However, it is important to observe that almost all of those women belonged to elite classes, predominantly families where the male

members supported the national movement. Women from Jawaharlal Nehru's family: his mother, Mrs. Swarupa Rani, Mrs. Kamala Nehru, his wife and Vijayalaxmi Pandit, his sister, were all active participants in the National Movement. There was also Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, who was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, and Mrs. Sucheta Kripalini, who belonged to a very politically active family. Her husband, Mr. Acharya Kripalini, was also involved in the freedom movement.

The women who participated in the freedom struggle not only fought for the country, but were instrumental in fighting for the cause of women. It is clear that Indian women who joined the National Movement wanted to share the responsibilities equally with the male leaders. The participation of women in national life increased the faith of the nation in the power of women, and increased their own self esteem too. It not only increased the confidence of women leaders who were directly involved in the movement, but also encouraged the common women of the country to enter into the public sphere. While women from elite families were more noticed, there were also hundreds of other Indian women who made sacrifices and contributed to the cause of Indian freedom, although their role remained largely invisible. It must be underlined that women were active in all spheres of political life across the board during the National Movement period.

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was among the few women elected to the Constituent Assembly, the body entrusted with the responsibility of drafting a constitution for Independent India. She also became the first ever woman Governor of Uttar Pradesh[14] on 15th August, 1947, the day of India's independence. Additionally, there were Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Ray and Hansa Mehta. Durgabai Deshmukh was the first woman in the Planning Commission of independent India. She also headed the National Committee on Women's Education (1958-1959), which focussed on the barriers faced by women in achieving a higher education and suggested different measures for breaking through these barriers to the Government of India. Active in politics during the pre-independence and

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[14] Uttar Pradesh is the biggest state in India and the most powerful in Central politics with the maximum number of members in the Indian Parliament. It is situated very near to Delhi, the Union Capital.

immediate post-independence years, Durgabai Deshmukh was essentially an administrator who built up the Central Social Welfare Board (Baig, 1976: 189). Hansa Mehta was known for her strong arguments against any provisions of privilege in favour of women in the Indian constitution. She was appointed as the Chairman of the Committee on Differentiation of Curricula for Boys and Girls in 1962 by the Government of India.

The women leaders who were active in both the pre- and post-independence period saw education for Indian women as a gateway to enable them to become useful citizens as well as a path for their own personal enhancement. It is interesting to observe that, while much attention by feminist movements has focussed on franchise rights for women in the West, women in India never had to fight long for this. Franchise rights came to Indian women in 1950, with a Universal Adult Franchise granted in the constitution of Independent India.

From the beginning of the Indian constitution, there were provisions of quotas for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, although not for women. Women were excluded from development areas, and not treated as a marginalised group in the original 1950 constitution. As women leaders were visibly active in all spheres of political activity they considered it disrespectful to claim quotas rather than to achieve it on their own merit. Even Hansa Mehta, who was Parliamentary Secretary in Bombay and a member of the Constituent Assembly, declared on 19th December, 1946 that:

> We have never asked for privileges. What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice and political justice. We have asked for that equality which can alone be the basis of mutual respect and understanding and without which, real co-operation is not possible between man and woman (quoted in Desai and Thakkar, 2005: 14).

So, the Indian constitution did not provide any reservations for women, instead it mentioned rural self-government[15] with women members in a chapter called 'The directive principles of state policy'. Right from the beginning, the state has attempted to ensure the presence of women in these local bodies that operate at

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[15] Rural self-government is the *Panchayati Raj* System.

the village level. At its third meeting, held in Srinagar in 1957, the Central Council of Local Government recorded that the elected representatives (about 20 in number in each *Panchayat* block), 'will co-opt two women who are interested to work among women and children' (Buch, 2005b: 236). At the same time, the *Balwant Rai Mehta* Committee also recommended the induction of two women members in *Panchayats* in order to carry out specific programmes relating to the welfare of children and women.

Traditionally, *Panchayats* in Indian villages were bodies of elders (preferably five or more, indeed, *panch* in Hindi means five[16]), who came together to settle disputes among the villagers. Therefore, it is clear that for some time these *Panchayats* served no purpose as units of local government. Directing attention towards the welfare of local people or discussing gender issues was nowhere in sight. However, following recommendations made by the *Balwant Rai Mehta* Committee, different states started providing specific numbers of seats in *Panchayats* for women. Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka were among the first states to implement these reservation provisions for women. In 1957, the rural Local Self Government Committee of Madhya Pradesh recommended *Panchayats* having 18 members, including three nominated members, i.e. a Patel, a woman and a representative from a cooperative society. The committee acknowledged that:

> We are in favour of according representation to them by means of nomination in view of the need to encourage women in rural areas to participate in civic affairs even though a woman or women come to be elected to *Panchayats*. Accordingly, we have already suggested inclusion of a woman by nomination when recommending the minimum number of *panches*[17] for a *Panchayat*. In *Janpad*[18] *Panchayats* if no woman or a member of SC or ST comes to be elected, such members should be co-

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[16] Even today, in rural parts of India, a meeting of a *Gram Panchayat* is referred to as *'Panch Parameswar',* meaning the meeting of five Gods.

[17] A member of a *Panchayat* is called a *Panch.*

[18] *Janpad Panchayat* is the local name for a Block level or middle tier *Panchayat* in some parts of northern India.

opted (Report of Rural Local Self Government Committee, 1959: 23, in Buch, 2005b: 237)

Apart from some women becoming important actors on the political stage during these early years of Indian independence, the five year plans of the Government of India promised much for the development of women, although all these policies and promises approached women as objects of development. The common Indian woman was seldom given any chance to participate as an active agent in a process that was designed for her wellbeing. However, this governmental approach was seriously challenged in 1974 by the 'Towards Equality' report on the status of women.

'Towards equality' and its effects

Following the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women by the General Assembly in 1967, the UN urged its member states to present reports on the status of women in their countries. The Government of India created a committee to assess the status of women (CSWI) which submitted its report, entitled 'Towards Equality', in May, 1975. This was a milestone in making the whole country realise the real status of women in India. The report accused the Indian state of large-scale discrimination on the grounds of gender, whilst also recognising the problems and needs of different socio-economic groups of women. To quote from the report:

> The National Committee on the status of women observes that women have a negligible impact on the political process, that they constitute a numerical majority, they are slowly acquiring the features of a minority group because of inequalities of status and political power (ICSSR, 1974).

Parliamentary debates on the committee's report gave a wide mandate to the government 'to remove all disabilities that Indian women continue to suffer from...' (Mazumdar in Bandyopadhyaya, 2000: 2697), but in the turmoil of the internal Emergency declared by the National Government shortly thereafter[19], this issue was temporarily forgotten.

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[19] On 1st of July, 1975, Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in order to meet internal threats to the nation's security. This is the only experience of Indian nation being

Nevertheless, the report was a shock to everyone, including Indian women, for after 27 years of Independence they were still performing the traditional roles expected of them by men and suffering from large-scale illiteracy, poor health, marginalised employment and violence and had practically no voice in the decision-making processes of their country or even in other spheres of life. The report was treated as a landmark in the history of the women's movement in India. Singla considers it an eye opener, even for those women who initiated the report (2007: 30). She perhaps meant by this that even the women who demanded a report on the status of women at that point in time were surprised by the outcomes. Among many other recommendations for the provision of an improved status for women, this report states that it is only by reserving a certain percentage of seats in *Panchayati Raj* institutions that women can be expected to enter these institutions in larger numbers and participate effectively. The committee therefore recommended the establishment of statutory women's *Panchayats* at the village level so as to ensure an increased role for women in the political sphere in local government (Vidya, 2007: 14). The recommendations of the committee changed the strategy of those women leaders who were initially against a reservation policy for women. Prominent feminists who had never thought of reservations as a solution to bringing women into the power structure of their country began advocating it as a necessary step (Singla, 2007: 30).

Although the debates surrounding 'critical mass'[20] (the feminist argument for having women in a definite number at the decision-making level), systematic developments aimed at bringing more women into politics in the western world and recommendations for providing seats for women in Indian political bodies via quotas came almost at the same period of time, scholars note that to consider the attempts of activists and feminists for women's liberation in India as purely western-inspired (Calman, 1992: 48) is a 'mystification of women's actual history in India' (Liddle and Joshi, 1986: 240). I suggest that this argument is due to the fact that even before this important report appeared there were active women's movements emerging in different parts of the country, each focussing on different

put under emergency rule (1975-1977). This period is known as the most corrupt period with maximum state intervention in the private lives of Indian citizens.

[20] I discuss the concept of 'critical mass' further in the following chapter.

local concerns. The 'Towards Equality' report helped spur their activism in a new direction and therefore this document exists as a turning point in Indian history, in terms of creating a sense of awareness among the people about the position of women in their country. The following years witnessed a successful continuation of movements in different parts of the country where women worked as the driving force. Two of the best known women-led movements, which became more successful during the following years, were *Chipko*[21] and *Sewa.*[22]

While analysing the structural strain in Indian politics that caused both the creation and aggravation of grievances and encouraged common Indian women to act politically, Calman suggests that these movements have two implications. The first is that existing political institutions cannot produce the desired remedies and the second is that people involved in these movements do not trust the state as the only appropriate arena in which they can resolve their grievances (1992: 21). This conclusion has been substantiated by the fact that, even after the recommendations made by the 'Towards Equality' report to provide a definite percentage of seats for women in rural local self-government units or *Panchayats*, there followed no immediate action at a national level. Nevertheless there were several attempts by regional governments to guarantee the presence of women in the public sphere, as different women's organisations remained active in demanding a broader scope for women in political activities.

Soon after, in 1978, the *Ashok Mehta* Committee was appointed to review the working of the *Panchayati Raj* system. They recommended women's token representation, but also suggested that if no women were elected then the two women who received the highest votes at the District level should become members. Where no woman stood for election, two women might be co-opted. This made the presence of women mandatory in grass-root political institutions all over the country. Over the following years a number of state governments

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[21] *Chipko* is a Hindi term which literally means to 'cling on'. The movement was started in 1974 by thousands of women who gathered together to protest against deforestation decisions made by the Government and stood hugging trees till the cutters were pushed back.

[22] *Sewa* was the first co-operative movement run by women in India. SEWA stands for the Self Employed Women's Association.

provided different legislative measures for ensuring women's presence in *Panchayats*.

In 1979, the Andhra Pradesh government appointed a committee on *Panchayati Raj* institutions to look into the question of reservations in favour of women. It recommended a 5% reservation of *Sarpanches* posts in each of the block level *Panchayats* for women. However, it also remarked that 'this reservation may be made in *Panchayats* where the percentage of women electors is comparatively higher' (Report of the government of Andhra Pradesh, 1981: 31 in Buch, 2005b: 240). During the 1980s, a number of state sponsored conferences, discussions and different state level committees made recommendations on *Panchayats* and provisions for the inclusion of women in these bodies, and these recommendations resulted in specific strategies that evolved over subsequent years. In 1983, the state government of Karnataka announced a 25% reservation of seats for women in *Panchayats* and the river of change began to flow rapidly.

Karnataka also stands first among the states with a large number of women members in *Gram Panchayats* (47%), *Taluk Panchayats* (40%) and *Zilla Parishads* (36%) (Hemalatha, 2005: 334). Thus, in the early years, women were successful in gaining more seats than were specifically reserved for them. This also suggests a kind of change in the attitude of a traditional society in favour of sensitisation to gender issues. In subsequent years, the government of Karnataka led by the same Jananta Party, (Congress held power at the Centre)[23] was elected with a huge majority, which suggested the popular acceptance of women's entrance into *Panchayats* for the first time.

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[23] In 1983, during the elections, the Janata Party (a newly formed national party then) promised to revitalise the PRIs in the state to enhance the process of rural development. 'Power to the people' was at the top of their election manifesto. Subsequently, when they were elected and Mr. R.K. Hegde became the Chief Minister of the state, the Karnataka *Zilla Parishad* Act, *Taluk Panchayat Samitis* and *Nyaya Panchayat* Bills were introduced in the State Assembly. These took two years to get President's assent and finally became effective from 14th August, 1985. They provided a quota of 25% seats for women in all the levels of *Panchayats*, which was an innovative step (Vidya, 2007). Interestingly, this radical step acted as a perfect catalyst in this state and during some years women occupied up to 43.6% of seats in PRIs, which clearly shows that a large number of women are also being elected to open seats (Baviskar, 2003: 4).

In 1987, the central government appointed two high profile commissions to suggest ways to ensure development for women. One was chaired by Margaret Alva, the then Minister of State for the Department of Women and Child Development, who presented the Draft National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000). The other was headed by Ela Bhatt of *Sewa*, who presented the *Shramshakti* Report in 1988 (Desai and Thakkar, 2005: 152). These two documents signalled the increased visibility of women and women's economic development needs on the governmental agenda.

The National Perspective Plan for Women recommended a reservation of 30% for women in local government, and with the support of the central government, women's groups consistently worked to make this a reality. The report also showed that after 40 years of democracy the share of women in the Union Parliament still did not exceed 8%. Most of the states were no better, including Communist-ruled states like West Bengal and Kerala (though there was already a reservation provision in the state of Karnataka at this time). The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000) had argued that the active participation of women in the power structure of politics and their inclusion at the decision making level are critical prerequisites for women's equality in the process of nation building (Datta, 2005: 269). It was no wonder that this prompted the women's organisations to demand the possible alternative of bringing women into politics. The *Shramshakti* Report particularly highlighted the contribution of rural and urban self-employed and marginalised women to the national economy. Bhatt herself had direct experience of working with self-employed Indian women for many years during her involvement with *Sewa*. Therefore, her report strongly recommended the establishment of an exclusive credit body for poor and self-employed women, the linking of training programmes to employment and made many other suggestions. Accordingly, the National Credit Fund for women, (the *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh*) was set up in 1993 to extend credit to poor women at reasonable rates of interest, through non-governmental organisations working in rural areas (Desai and Thakkar, 2005: 152). These continuous engagements of the women's movement and the consultation of women's groups with the government at the national and local levels also led to the creation of the Women's National Commission in 1992, which opened branches in all the states in subsequent years.

Political parties as catalysts

While discussing the inclusion of women in politics at the local level, it is interesting to observe how political parties also worked as important catalysts in this process. Women's issues were at the top of the agenda of almost all the political parties during the late eighties and nineties, with different political parties coming forward with different promises to women as a group. The multiplicity of political parties has gained paramount importance in the most recent years, offering the country the option of groups of ruling parties in place of single party rule, which had been the usual practice in the past. The need for the reservation of seats for women was one of the common assurances of almost every party during the 1989 elections, and in this year, the 64th amendment act of the Indian constitution was presented before parliament, clearly stating that as many as 30% of seats may be reserved in favour of women *Panchayat* members at all three levels, including seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Though this proposal failed to get the support of *Rajya Sabha*[24], it nonetheless marked the beginning of a new era for policies to ensure the active participation of women at the grass root level of democracy in India. Governments in many states started taking the initiative to reform the existing provisions in order to accommodate a greater percentage of women in local politics. The multiplicity of political parties also helped women to represent themselves as a group.

In 1990, Mr. Biju Patnaik, a close associate of Mr. R.K. Hegde of Karnataka[25], became the Chief Minister of Orissa. He had always been in favour of the empowerment of women in PRIs and had taken many steps for the devolution of PRIs in Orissa during his previous tenure in office. By that time, his party, the Janata Party[26], had become known for its pro-women stance in different parts of

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[24] Indian Parliament is bicameral. The upper house is known as *Rajya Sabha* which represents the states and the lower house is known as *Lok Sabha* which represents the citizens of India.

[25] Mr. R. K. Hegde was the chief Minister of the state of Karnataka at the time of the introduction of 25% of reserved seats for women in the *Panchayats*.

[26] In 1977, for the first time, the Congress Party was out of power at the Centre and a new party, named the 'Janata Party', emerged under the leadership of Mr. Morarji Desai, who became the

the country. He announced on his birthday, 5th March, 1991 that this day would be celebrated as '*Panchayati Raj* Day' in the state. In that year, his Government enacted a bill which provided a 33% quota for women at all levels of the PRIs (Patnaik, 2008).

Following the Government of Orissa, the Government of Maharashtra introduced a 33% reservation of seats for women in *Panchayats* in 1991. The Government of Kerala also made changes by introducing 30% seat reservations for women in *Panchayats* in the same year. Regional governments considered the inclusion of a definite percentage of women in local power structures to be an important step. While the percentage of women was constantly fluctuating in national politics, regional governments took the initiative to increase and ensure their participation in *Panchayats* and other local bodies. This acted as a boost to women, encouraging them to take an interest in public life.

The post 1991 developments and *Panchayats* in Orissa

In 1991, the Government of Orissa passed three important Acts – namely the Orissa *Gram Panchayat* (Amendment) Act, the Orissa *Panchayat Samiti* (Amendment) Act and the Orissa *Zilla Parishad* (Amendment) Act, which are considered as landmarks in the history of PRIs in Orissa. The new policies provided radical provisions, such as 'one-third seats for women and seats on rotation'. This Act also provided for one third reservations for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The policies relating to *Panchayats* in Orissa went further, reserving the post of Vice-Chairperson for women at all levels of *Panchayats* if the Chairperson was not female (Orissa *Panchayat* Act,1991). This became effective before the elections to *Panchayati Raj* institutions in 1991. The 1991 elections to *Panchayats* brought 28,069 women members to the 5,267 *Gram Panchayats*, 14 women *Sarpanches* and 5,237

Prime Minister. As a new political party, it started to work in different parts of the country taking progressive steps, among which many were pro-women.

women *Naib-Sarpanches*[27] into these rural self-government units (Jena, 1995: 162). It was considered to be a progressive step by the state government and soon afterwards, in 1992, the most important intervention from the central government followed, in the form of the 73rd Amendment, which came into effect in 1993. So, even before this 73rd Amendment, the state government had already taken initiatives to increase women's representation in the rural local self-government units.

Since, in Orissa, the 1991 elections to *Panchayats* were concluded with 33% reservations for women, the state government took the time to change the Acts relating to *Panchayats* in order to incorporate the other new provisions of the 73rd Amendment. The next election to *Panchayats*, in 1997, was the first election in Orissa which accepted the one third quotas for women belonging to different categories, namely, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and women belonging to general castes (as per the 73rd amendment). Apart from the provision of quotas for women at leadership level as well as representatives, the changes in the state level Acts[28] (Orissa *Gram Panchayat* Act, 1997) also entrusted *Panchayats* at all three levels with duties and functions in respect of 21 matters out of the 29 listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution[29].

Panchayats in Orissa: basic statistics

The table below is a presentation of the *Panchayats* working at different levels in Orissa. The numbers here show the recent picture.

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[27] A *Naib-Sarpanch* is the Deputy Chairperson or the official who is the immediate subordinate to the *Sarpanch* in a *Gram Panchayat*. The Orissa *Panchayat Act*, 1993, provides for a quota for women in the position of *Naib-Sarpanches* where the *Sarpanch* is not a woman.

[28] The 73rd Amendment empowers the Legislature of a State to endow the *Panchayats* with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and to entrust the *Panchayats* at the appropriate levels with authority for the implementation of new schemes for economic development and social justice, including those listed in the Eleventh Schedule (Article 243-G, Indian Constitution).

[29] I discuss this further in Ch.6.

Table 1- Number of *Panchayats* at each level of the PRIs

1. District level	*Zilla Parishads*	30
2. Block or intermediary level	*Panchayat Samitis*	314
3. Village level	*Gram Panchayats*	6234
	Total	**6578**

(Source – Government of Orissa official website[30])

As my research aims to consider women at the *Gram Panchayat* level, which is the lowest of all these levels, I provide below two tables on the members elected to *Gram Panchayats* in Orissa. The two tables show the increase in the number of women in the *Gram Panchayats* after the first two elections following the reforms.

Table 2- Number of Elected *Panchayat* Representatives in the *Gram Panchayats*: 1997 Elections.

Year of Elections	Number of Gram *Panchayats*	Total number of Members	SC's	ST's	Women
1997	5261	81077	7339	11823	28595
2002	6234	93781	15746	25453	33602

(Source – Government of Orissa official website)

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[30] (http://www.orissapanchayat.gov.in/English/default.asp Accessed 10/6/2010)

Table 2 shows an increase in the number of *Gram Panchayats* along with a considerable increase in the number of representatives in each of the groups, which makes it clear that, after the reforms, steps had been taken by the state government to reorganise the borders of the *Gram Panchayats*, giving due consideration to population factors and allowing for an expected increase in the performance level of the *Gram Panchayats*. *Gram Panchayats* were made more powerful and there was a considerable amount of growth in the functions of these bodies. However, it should never be assumed that each village has one *Gram Panchayat*. In order to make *Gram Panchayats* more effective and accessible to their communities, the *Gram Panchayats* in Orissa now consist of about five to six villages each, and sometimes even more than that. However, each of these villages has its own *Gram Sabha* where all the voters of the village are members. The *Gram Sabha* is the lowest level village body, which approves and assesses the performance of the *Gram Panchayats*.

Operational structure of the decentralised system

Apart from providing specific provisions that would enable the *Panchayats* to improve the lives of poor and vulnerable groups, the reforms also strengthened the institution of *Gram Sabha*[31], which was meant to serve as a principal mechanism for transparency and accountability (Johnson, Deshingkar and Start, 2005: 942). The *Gram Sabha* remained as the hidden power houses for the *Panchayats* at the village level and had many powers without any corresponding responsibilities. I argue that there has been no change in the operational structure of this rural local self-government system and yet it was still expected that there would be an effective coexistence between the old *Gram Sabha* and the newly improved *Gram Panchayats*. The newly improved system has to co-operate with the traditional institutions, which provide no space for women. These old councils of elders exercise power in ways unpredicted by the constitution and, as they have no formal status, it is not easy to change them by law (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 2000:

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[31] The 73rd Amendment, 1992, defines *Gram Sabha* as a body consisting of persons registered on the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of a *Panchayat* at the village level. Since 'village level' consists of a village or sometimes a cluster of villages, *Gram Sabha* meetings are usually large gatherings.

46). Therefore, no study of *Gram Panchayats* could be complete without a brief discussion of the *Gram Sabhas* and how gendered these small units are in their patterns of operation.

Vertical line of control

The line of control of the decentralised structure of these rural local self-government units flows from the District level to the village level. At the lowest level is the *Gram Sabha*, which in fact has an important place in the whole system, but is not strictly a part of the PRIs. *Zilla Parishads* are the District level *Panchayats* which operate at the highest level. They have been entrusted with wide powers of monitoring and control over the functions of Block level *Panchayats* and the Block level *Panchayats* are in turn responsible and accountable to them. The Nominees are elected directly by the voters of the *Gram Panchayats* and they represent them at the Block level, which are known the *Panchayat Samitis*. Block level *Panchayats* control the village level *Panchayats* and village level *Panchayats*, or *Gram Panchayats*, remain finally accountable before the lowest level village bodies. So these village bodies, which are constituted of all villagers, are sometimes acting as the deciding institutions for the working of *Gram Panchayats*. These are known as *Gram Sabhas*, or *Palli Sabhas* in some areas. All adult members of the villages are members of the *Gram Sabha*. As there are a number of villages under a *Gram Panchayat*, so *Gram Sabhas* meet in their villages to prepare a list of demands for the development of their own village. They also evaluate the functioning of the *Gram Panchayat* and its different developmental activities specific to their own villages. This is a forum for the ventilating of grievances and often meets in a public and open space, like the temple premises or a playground or sometimes a field on the outskirts of the village. *Gram Sabhas* meet twice a year and it is mandatory for the members and the heads of the *Gram Panchayats* to be present there and to answer all the questions put by the villagers.

The gendered structure of the *Gram Sabha*

Before the reforms of the *Panchayats*, the *Sarpanch* was always a part of the *Gram Sabha* meetings and his (as it was usually a man almost everywhere) presence was considered essential for all the decisions. The women of the village had no role in the meetings of these village bodies as they were primarily meant to solve disputes among the villagers. The presence of the male *Sarpanch* and members of the *Panchayat* was considered important and their decisions were regarded as final in all community affairs. With women coming to power in the *Gram Panchayats* after the reforms, I assume this provision was changed automatically as women were never considered to be the decision-makers over village issues. *Gram Sabhas* are not part of the structure of the *Panchayats*, yet in terms of operation, they are important because they are able to intervene in the functioning of the *Panchayats*. Further, the Orissa *Gram Panchayat* Act makes the presence of the *Sarpanch* and a one third proportion of women mandatory (as a quorum) for any sitting of a *Gram Sabha*.

Conclusion

Evidences in Indian national politics, and also at the regional levels have suggested that the visibility of some prominent women in the echelons of power does not necessarily lead to the enhancement of the status of women as a whole. Therefore, in recent years, the question of the preferential treatment of women as a political group or the provisions of quotas for women to ensure numerical strength and visibility in the political power structure has assumed considerable importance. Women leaders at the time of the drafting of the constitution ignored the possibility of quotas for women as they considered it as an unnecessary privilege (Desai and Thakkar, 2005: 14) and they were confident that future generations of Indian women would succeed on their own merit.

In the Indian Parliament, despite their steadily increasing participation, women have not yet held even 10% of the total seats. India has the largest parliamentary democratic system in the world, spanning more than 60 years of independent

government; however, women have never been visible in great numbers in the political life of the nation. At different times, the Government of India has formulated various policies to enhance their position in national politics, but unfortunately these steps have not been very helpful.

It is of course important to note here that the proposed 84th Amendment Act, 2002 to the Indian constitution, which proposed 33% reservations of seats for women in Parliament and the state legislatures is still struggling to see the light of day. Since then, three successive governments have attempted to pass the Amendment Bill and women members of Parliament, cutting across party lines, have expressed their solidarity in support of the bill. However, on 9th March, 2010 the Women's Reservation Bill, providing for one third women in National and State level legislatures was approved by the Upper House of Parliament. It still has to secure the support of the lower house in order to be implemented. As Amrita Basu remarks, 'there has been a great deal of debate within both the women's movement and political parties about the desirability of reservations for women in the Legislative Assembly and Parliament' (2005: 30). Social science scholars have interpreted this as an impact of the anxiety that was created in the male dominated political field following the success stories of rural women from *Panchayats*. At a grassroots level, these women leaders are seen as a threat to the, until now, male-dominated power structure that underpins Indian politics. The stories of women in *Panchayati Raj* institutions have sent signals of the determined efforts these women have made for change, creating the aforementioned sense of anxiety in male-dominated power structures (Desai and Thakkar, 2005: 117).

Though Indian women leaders of the pre- or post-independence era belonged primarily to the elite class, they never intended to keep the bulk of women excluded from the realm of politics. Some of them worked tirelessly on issues related to the welfare of women and contributed much towards increasing the numbers of women in Indian politics. They fought to include and initiate steps in the system, which would encourage the entry of women belonging to different social groups and women from the marginalised groups into mainstream politics. It is partly due to the constant hard work of elite women leaders that today women in rural India have a greater impact on the decision-making activities of local

bodies. However, other factors, such as the influence of political parties, have also helped the inclusion of more women in local governance. Evidence suggests that individual political leaders, such as Mr. R.K. Hegde or Mr. Biju Pattnaik, and the commitment of the Janata party towards women led to the provisions of reservations for women in Karnataka and Orissa even before the national government legislated on this matter. However, reservation should by no means be seen as an end in itself. Many of these women are still struggling to deal with the burden of responsibility and handle the various obstacles that are coming their way from their traditional cultures. Challenging these conventional ways of thinking was especially important for them in the early years, whilst the opportunity to make their voices heard is merely the beginning of their struggle to gain real empowerment for women in Indian society.

Recently, in August 2009, the Cabinet Committee of the Union Government has decided on an amendment in Article 243 (D) to provide a 50% reservation of seats for women in the *Panchayats* in the next *Panchayat* elections. Even before this provision comes into effect, many states, such as Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, have already implemented a not less than 50% reservation of seats for women in *Panchayats*. Rajasthan and Kerala have declared that they will implement it in the next elections. In fact, in 2006, Bihar became the first state to increase the quota for women in *Panchayats* by providing 'a not less than 50% seats' for women in *Panchayat* institutions. Bringing more women into local government is a bottom-up approach to bring social and cultural changes and thereby pave the way for creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment. However, I find empowerment of these women really problematic considering the barriers that they face. The following chapter deals with the conceptual issues related to the effectiveness of the elected women leaders in these grassroots democratic institutions.

Chapter Three: Conceptual Issues

Introduction

Women have a considerably lower presence than men in elected political bodies throughout the world and this year they made up only 18.4% of MPs globally (Quota Project, IDEA, 2010). The share of female representation in the legislative bodies of all 120 world democracies is negligible, although the percentage of votes from men and women in elections was almost the same in 2000 (Mudaliar, 2005: 9). This imbalance has been challenged over the years in different parts of the world and systematic attempts are being made to set it right. One of the most popular devices has been preferential treatment or the reservation of seats for women to provide them with a 'critical place' in the political field. Gender quotas have worked successfully in some parts of the western world to bring a gender balance into politics. My research intends to assess the importance of quotas as a way to bring a gender balance to local governance in India, asking how far these gender quotas have affected the nature of politics at the grassroots level. The case of affirmative action in India is crucial, as the identity of a woman is layered within the various intersecting forces of caste, class, religion and ethnicity and is not manifested only in terms of 'gender'. This social reality is reflected in political institutions like the PRIs[32] (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 1999). I consider this to be important, as *Panchayats* used to be elite bodies and women remained excluded from these institutions largely until the one-third reservation was provided.

In this chapter I deal with some key conceptual issues which might help in addressing a number of queries, such as: how far has public life impacted on the personal lives of the rural, poor and mostly uneducated women who are involved in *Panchayats* and who are now on quota, and how effective has their presence in the *Panchayats* actually been? I first investigate the previous scholarship on some important concepts and then proceed to my own understanding of the present

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[32] PRI is used as a short form for *Panchayati Raj* institutions.

research. Understanding the position of women at the decision-making level in rural India involves untangling some important conceptual issues, such as: critical mass, citizenship, political participation and empowerment, all of which are closely connected to each other. When I say that these concepts are interlinked, I mean to suggest that the provision of quotas recognises the exclusion of women and their absence in substantial numbers from public bodies. Furthermore, while quotas may provide the much-demanded 'critical mass', their real performance largely depends on the cultural sanctions which make women's role as active or passive citizens very complicated. Conflicting social customs can also limit the knowledge that women have as to how they could enjoy their citizenship rights, which in turn has an impact upon their political participation. Understanding this inter-linkage is very important and it is interesting to see whether or not it results in a new perspective on empowerment for women.

The concept of 'critical mass'

It has been argued that women in positions of power have always introduced women-focused measures (Afshar, 2010). Though the presence of even one woman can make a difference, long-term significant changes can only be expected to be realised when there is a definite number of women who are motivated to represent women's concerns. Feminist literature refers to this need for a significant minority of women to affect political change as 'critical mass' (Lovenduski and Karam, 2002: 2). Quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a 'critical minority' of 30 or 40% (Dahlerup, 2002: 1). Dahlerup further states that, in the 1980s, the 'critical mass' argument was primarily applied to situations where women had not reached 30% in parliaments or local councils. Consequently, the argument suggested that it was unrealistic to expect major changes until women's representation had reached a critical mass; a qualitative shift is supposed to occur when women exceed a proportion of about 30% in an organization. In this way, a historical move from a small to a large minority is significant, and the guaranteed presence of a greater percentage of women may mean the occurrence of real political change in politics at national or local levels. Hust also refers to a 'critical mass' as a prerequisite for change (2002: 6). In a traditional society, if changes in the position of women need to occur, bringing a considerable percentage of those women into the political space becomes one of

the most frequently suggested steps. However, it is interesting to note that in Dahlerup's subsequent works, while revisiting the 'critical mass' theory, she qualifies her own suggestions by replacing the concept of a 'critical mass' with a new concept of what a 'critical act' may be; she defines this as an act that will considerably impact upon the position of the minority and lead to future change. As examples of critical acts, she mentions cases where women have begun to recruit other women and the introduction of quotas for women (2005: 3). In searching for empirical evidence supporting a critical mass theory, the difficulty surrounding the concept of women 'making a difference' is a major problem (Dahlerup, 2005: 5). Debates around provisions for the presence of women in a definite number or percentage within democratic institutions has been linked with 'women making a difference' in politics. Dahlerup's concept of 'critical mass' has been considered important by many feminists.

While supporting quotas as changing history for women in some parts of the world, advocates are also critical about their effect and argue that the results of quotas are modest in the quest for equality (Peters, 1999: 295). It is also argued that fulfilling the quota system objective depends largely on the process of implementation (Dahlerup, 1998: 5). While I consider Dahlerup's (1998) arguments about the need for a 'critical mass' important for the Indian context, I would also argue, with Childs and Krook (2008), that 'critical mass' is not only about an increased number of women, rather it also consists of the opportunities for women to build up networks among themselves and create a support system. The authors rightly suggest that there are 'multiple possibilities in the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation' (2008: 734). While deconstructing the 'critical mass' concept of Dahlerup, they stress the need for the 'passage of women-friendly policy outcomes' rather than their increased representation (2008: 726). I engage more with Childs' and Crook's arguments later on when I discuss women making a difference. I argue that both an increased number and their performance matter. In grassroots level democratic institutions in India, where the actors are rural, uneducated or less educated women, and considering their cultural background, quotas could be supported as an effective tool for increasing the number of women, and this may eventually lead to their effective participation, at least in some cases. Some authors believe that quota

results are mixed, but lead to greater links between government institutions and give a greater focus to women's rights (Rai, 2003: 38). So, quotas obviously emerge as an important affirmative action for bringing about gender balance and gender justice in politics.

However, as discussed in the previous chapter, quotas for women in India had been contested over the years on the grounds that women should be elected on their merits. But as Rai argues, mere quantitative representation is not enough, there has to be parity (2001: 94). 33% seats for women is definitely an important step for creating the 'critical mass' in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions, but whether or not it has led to gender justice in this part of rural Orissa can only be assessed by revealing both the situatedness of the elected women in *Gram Panchayats* and their participation in both private and public worlds. As I set out to investigate how far women's new public role has changed their own perspectives and whether or not this has led to their effectiveness in the public field, I discuss the issues concerning their citizenship in a very underdeveloped rural setting.

Questions of citizenship

Women were never systematically or constitutionally excluded from the public sphere in India, but patriarchal constructs and practices have always substantially hampered women's equal representation in the political sphere. Citizenship may be understood as a concept which entitles individuals to certain rights and duties by recognising their belongingness or conferring a specific status on them. However, the history of citizenship has followed many different paths in countries across the globe (Yuval-Davis, 2007: 15). Citizenship has been historically linked to the privileges of membership in a particular political community, which also enables its members to participate on an equal basis with fellow citizens in making those collective decisions that regulate social life. I draw on Bellamy's point that essentially citizenship implies a capacity to participate in the political and socio-economic life of the community (2008: 13). However, these capacities are never uniform over time or for different groups in society. This lack of uniformity and consistency is more apparent in India, which presents a complex social order with different castes, classes, tribes and many other bases of stratification like religion, language and the urban/rural divide. These have

worked as factors inhibiting the capacity of Indian women to enjoy citizenship rights to their full.

The gendering of citizenship lies in the creation of the public-private divide, whereby male domination and female subordination are structured by the strict division of hierarchical domains, where males belong to the public and females to the private (Turbin, 2003 in Chari, 2009: 48). As Molyneux writes,

> Politics more than any other realm, because of its condensation of power and authority, has remained largely a monopoly of men. This is so empirically, as evidenced by the minuscule presence of women occupying political power in every country of the world. But it is also true symbolically in that the attributes considered necessary for political effectiveness are seen as quintessentially masculine. As a consequence, political women...are seen as deviants, the trespassers or the guests in a terrain which does not fundamentally belong to them (Molyneux, 1986: x).

The central idea in this public/private divide is male dominance and the boundary between what is seen and what goes unseen. Most of the private workload imposed on women by tradition is not properly valued. The public sphere on the other hand does not belong to women historically and women are considered deviant and unwomanly when they attempt to engage in public activities.

In a country like India, where the phrase 'women's place is in the home' still defines women's position and participation in public spaces or working outside the home are still considered secondary (Omvedt, 2005: 4746), millions of rural Indian women have responded to the provision of gender quotas in *Panchayats* with great enthusiasm, presenting themselves in large numbers and fighting against many odds. The main reason for encouraging women to step out of their homes into the political world was that 'their presence would herald the erosion of one area of the sexual division of labour between men and women in society, men in the outside public world and women in the private world of the home' (Shah and Gandhi, 1991: 22).

Analysing the ways in which differences between categories of citizenship lead to different types of identities, Chari says,

The passive citizen is a recipient of certain benefits from the state, which include the right to protection, access to basic necessities and liberties. A passive citizen hardly plays a role in the public sphere and she has a private space protected by the state and granted to her as a citizen. The active citizen on the other hand engages with the state and the ruling elite to negotiate for her rights (2009: 47).

So, passive citizens are on the receiving end of certain benefits provided by the state, whereas active citizens are constantly in negotiation with the state and civil society to provide them with an enabling environment. I would like to investigate whether the elected women representatives of the rural local institutions in Orissa are negotiating with the state and the civil society to have an active citizenship status or they are still in the position of the beneficiaries, even after this quota is in place for them. I argue that active participation in public may lead to a shift in the status of citizenship for these women. I discuss first the importance of political participation in the Indian social context, as the elected women representatives are expected to perform a set of definite political actions in the *Gram Panchayats*, and then I move on to examine the possible general obstacles in the way of their active participation in this public field.

Political participation

Political participation denotes citizens' ability to negotiate with governing bodies through voting, contesting as candidates, campaigning for themselves and others' candidacy, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or collectively (Vissandjee et al., 2005: 124). Exercising the right to vote alone, therefore, does not denote the fulfilment of citizenship rights and political participation is an all-inclusive concept which consists of all these above-mentioned attributes. For the women in the *Gram Panchayats*, however, political participation consists of certain specific political activities within the defined area of their operation. While looking into the question of the participation of women in *Gram Panchayats*, earlier studies considered some specific actions as the important indices of participation (Jayal, 2006; Vidya, 2007; Buch, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Panda,

2002; Satpathy 2003). Summarizing these indices, activities such as attendance of meetings, involvement in village work and different committees and above all their participation in *Panchayat* activities emerged as the four most important indices of participation for the women in *Gram Panchayats*. However, all of these above-mentioned activities demand a lot of time and involvement on the part of the elected women. Apart from the conservative cultural norms of a patriarchal society, there are also other general barriers which lie in the way of their participation.

In India, women are not seen as a single political category but are instead divided by caste, class or religion in different areas and in different ways (Hust, 2002: 2). As most of the women who are elected to the *Gram Panchayats* are illiterate they are not in a position to understand the schemes of the Government, which are written in a complex language. The Block Development Officer[33] and the Secretary, both Government officials, do not usually cooperate with the women members. Previous studies have found that the elected women members of the *Gram Panchayats* often sit silently in *Gram Sabha* meetings and even if they attend sometimes and do talk, no-one listens to them sincerely (Singla, 2007: 251, Vidya, 2007: 234).

As I noted in Ch. 2, the *Gram Sabha* meetings are usually an all male gathering. Attending a *Gram Sabha* meeting is never considered a necessary act for the women, so women members or *Sarpanches* find no point in going there since it might mean finally disobeying social and family norms. Previous researchers have found that, the provision of quotas brought women to the *Panchayats*, but that does not give them a direct voice in village matters, which are of a more personal nature and therefore involve a lot of caste and class consciousness in rural Orissa (Hust, 2002; Panda, 2002). *Gram Sabhas* are generally headed by people from the leading families of the village who were landlords in years gone by or were considered important in the village for similar reasons. In some villages more highly educated people headed the meetings. I would like to investigate what happens in the *Gram Panchayats* which are headed by women since the presence

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[33] The BDO or the Block Development Officer is the administrative head of the Block and the Secretary is an assistant appointed by him to assist the elected political representatives in the *Gram Panchayats*.

of *Sarpanches* at *Gram Sabha* meetings is made mandatory by the Orissa *Gram Panchayat* Act.

There are also a number of women members who are systematically harassed by politicians, for example, local assembly members or local Parliament members, leading to Mathew's query (2003: 3) regarding whether MPs and MLAs really understood the full meaning and structural implications for the polity when they approved the two constitutional amendments. *Panchayats* have not worked wonders, but a few small early steps have been made. These have happened despite the efforts of those MPs and MLAs who have worked overtime to undermine them. *Panchayati Raj*, which aims to give power to people and especially intends to ensure the involvement of women from different sections of society in the decision-making process in rural local government, will remain a pipe-dream if things are merely left to the politicians and the bureaucrats (Mathew, 2003: 3).[34] This precisely describes the interference of the Members of Assembly and Members of Parliament who feel uncomfortable in accepting women as leaders of local self-government.

There are also social and cultural barriers in the form of double burdens like household chores and there are also restrictions on mobility – issues that a number of studies consider common for women of all classes (Singla, 2007; Datta, 1998; Hust, 2002 etc.).

Mohanty, in her studies of *Panchayats* in different parts of India, has admitted that, following women's inclusion into grassroots politics in large numbers to fill reserved seats, violence against women has increased. A woman *Sarpanch* was killed in Madhya Pradesh because she defied her husband and called a meeting of the village assembly to discuss the budget agenda (2001: 9). While expressing concern over the acute violence between castes in different parts of the country, she describes the case of one woman member of *Nagarpalika* in an urban area of

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[34] This is important as George Mathew is constantly engaged in research in this field. He was the Director of the Indian Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, which is known for its efforts to encourage studies and projects related to women in *Panchayats*. Popularly known as ISS, this institution celebrates April 24th, the date of enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act, as Women's Empowerment Day each year and it invites elected women leaders of different *Panchayats* from around the country and encourages them by making awards in many categories.

Tamil Nadu, who was killed because she wanted to bring piped water to her ward. However, except on very rare occasions, specific cases of violence against women members are largely absent in the *Gram Panchayats* of Orissa.

However, while discussing the participation of women in the politics of *Gram Panchayats*, scholars suggest that the women who are elected on quota come from families with a political background (Jain, 1996; Mohanty, 1995). So, the participation of women in the *Gram Panchayats* intersects with the stereotypes of women or scepticism surrounding women's lack of ability to manage public activities. Some studies express concern over the fact that elected women were proxied by their husbands or fathers and, while the *Panchayat* meetings were being conducted, it was the father or the husband or sometimes the son who exercised the power, while women did babysitting or engaged in other household chores. The concept of 'proxy women' has led to much debate among feminist writers. Whilst Jain and Mohanty see it as quite superficial or as only relevant in the early years, others such as Buch and Baviskar argue that it still continues in some parts of India. While the earlier studies, which were conducted in the first few years after women came to power via quota, were concerned about women acting out a proxy role for their husbands and fathers (D'Lima, 1983; Mohanty, 1995; Datta, 1998), studies from recent years are more optimistic about women's effectiveness (Dogra, 2008; Pattnaik, 2008; Mathews, 2003 etc.). Mohanty was sceptical about the role of women in her first (1995) study but changed her position in subsequent studies, indicating the absence of proxy women and noting that women have gained immense confidence over the past few years (Mohanty, 2002; 2003). In a very recent study of 33 elected women from *Panchayats* in two districts of Jammu and Kashmir, Kaul and Shahni observe that the majority of women had 'complete freedom of expression in the meetings' (2009: 32). Certainly, in the early years, women who came to power were mainly from families whose men-folk were in politics. Secondly, and in many cases, the women were not seen to be the *de facto* decision makers; some of the women of the houses who gained power and position might have been simultaneously forced to submit to the dictates of the men too. However, in Orissa, one would always come across the frequent use of new terms like *'Pradhan Pati'* (husband of the Chair Person), the *'Sarpanch Pati'* (husband of the Head of the *Gram Panchayat*)

or *Pradhani* (Lady Head) or even the '*member pati*' (husband of the ward member). As Pai suggests that even contesting an election, getting involved in the whole process of the election and becoming a *Pradhani* (Lady Head) could make a difference in their lives (1998: 1010). On the other hand, I also argue that this makes negotiations easier for women. These newly coined terminologies, which developed with the women coming to power in the *Gram Panchayats*, in fact have been helpful for the women. In the first place, it goes against a very well-established common social practice in rural Orissa to identify a woman as 'someone's wife' or 'someone's mother' and secondly, it elevates the position of the men in social gatherings. The men feel indirectly empowered and are also traditionally entrusted by society to take decisions on behalf of their wives, even when their wives are in directly elected political positions. I would like to see whether the newly gained experience of women in the elected offices help to make them feel empowered or not. This may be slightly different from political empowerment, which is considered as a process by which women acquire the same recognition as men (Satpathy, 2003: 1), but it is interesting to see whether it makes them more able and confident to participate in the development process of society through political institutions. An understanding of potential improvements in their quality of life is integral to developing a new perspective on empowerment.

Empowerment

Empowerment is largely about 'ordinary, common people, rather than politicians, experts and other socially or culturally advantaged persons' (Betielle, 1999: 590). The empowerment of women has been one of the most popular themes on the state's agenda for the last few years in India. This term has been constantly under discussion for some years, as it is also seen as one of the objectives behind the quotas or preferential treatment of women in elected bodies. Focussing on women in Indian *Panchayats,* Jain observes that women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources and officials and, most of all, by challenging men (Jain, 1996: 10). She further argues that women, who were left on the periphery of political and public life for a long time, are empowered

now with new confidence and are attempting to improve the quality of their own as well as the community's lives. They are bringing their experience of private places to the public with them, 'their experience in governance of civic society into governance of the state' (Jain, 1996: 6).

Empowerment is surely about the action and performance of the actors rather than just about a policy decision of the state. I support Childs and Krook's (2008: 726) argument that there is a need to untangle the inter-linkage between the presence of more women and the appearance of women-friendly policies for understanding 'critical mass'. No doubt, numbers count, but more important is the effectiveness of the women in *Gram Panchayats* who have come to power on quota. This is one of the important issues to be investigated. However, it is also important to throw some light here on how women make a difference. The next section examines how the existing literature considers the presence of women in *Panchayats* and whether or not it leads to more women-friendly outcomes.

Because India is a vast country with different levels of literacy among women in its various geographical areas, alongside a difference in economic and social status depending on regional patterns and prevailing traditions, what is true for the northern states may not hold equal importance for the women of the north east or south. Therefore, while Datta's study[35] of 12 all-women *Panchayats* in Maharashtra reveals that family members' support for women entering *Panchayats* were interwoven with anxieties like 'who will make *Chapattis*?' or 'so long as you mind the kids', another study, by Athreya and Rajeswari (1998), undertaken in the remote villages of Tamilnadu, in southern India, speaks of very good attendance and active participation by women representatives in *Panchayat* meetings. When researching their socio-economic profile, it becomes apparent that, while some studies express concern over the political links of these women with prominent male members, which make them vulnerable, there are also some hopeful observations: for example, the women on quota were predominantly

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[35] This study is mostly referred to by researchers as it is one of the earliest studies undertaken on the role and problems of women in *Panchayats*. The study is based on fieldwork conducted in 12 all-women *Panchayats* of Maharashtra, during a nine-months period over 1994-1995 (see Datta's Introduction to the book), and the work was first published by Alochana: Pune, Maharashtra in 1998. However, the later version of the book was published in 2002 by Stree: Calcutta.

(97%) first generation entrants to politics (Buch, 2005b: 247). In more recent years, studies show that more and more women are entering into politics as first generation politicians (Patnaik, 2008; Singla, 2007; Desai and Thakkar, 2007).

In some parts of India there is a hopeful scenario wherein the image of women's empowerment is, in reality, not so grim. More importantly, recent studies show an improvement in the power equation. Those women who came to power at the beginning with the help of the male members of their families have learnt the art of decision making and over time have started to make their presence felt at all levels of the decision-making process. Studies indicate that the working culture of the *Panchayats* has changed because of the presence of its women members. Mohanty argues from her own experience that almost 80-90% of all elected women attend *Panchayat* meetings regularly. She sees the presence of women in such a considerable proportion as making democracy more participatory than before, at least at the grassroots level (Mohanty, 2001: 5).

In her study of *Panchayats* in the state of Orissa, Mohanty observes that the introduction of reservations has contributed towards the presence of women at almost all *Gram Panchayat* meetings. What has been most contested in the literature is whether women really work in a different way from their male counterparts. Baviskar suggests that women think of tap water and toilets while men think of roads and buses, that is, women see the value of education in their daily lives. Illiterate women often regret their plight and claim how much more effective and efficient they would have been in their *Panchayat* work if only they had had an education (Baviskar, 2003: 6). In her study of *Panchayats* based in Orissa, West Bengal and Maharashtra, Nirmala Buch also observes that elected women representatives are more concerned with issues like water supply, electricity and road construction, all of which would enhance the quality of life in their villages. They are also fighting for pensions for widows and elder citizens (2000: 150).

It is important to note that, since women in rural areas have been promoted to the decision-making level, they have taken assistance from others – in most cases, this means from the men who are also members of the *Gram Panchayats* – so as to better understand the procedures of working in *Panchayats*, procedures which are

traditionally written in very complex governmental language. I have always been aware that the instructions from government offices in India are known for their particular use of English and/or typically difficult terms, as well as a very complex version of Hindi or any other local language, which even educated people sometimes struggle to understand. It is likely that this has led to a bid by these women to increase their own level of understanding, which would consequently allow them to get rid of the interference of men in *Panchayats* who are keen to exercise their power. Finally, this has had a positive effect on the literacy level among rural women, an accomplishment which is an indirect impact of women's empowerment. As Mohanty observes, the female literacy rate has jumped from 39% to 53% within a decade of women's empowerment in *Panchayats* (Mohanty, 2001: 6).

If it is sometimes the level of literacy which accelerates the participation of women in grassroots politics, it has also been experienced that in other parts of India where the female literacy level is traditionally low, women have proved themselves to be good leaders when they receive timely intervention from the government and an active support system from society. Singla, in her study of women's participation in *Panchayati Raj* in a northern Indian State, Haryana, presents a different view. While Haryana is characterised by an alarming sex ratio in favour of men, (i.e. 864:1000) and this is a state known for its gender discrimination against women, in 1994 it came forward with a very progressive *Panchayati Raj* Act in response to the requirements of the 73rd Amendment. The Act's mandatory requirements have necessitated the participation of women in the decision-making process at the grassroots level (Singla, 2007: 208). Singla's study reveals that nearly half of the women members feel that there has been a positive change in the attitude of family members and that this change is acknowledged by the community too. The increase in levels of awareness and knowledge is looked upon by members of both sexes as a direct gain of their political experiences.

However, this is a remarkable development which reflects the fact that women are fighting against different cultural and social barriers. Datta shares a different experience when he suggests that bureaucracy in rural areas has to be gender sensitive. In Tamilnadu, 66 out of the 98 *Panchayat* presidents removed on various grounds were women. He discusses a woman president of Thiruvely's

Gram Panchayat in Kerala, who faced a lot of humiliation during a meeting and was abused by one of her male colleagues, and also a very effective woman president in Andhra Pradesh, whose popularity caused her male colleagues to became envious and eventually organise a vote of no-confidence motion against her, leading to her defeat (Datta, 2005: 273).

The upsurge of women's power was very noticeable after the provision for reservations came into effect. The entry of women into politics in such prominent numbers has led to a change in the nature of Indian politics. This is expected to lead to the healthy restoration of India's present dysfunctional political system where, even today, a young collector[36] (who is a bureaucrat) can rule like a colonial master over his district and dismiss all the *Panchayats* at will. This politics-bureaucracy nexus is dangerous for democratic health, but it may be corrected by the entry of women in large numbers. As Kishwar says: 'while it is legitimate for women to demand a share of the pie, it is equally important to ensure the pie is worth eating and there is enough there for everyone to share' (Kishwar, 1997: 5). What I have set out to ask is whether Indian women really have the freedom to choose their priorities. In other words, reflecting on Kishwar's words, can the rural women ensure everyone's equal share in the administration of these local democratic units? Jain argues that the sheer number of women that the *Panchayat Raj* institutions have brought into the political system has made a difference. But the difference is also qualitative as these women are also importing their experience in the governance of civic society into the governance of the state. In this way, they are making the state sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice (1996: 6).

Conclusion

Assessing these qualitative changes may not be an easy task. However, I consider doing so as undoubtedly valuable. There are innumerable barriers that exist to thwart women entering Indian politics, even excluding the more prominent and visible ones. Women are able to start dismantling all of these in their own

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[36] The collector is the Head of the District Administration in India.

capacity through achieving a share in the decision-making process. As politics has been so inhospitable a place for women for so many years, even talented women have found it difficult to maintain a hold on the traditional power structure, especially if they are married and have families to look after. If the nature and demands of politics are such that a woman has to choose between her children and politics, even women in the most advanced countries would be likely to avoid politics. So perhaps this is a reason for finding leaders like Sonia Gandhi, Mayawati, Jayalalita, Maneka Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee or Uma Bharti in the list of successful women politicians in Indian politics, all of whom are either single or widowed (Kishwar, 1996). Kishwar observes that successful women politicians with an equally successful family life are rare in India. Indian women do not want to risk their family life and do not want to let other members of their family suffer because of their public life. Therefore political work which does not take them far away from home on a regular basis is the best possible solution for enhancing the participation of women in active politics; here, decentralised politics like the *Panchayati Raj* institutions, which decide about people's lives at a community level, are the best possible resort. So, the empowerment of women at a grassroots level, through important amendments in the Indian constitution, is suggestive of an area ripe for research. It raises a number of issues regarding the enormous new challenges that Indian women meet in terms of exercising real power. It is not only cultural barriers, nor the lack of sufficient and timely structural interventions, which makes their task a trying one, there are also a number of unseen factors, all yet to be explored. While scholars consider 33% as a substantial number to bring about the 'critical mass', they are also doubtful about the effectiveness of the legislative measures and reforms in creating an enabling environment for women's effective role in politics (Rai, 2001: 95). As social scientists, and feminists in particular, are concerned worldwide to increase the political status of women through different timely structural interventions and innovative ways of resolving the problem of the under representation of women in democracy, I wonder how India's rural women are struggling to handle this provision of the reservation of seats for them in the power structure. Each day, along with the stories of success and survival, stories of denial and exclusion or the systematic attempt of the power brokers to make their tasks more difficult, are also coming to our attention. Today, 15 years after the 73rd Amendment Act of the constitution of

India was enacted, women in the lowest strata of democratic hierarchies are still facing unexplored emotional, social, cultural and political barriers. My study intends to help by making a specific attempt to identify these barriers in Orissa. The recent Economic Survey (February 26th 2009) from the Indian government states that Orissa is the poorest of all the states with the lowest per capita income. This study will attempt to study how poor rural women from this part of India are managing to exercise their political power amidst this bleak scene of poverty, illiteracy, social constraints, cultural barriers and lack of infrastructure. In doing so, I consider that getting to know the elected women representatives from close quarters is essential. The next chapter deals with the methodology and my experiences of data collection in a rural setting in Orissa.

Figure 1- Political Map of India

At: http://www.indianorphanages.net/home/india/indiamap.html (Accessed, 02/07/2010).
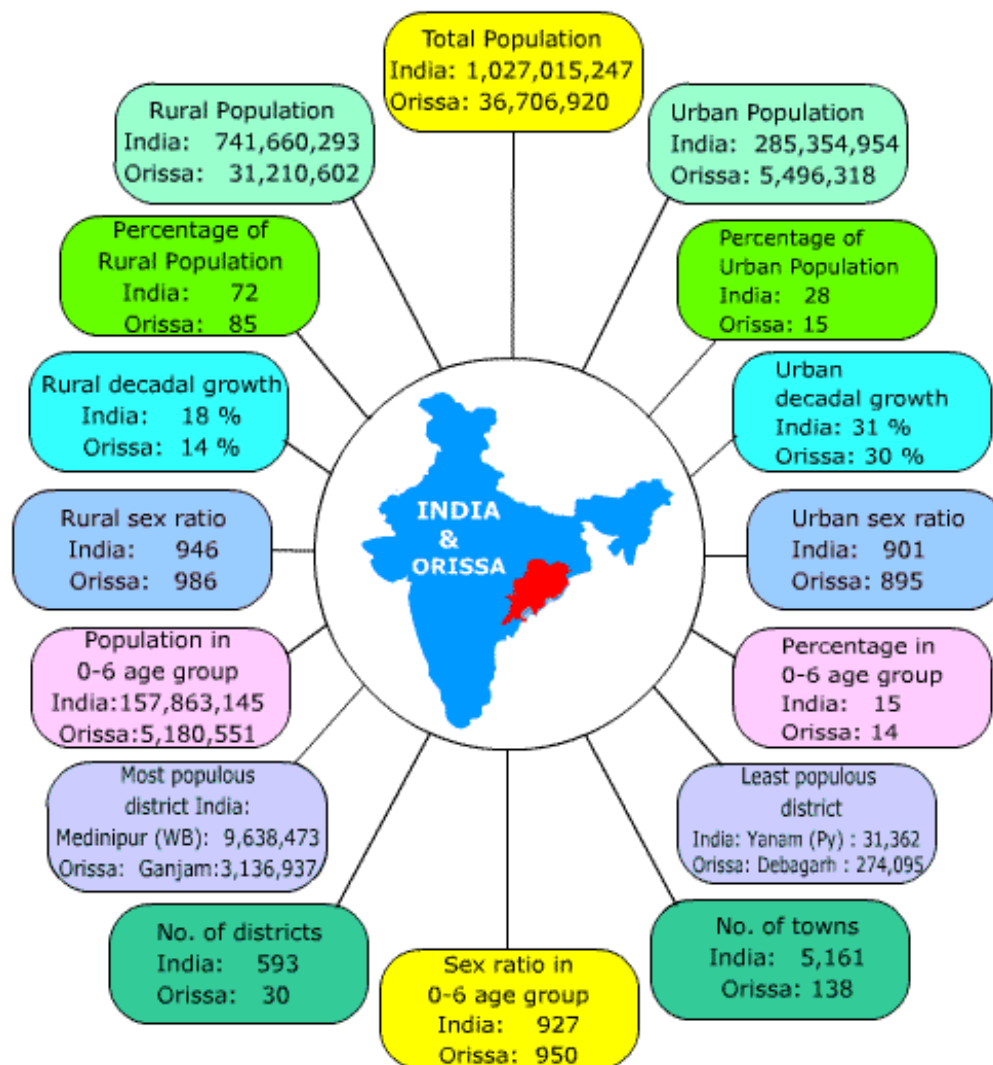
Figure 2- Orissa Demographic Profile At:
http://www.orissapanchayat.gov.in/English/Images/ind1.gif (Accessed,
01/07/2010).
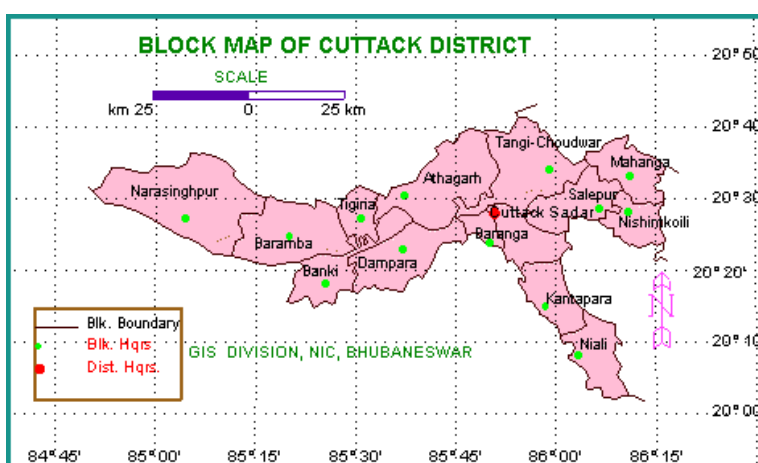
Figure 3- Cuttack Block Map, at: http://as.ori.nic.in/gis/html/district/ctc/blk.htm
(Accessed, 01/07/2010).

Chapter Four: Researching Women's Voices in Decision Making in Rural India

Introduction

The aim of my investigation is to analyse critically the effects of the 73rd Amendment Act to the Indian constitution on the lives of rural Indian women and to examine its impacts. I will consider how rural women who have come to the *Gram Panchayats* on quota are negotiating barriers at different levels. In 1992, when the 73rd Amendment to the constitution of India was drafted, many questioned where the large numbers of willing women candidates would be found (Ramadevi, 1998: 21). Initially many women's groups opposed the introduction of quotas because they believed that it would lead to what is known as 'proxy reservation', that is women controlled by their men (Basu, 2000: 171). However, the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 is considered to have envisioned people's participation in the process of planning, decision-making, implementation and the delivery system by strengthening the *Panchayati Raj* systems (Satpathy, 2003: 2).

My investigation is limited to women in the lowest level institutions of this system (the *Gram Panchayats*) who are working in different capacities in eight *Gram Panchayats* of Cuttack Sadar Block, Orissa, India. My research considers to what extent the *Panchayati Raj* institutions have been effective in enabling these rural women of India to play a role in policy making. Does the intervention of the state through the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992, which came into force in 1993, aid their effective participation at a decision-making level? It will ask whether or not their participation has led to empowerment. Are these new women leaders of rural India able to change their self-image? If so, do they avoid co-option and pervasive patriarchal forces? This is a feminist research project and I have used qualitative methods such as participant observation, focus groups and semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews.

As I have discussed in Ch. 3, there is a lack of recent literature in my research area. There is a clear gap as there have been very few studies on the *Panchayats*

of Orissa and no work has ever been undertaken on women in the *Panchayats* of this District. As I designed the study, I started going through the literature available in my university library and online. As I read different available literatures on similar studies, I became convinced that participant observation would be helpful for my study, and feminist methodology is flexible enough to allow the use of different methods and techniques of qualitative research depending on the nature of the study and as and when they are required. So, combining methods like interviewing in the form of formal or informal interactions while living inside the social setting and arranging for an all-women focus group to understand the social networking and their collective perspective on important issues served the purposes of my study. Feminist scholars have always emphasised the importance of listening to, recording and understanding women's own descriptions and accounts (Maynard, 1995: 12); this strategy has enabled me to develop a holistic approach towards the role of these women in the political structure. Observing the position of these women in their disadvantaged world and listening to their words carefully to extract the meaning they give to their experiences and using their meanings within the research context has been central to my study.

My research and my position as a researcher

As a researcher, I am working across cultures. Although Indian by birth, I am both an insider and an outsider. My surname indicates that I belong to a high-caste family, which further makes my 'outsider' position prominent. My urban upbringing also creates a difference as my research setting was a rural one. So, I was apprehensive about my participants' degree of acceptance of my identity. I was conscious about my identity as an insider/outsider from the very beginning. I was an insider primarily as I have a 'stronger understanding of the dynamics and play of social relationships that inform the situation under investigation' (Brayton, 1997: 5). I was aware that my insider identity was relevant to my study as India presents a stratified picture of a society on different bases like caste, class and tribes, which leads to an unimaginable gap continuing to dominate social lives in contemporary India. More than 50 years since untouchability was declared illegal, there are still large groups of 'backward' castes that remain distinctly poorer than

the rest of society (Basu 2006: 3). My participants were from three different categories of women, namely, Scheduled Castes (who are largely known as untouchables in society, especially in rural areas, even now), Scheduled Tribes (mostly living in inaccessible areas and distinctly marginalised)[37] and General Caste[38] (OBC and High-caste). Of late, the General castes have been further sub-divided into two different categories for purposes like the reservation of seats in educational institutions or government-sector employment etc., and some of these General Castes are now known as 'Other Backward Castes' or OBCs, while the other group is excluded from any preferential treatments as they are known as High Caste or General Caste.

As my sample consisted of women belonging to different categories of Indian society, apart from caste or class, there was also the issue of language involved in the research process. In a multi-lingual country like India where one can expect to come across a new language every hundred miles or even less, dealing with language while researching in indigenous communities is a real challenge. My task was made even more difficult as I went to a tribal hamlet where people spoke in their own dialect. Though I was able to understand it (as it had many terms taken from the national language Hindi and some others from my mother tongue Oriya) and even attempted to talk to them in their language, my limited understanding of

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[37] Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are communities defined as socially disadvantaged and recognised as the most marginalised groups in the Schedules of the Constitution of India.

[2] In 1980, as a result of the findings of the Mandal Commission, reservations for OBCs were added to the list of reserved categories. A range of 25 to 37 percent of India's population belongs to OBCs (Nussbaum 2002: 10). As per the recommendations made by the Mandal Commission, reservation of seats in educational institutions and a quota in recruitment to different sectors of employment for people belonging to caste groups that do not belong to the so-called 'High Castes' was implemented. There was large-scale agitation by the masses throughout India after the report of this Commission was made public as it did not take into consideration the economic condition of the people and it was alleged that there was large-scale discrimination in the process of identification of 'other backward castes'. The discontent and resistance was so considerable both inside and outside Parliament that it led to the resignation of the then Prime Minister, Mr. V. P. Singh.

their culture and the fact that I was staying with them for a relatively short period of time meant that communication was not at all easy. I could hardly manage in their language, which was very different from my own. There were terms like '*mahuli*', '*dhangdi*', '*bua*', and many more which have no parallel meanings in my mother tongue. There were many such terms which were used in their day to day conversations and I had to find the closest meaning in my own language. The people in the tribal hamlet called me '*Maa*', which literally means 'mother' in my language, but they were using it out of affection (like addressing a daughter). So, issues of both cultural and linguistic translation are involved in my study. I discuss more this later on while discussing data management.

My experience with access/gatekeepers

I was constantly in touch with my school friend Nagen (who was then a permanent resident of the first study location Arilo, but now lives in a nearby city) before leaving the United Kingdom for my fieldwork during the whole month of June. He was very helpful in providing me with all the information I needed about my proposed locations of study. The day (on 2nd of July, 2008) that I reached the first location was a disempowering experience for me as a researcher. I arrived there with Nagen (who was supposed to act as my gatekeeper), with my preconceived ideas of disadvantaged and marginalised groups (as described in the constitution of India itself). I found the people very reluctant to devote any time to my queries or interests. The previous *Sarpanch* (the ex-leader of the *Gram Panchayat*) was surrounded by a group of elderly people and they were busy discussing problems such as bad road conditions inside the village during the ongoing rainy season, as well as the scarcity of fodder and firewood due to continuous rain. They were sitting on a village *mandap*[39] and did not show much interest in my introduction by my friend. I felt as if people knew Nagen, but they didn't have any interest in him. Someone asked me if I would like to have some water (the usual way of greeting a stranger) but they did not ask me to take a seat, as they were on a

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[39] A round cement platform meant to be a gathering place for villagers; this is very common in Indian villages. The people of the village meet there to seek suggestions from the elderly and respectable people of the village.

mandap, which is a rather male-dominated place. Women do not sit with men in Indian villages on a *mandap,* which is also used as a location for village meetings. I remained standing and began talking to the men gathered around and wanted to make my identity clear to them. I understood that tribal people should not have any adverse impressions of me as I was with a male, but something was very conspicuous about their attitude towards me. This was unexpected and I perceived their sense of discomfort as I had arrived in their village without proper information and perhaps they were not prepared for me and my research.

Following this, I went to meet the *Sarpanch*, the woman who was elected as the leader of the *Gram Panchayat* and some of the women ward members with whom Nagen had previously discussed my research plans. He led me through narrow and muddy lanes, which were difficult to walk on, and then we reached a big field where women were busy with the manual transplantation in the paddy field. It was raining and I was almost losing my balance walking on the narrow lanes with my umbrella in one hand. Finally, we reached the first ever elected woman *Sarpanch* of that *Gram Panchayat*, who was among the women working. Though she had been informed about my arrival on that day, she was very reluctant to give me any attention and remained busy working. I felt rejected, especially as it was just the beginning of my fieldwork, and decided not to meet anyone else on that day. I requested that I return the following day and asked for some time with them then. I anticipated before my field experience that my respondents would have the power to choose to talk to me or not and they could just disclose what they wanted to. After the experience of my first day, I felt confused about how to handle the power relationship in this tribal area. As I started to analyse the situation in my mind, I found the answer to my uncertainties. When Nagen talked about these people and their reaction towards me and as he tried to make me feel at ease, I realised that they had taken me as a part of the state administration. People of this locality often feel neglected by the government administration and, as these are migrant people who have only lived here for the last 50 years, they have ongoing struggles regarding access to different government beneficiary schemes. For them, Nagen, who was known to be a government employee, was a face of the government whom they did not like. So as my gatekeeper was not acceptable to my respondents, I returned back home tired and confused.

However, I did not give up and made a second attempt, arriving there two days later with my whole family. I was purposefully dressed very simply and I took my seven year old daughter with me. As Letherby suggests, though it is difficult to disguise some of the aspects of our identity that can affect data collection, there are other aspects, like adornment and dress, which can easily be adapted to the research situation. So 'dressing up' or 'dressing down' in this way may not be about getting the best data, but about 'enabling the respondents and researcher to feel comfortable' (Letherby, 2003: 110). Seeing my car arrive in their village, the children came first and then the women and when I got out of my vehicle, women and children surrounded me. The atmosphere was warm and things started to change steadily. My family stayed the whole day with me and my parents-in-law were very happy to see the village. We were invited to speak to many families and there were almost no men in the village at that time. Even the young women, including Muni, the *Sarpanch* whom I was supposed to meet that day, were out at their work and only the children were there with elderly persons in almost all families. They were talking to my husband and my father-in-law and I realised that they wanted to get my introduction from my own family and wanted to be sure of my identity. As my mother-in-law explained that I needed a place to stay in their village for some weeks, one ward member was very happy and kind to offer a place in her own home.

In the evening my family left me once we were assured of my acceptance and had found a suitable place for me to live with a family. It also became easy for me to interact with the women after they had had a full day of interaction with my talkative mother-in-law and 92 year old and less-educated father-in-law. It was nothing less than a picnic trip for my seven year old daughter. The gap that they perceived between themselves and me was gradually diminishing and I started living with the ward members who had invited me into her house. So, though my friend was supposed to help me as a gatekeeper to avoid the idea of me 'just hanging around', it was not that simple. Instead, my family's presence, and particularly my identity as a mother of a young child, helped to enhance the relationship with my respondents.

I wanted to attend the meetings of the *Gram Panchayats* where my respondents were chairing and participating in the discussions. Soon I realised that, as an

outsider to these *Panchayats*, I was supposed to have no authority to attend their meetings unless the Block Development Officer ordered the *Sarpanches* to allow me. This officially confirmed my status as an outsider. So I had to meet the Block Development Officer and ask him to provide me with an official letter allowing my presence in the meetings. Though it took some time to convince him that I would just sit there as a researcher and would not participate in discussions, he finally helped me with official permission. His consent helped to change my status and the relationship between me as a researcher and my respondents.

I did not require any special access for introduction in the second location and I was staying at my sister-in law's home. This was a familiar place to me, but I did need help from my ex-students to meet and talk to the women from high caste and high-class families as there was a strict social restriction on their mobility and they had limited choices of social interactions.

My fieldwork and the participants

I conducted the fieldwork in eight *Gram Panchayats* under Cuttack Sadar Block of Cuttack District of Orissa (See Map 3). It was initially a study of seven *Panchayats* which were headed by seven women *Sarpanches*. I included another *Panchayat* where the head was not a woman, but the nominee was a woman (Renubala), who was in fact known to be more powerful than the male *Sarpanch* and the man mostly depended on her. When I came to know about this, and due to the proximity of this *Panchayat* to the location of my field, I thought it proper to include this *Gram Panchayat* (Paramahansa) in my study as well. While all of my participants were Hindus by their religion, there had also been Muslim women elected as representatives over the past years. Kalapada, my second location of study, has a reputation for being one of the places in the state where there has been an absolute peaceful, longstanding good relationship between the Hindus and Muslims. In these villages, they worked and lived together without any specific or recent tensions between the two communities. Apart from that, as there were no Muslim participants in my study sample, I have not taken into consideration the impact of the difference in their religious affiliations while discussing the participants or while working with them. I purposefully avoided

that issue when I observed that there was hardly any discrimination against anyone based on religion in the *Gram Panchayat* meetings (there were some Muslim men who were working as representatives in that *Panchayat*) in that locality. This situation is rather common in rural parts of Orissa, though things may vary in other areas of the country.

The respondents were 38 in number. My participants wanted their names to appear in print, so all of the names I am using are the real names. There were seven *Sarpanches*[40], six Nominees and 25 members. They were all first-time entrants into politics and all but one were in the age group of 24-42 (the exception is Bishnupriya, who was 50).The presence of my respondents, most of whom were young, is in itself no doubt a sign of change from the traditional attitude that tended to keep younger women away from the public life of village communities. The opinion that young women were less interested in *Panchayats* because older women enjoy more physical mobility and have fewer burdens of household chores, or that the younger generation lacks political expertise (Datta, 1998; Baviskar, 2003) therefore did not hold good for my respondents. None of them was elected to an unreserved seat and for all of them it was their debut venture into the politics of the *Panchayats*. Table 3 summarises the age, marital status, educational qualifications and social category to which the women leaders among my participants belonged.

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[40] The name of the *Sarpanch* is left vacant at the bottom of the table 4 as this is the only *Gram Panchayat* included in my study which had a male *Sarpanch*. However, he was not included in my group of participants as this study considers the women leaders and members in *Gram Panchayats*.

Table 3 - List of the *Gram Panchayats* and participants in the study.[41]

Names of the *Gram Panchayats*	Names of the *Sarpanches*/ Marital status/Educational qualification/Age	Names of the Nominees/ Marital status/ Educational qualification/Age	Status of the seat	No. of ward members
Arilo*	Muni Tudu/Married/ Std. Four/24	Kuni Singh/Married/ illiterate/35	STW	3
Barada	Swarnalata Jena/Married/ Std. Four/38	Sabitri Nayak/Married/ Std. Three /35	OBCW	3
Bentkar	Padmini Behera/Married/Std. Six/26	Basanti Mallick/Married/ Illiterate/42	SCW	3
Gatiroutpatna	Bishnupriya Dei/Married/ Illiterate/50	Aiswarya Prabina Jena/Unmarried/ Bachelor of Arts/24	RW	3
Kalapada*	Asmita Sahu/Married/ Bachelor of Arts/30	Sunati Bhoi/Married/ Illiterate/28	SCW	4
Kandarpur	Jyothsnarani Muduli/Married/ Std. Seven/34		OBCW	3
Nemeishapur	Sabita Behera/Married/ Std. Eight/31		OBCW	3
Paramahansa		Renubala Panda/ Married/Std. Ten/42	RW	3

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[41] I put *(asterisks) to point out the locations where I stayed during my field work. I have provided a list of the meaning of the abbreviations used, in the beginning of the thesis.

The villages were small in size and all adjacent to each other in two clusters, which was supposed to make my task somewhat easier. Each *Panchayat* comprised a number of villages; some were very small, with 10-12 families, while some were large with 50-60 families. The villages under one *Panchayat* were all in one locality and these eight *Panchayats* were near to the two localities where I stayed. Ramkumarpur, the first location where I stayed, was under Arilo *Panchayat*. The *Panchayats* of Barada, Nemeishapur and Kandarpur were nearby. Kalapada, the other location where I stayed, was the headquarters of the *Panchayat* which was near to Bentkar, Gatiroutpatna and Paramahansa *Panchayats*.

In the first location, as it was a tribal hamlet, my work seemed to be very difficult in the beginning, but as I kept myself engaged in my activities and started to move around the whole day, it became slightly more manageable. As I noted above, after failure of my friend Nagen as an access to this locality, I changed my strategy to approach my participants in this locality and I was successful in doing so. When I started staying there, the pre-scheduled course of my field work constantly kept changing. In tribal villages, the mobility of women is well accepted, but they were so apprehensive about my safety in other villages that whenever I had to go to the other nearby *Gram Panchayats* to attend the meetings, there was always someone (usually a man) volunteering to accompany me. During the days, I was moving to other villages and coming back before it was dark. In rural India, women are supposed to be inside the home before it gets dark, if they are not accompanied with any man of their family. This was not actually a problem for me as only on the dates of *Panchayat* meetings did my work continue till late evening hours; on all other days I was returning back to my living place before evening and I had to see the women of the hamlet only in the evenings.

There were three other nearby *Panchayats*, Barada, Kandarpur and Nemeishapur, which I had to cover during a stipulated time. These were all within walking distance from Ramkumarpur, although they lay in different directions. I did not visit all the villages under these *Panchayats* as I had to observe only the lives of my women participants. I chose to go to only those villages where my respondents were living and to the villages where the *Gram Panchayat* offices were situated as I had to attend the *Panchayat* meetings. So I had to maintain a strict timetable for my fieldwork and to be very calculating about distributing my observation period

among my participants and their settings and the different dates of the monthly meetings of the *Gram Panchayats*.

Apart from Arilo, none of the *Panchayats* of this part had any tribal women as members or leaders. My respondents from the nearby *Gram Panchayats* belonged to Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes and most of them did not go out to work, instead shouldering all the household responsibilities and taking care of the elders and the children. So they were at home after the children had gone to school and the elders had got their lunch on time. That was my time to meet them in their homes.

As mentioned above, I stayed with my sister-in-law in the second location, Kalapada and that was a kind of known locality for me. So staying as a participant observer or arranging focus group discussions or doing a study there was not particularly difficult for me. I was of course aware of the fact that my identity still remained that of an outsider as this time I was in a different role and they were going to provide or supply me the information I needed. There was also the risk of me being perceived by them now as someone who had sufficient money for this research purpose as I was coming to them from a western country. Further, in India we don't have the practice of addressing our teachers' community by their first names. Instead they are usually known and addressed as 'Sirs' and 'Madams'. So my previous identity as a 'Madam' of a local college was already affecting the power equation. I had to act strategically to cross the gap and build up a new rapport in that locality. My students were always there to act as intermediaries when I needed access to married women from some of the high class families. I did not have any problem there in mixing with the people or interacting with them as we were talking in Oriya in our day to day conversations. People were happy to see me back and very welcoming in their attitude.

I was fortunate that most of these women (in all the *Panchayats* except the women in Ramkumarpur) had mobile phones and I could contact them as and when I needed any information. This helped me to keep in touch with most of them constantly and in deciding time slots of our meetings. In some cases, I met them first in the *Panchayat* meetings and then I asked for their co-operation in my

work. I also went to their houses directly from the meetings on some occasions when they were happy to invite me.

Methods and methodology

According to Harding's analysis, a method is a technique for gathering and analysing information and a methodology consists of the researcher's choices of how to use these methods (Harding, 2003: 03). I choose to follow a feminist methodology as it offers a combination of methods for studying gender injustices and the subordination of women. As Ramazanoglu and Holland suggest,

> It is not the investigation of gender, or gendered social lives as such that makes a research project feminist. Research projects can be thought of as feminist if they are framed by feminist theory and aim to produce knowledge that will be useful for effective transformation of gendered injustice and subordination (2002: 146).

As my study involves all female participants who live marginalised lives in a world of subjugation and denigration, I had the choice of opting for multiple methods of qualitative methodology. Rather than suggesting investigation through one method, feminist scholars have recognised the need for combining different methods wherever possible. Reinharz suggests that the use of multiple methods enables researchers to link the past and the present and relate individual actions and experience to social action (1992: 197). The women who have come into the lowest level of the *Panchayati Raj* institutions under the quotas are, for the most part, functionally illiterate, with few productive assets, and the vast majority of them depend on wage labour in a traditional rural society that has fixed places for various castes as well as for each gender (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 2000: 46). The use of three methods: participant observation, focus groups and in depth interviews was considered necessary, as it would allow the flexibility to be receptive to my respondents. It was also expected to enhance my understanding by using layers of information and by using one type of data to validate or refine another (Reinharz, 1992 in Letherby, 2003: 96).

Using participant observation enabled me to experience what life is like for my participants in the remote rural villages. Living in a village in India is totally different in the sense that rural areas do not usually have minimum basic amenities like electricity or water supply and only have sanitation of the worst kind. There are also very bad connecting roads that make the lives of women really difficult and all of these conditions have 'an adverse impact on women's empowerment' (Hust, 2002: 5). Living with these women in their community settings has given me first-hand experience of the social and cultural barriers they experience as well as the changing dynamics of relationships within and outside their families. Participant observation was the only way to provide me with an insight into their ongoing struggles to balance the private and public spheres, in a very conservative patriarchal social pattern.

The aim was not only to collect or compile data but also to investigate how these women experience their new roles in the grassroots democratic institutions after the policy of reservation began in 1993, and how they relate to the debates surrounding their increasing participation. For this, participant observation was to be complemented with interviews, which are in fact part of the participant observation process. Individual as well as collective views of these women were collected through the focus groups and in-depth personal interviews, which I think are indispensable for my type of study in order to gain a complete overview. These two types of interviews complement and supplement the process of observation that I undertook during my stay in their social setting as a participant. These three methods in combination helped to make my study a complete one, taking women's standpoint as the grounding for research. As a feminist researcher, I have attempted to represent women's perspectives and realities as accurately as possible.

From the beginning, I asked their consent to record their voices. I had a very small digital recorder with me which I showed them and explained how it worked. Some of them became nervous in the first instance and I did not use it often in the first locality, as they were not happy with it. There was also no electricity supply inside the hamlet, so it was mostly of no use. I could not re-charge it when the batteries were low. In the second locality, the respondents had no problem with being recorded and so I recorded the voices of the women *Sarpanches* in some *Panchayat* meetings where they were trying to resolve some important issues. I

did not use the recording device at all where people did not like the idea of going on record. While conducting the interviews, I recorded their voices with their consent. I explained that they could switch it off at any time when they did not feel comfortable. However, I always made it a point to write down notes in my field diary, which became an important source of analysis.

Participant observation

Where I participated and where I could not

I want to make it clear that my respondents, particularly in the tribal hamlet, were completely ignorant of the meaning of a research project. This hamlet was considered to be a part of the village called Ramkumarpur which was marked with a high level of poverty amongst the people and all the families were either included in the government's list of BPL[42] or had applied to get a place on the list. They were all migrant workers from a nearby state and Muni (my participant who was the *Sarpanch*) was the most educated person of their hamlet even though she had only passed fourth standard in the primary school situated in a distant village. The villagers were quite anxious about me and my activities, though they were never suspicious about my intentions except for the very first day. As my stay continued and I mixed with the people of the hamlet they were pleased to realise that I had undertaken this study to make the world aware of their stories of struggles and achievements.

It was not possible on my part to explain the research in technical detail as the women were illiterate and the children were not sent to school. There was one *Anganwadi* centre in that hamlet, which is a part of the government's plan to target the welfare of rural people and it is supposed to create awareness about health, sanitation and education in remote villages. The centre in the hamlet had

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[42] BPL stands for 'below poverty line' and refers to people who have no sustainable resources of livelihood. The government of India declares different beneficial schemes for these people from time to time like provision of concrete houses, job cards guaranteeing job opportunities for twenty days along with the supply of a monthly ration and rice at a much subsidised cost. The government prepares a list of BPL people based on their income and other criteria and the list is changed from time to time.

stopped working after only a few months. These centres are meant to function as playschools for the children of remote villages and are responsible for creating interest in education. So, the children were playing the whole day unattended as their parents were busy with the transplantation work in the paddy fields, as it was the highest paying job of the season. In the first instance, I started with children, by telling them stories and offering them some toys which I had brought with me. This attracted the attention of their mothers when they came back and they started asking me about my personal life. I got the chance to start talking to them about their personal lives, allowing their confidence in me to grow, which led to long hours of talking about the new rules of the *Panchayat* and their problems after getting elected and so on.

I was trying to meet the *Sarpanch* and finally managed to get half an hour of her time after three days. I discovered that the *Sarpanch* now gets more work offers from the local land owners as she is in power. So she was very busy in those rainy days, rushing from the paddy fields to the various construction sites. I could not possibly participate in her work in the field, but observed her working on a construction site for two long hours, after which the contractor took pity on me and allowed her to talk to me. It was hard to realise that she had to satisfy all the landed people of the locality as they had helped her to win the election. On the other hand, it was a matter of pride for the landlords that the *Sarpanch* was working for them.

It was really strange that these rural women accepted me so soon as one among them. This was perhaps because they could relate to me more easily as I was very conscious of my simple dress and my language while talking to them. My age and status as a married woman made me comfortable in mixing with people of all age groups and to take part in their community celebrations.

While living in the community, I made careful field notes. Informal conversations and interactions with these rural women and people in their villages were also recorded in my field notes, in as much detail as possible, training myself before I started my day. Each day was like a new experiment for me and I had to look at ease and relaxed. Women who initially treated me like an outsider became friendly within a very short period of time. I tried to build up a rapport with these

women, even by trying to share some of my personal experiences of gender discrimination in my own life, thus helping to make us feel connected. However, the research process is a complex endeavour and the researcher's status as an insider or outsider is subject to constant negotiations between the researcher and the researched (Letherby, 2003: 133). Just as my respondents' identities were shifting, so was mine. There was a continuous effort from my side to lessen the anxieties in our relationship and my respondents too were receptive to it. As a researcher I could see myself 'as moving from an outsider to an insider position' over the time that I spent there (Letherby, 2003: 133).

I became close to almost all of my respondents within ten days of my arrival. The only exception was Kuni Singh, the Nominee of Arilo (I couldn't meet her until after I left and could only get an assurance that she would give me an interview during my next visit). In Barada, I was with Bishnupriya on the day of her *Gram Panchayat* meeting. It was getting late and she had to see that all the household chores were finished before she left. Her old mother-in-law was in need of a special diet and her small child and husband demanded much of her attention. She was very busy, so I offered to help her. Previously she did not allow me to share the household chores, but on this day she was helpless and did not stop me when I offered to prepare tea for her husband's guests. I had to develop a 'sisterly bond', which led to an increase in the trust of my participants in me as a researcher (Oakley, 1981: 48) and helped me to get more out of my insider status as a married woman of the same social system. There was a similar incident in the Nemeishapur *Panchayat* when I was waiting for Sabita to go to the *Panchayat* office. It was her son's examination time and she had to make him do some lessons for the test. Her husband, who was very supportive of her and usually shared the household responsibilities, had gone to a relative's place to attend a marriage ceremony. Sabita had to choose whether to attend the meeting or conduct her son's lessons. She was overwhelmed when I offered to take charge of her son's preparation. But as she knew that I was teaching in a college, so she was assured that I could do the job as well as her. She went with her brother-in-law to attend the very important *Panchayat* meeting. I felt a bit awkward choosing to teach her son over attending the meeting myself, but I managed to attend later after completing of her son's lessons. These were unusual experiences when I had

to think twice before participating, but I used my judgement in these situations and they helped me to gain greater access to the lives of my respondents. My participation in such private activities enabled me to gain the trust of their husbands and other family members that I needed for my focus group and the in-depth interviews. I stayed two nights in Bishnupriya's house, as she insisted so much, in order to attend a village celebration and to stay at her home. Apart from that, I also went to Sabita's home to attend her son's first birthday. I took these events as an opportunity to participate in their social events and celebrations. This helped me to develop a familiarity with the cultural milieu which was invaluable for my study. It was almost like a new relationship and I was well into my role as a researcher by noting down all these unusual experiences whenever I had the opportunity. I maintained field notes in situ, compiling my observations and day-to-day experiences in the field.

I came to understand that time is the most crucial factor for all these women. They really struggle hard to manage the time between their expected role in the private sphere and their new role in the public sphere. The dynamics of their relationships inside the family were changing dramatically over the years, as the male members of the family came to feel important due to the importance gained by these women of their families in the public sphere. It was not always looked down on if a husband shared the household responsibilities. Even elderly men of the families had started to support their daughters-in-law as this brought them a new sense of achievement and recognition in the society. Except in the tribal hamlet, women seemed to have gained the support of the community and their own families. Over the period of living with my participants, I was aware that the differences of my own social location as a researcher were not an insurmountable barrier to the process, but I had to recognise them and address them accordingly.

As an insider participant

I moved to Kalapada towards the end of the sixth week of my investigation and stayed at my sister-in-law's home mostly. My visit went smoothly in this location as an insider participant in a familiar place. However, I was conscious from the very beginning of the importance of being as astute in my observations here as I

was in the first location, so that my insider identity here should not affect the research situation negatively. There were three other *Gram Panchayats* in my field study, Bentkar, Gatiroutpatna and Paramahansa, close to this place. I needed no formal access here as this was a location that was familiar to me, but there were social constraints on the women of high caste. I was almost an insider here, except for the fact that people's perception of me had changed because I was from a western country now. They were interested to know about my supposed enhanced financial situation and every now and then I was asked to facilitate in some international funding for the welfare of their *Panchayat*.

My ex-students helped me gain access to the women, particularly as this was a more conservative social setting. There were people from high castes who were very orthodox in their attitudes, and thus could not easily accept me as they knew that I had left my daughter and family in order to pursue my own academic study. It was their perception of highly educated women that was getting in the way of my developing a good rapport with the people of this locality. However, my respondents were very co-operative and were very enthusiastic to make their own contribution. Among them there were two women in leadership positions who had B.A. degrees, one of whom was unmarried.

The women members and leaders of this location were very conscious of their political responsibilities. I had to create a rapport in order to have a balanced power relationship as they felt powerful in their positions. They were somewhat conscious of their position as my respondents and so they knew that my research was also dependent on their co-operation. Respondents in qualitative studies already have considerable power over the process of research (Sprague, 2005: 58). I used my research as 'means of sharing information' and my personal involvement became an important element in 'establishing trust and thus obtaining good quality information' (Maynard, 1995: 16).

I stayed with Asmita, *Sarpanch* of the Kalapada *Panchayat*, in her residence as she insisted that I must stay with her for some days if I wanted to know how she managed to perform her roles both at home and in the *Panchayat*. I conducted an in-depth interview with her during my stay at her home. I spent substantial time with Renubala, who was the Nominee of the Paramahansa *Panchayat*. She

attributed her disturbed marital life to her success in politics. Before being elected as a Nominee, she had some political experience although she had never stood for any posts before. Her two daughters were grown up and they managed the kitchen work, leaving her free to be fully engaged in welfare activities along with grassroots politics. I lived with her for two days to see how she managed to make her life so different in a very traditional, high caste society. She was very busy from dawn till dusk and was getting many calls on her mobile phone to resolve issues ranging from helping women of the village to start Self-Help-Groups[43] to requests from local health workers to help make the scheduled caste women aware of dietary needs during pregnancy.

I also stayed two days with Aiswarya, who was the Nominee of Gatiroutpatna *Panchayat*, and who was very co-operative with my work as she had higher education. It was from her that I got to know about the only proxy woman case in my field when she expressed her concern over 'too much interference' by the husband in the work of the woman *Sarpanch* of her *Gram Panchayat*, Gatiroutpatna. She even described instances where the husband of the *Sarpanch* had placed his signature in the block meetings, in the presence of the Block Development Officer, on her behalf. I asked her consent on this particular matter to note it in my field notes and she said she had already made the issue public. Aiswarya is acting as the Vice-Chairperson of the Cuttack Sadar Block and she is the youngest woman in this post in the Block.

Apart from working with these women in leadership, I took time to get to know and chat with the women ward members and their families too. All of them had come to power on quota and most of them were only in their thirties, which is the most productive period of a woman's life. There were small children, household chores and, in some cases, very demanding husbands. So, even women who were otherwise capable of managing the public decision-making authority on their own sometimes had to submit to the pressures of family as common Indian women never want to disturb their private lives and consider their family life to be the most important thing. As they gave time for my long conversations with them, I

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[43] Self-Help-Groups, or popularly known as SHGs, are government-sponsored organisations which are helping to make the rural women financially independent.

also shared their household chores many times. I was asked to teach their small children, who would otherwise disturb them in their work, and I also baby sat in some places. Sometimes I also interacted with the elderly family members of the elected women leaders and it was amazing to see their concerns for their daughters-in-law who were new in this power structure. I enjoyed whatever I did while living with my participants and this helped to balance the power relation between us.

Experience of participating in the Panchayat meetings

In both locations, I attended the meetings of the village *Panchayats*, which are held regularly once in a month. As I had the official letter from the Block Office which provided me with permission to attend all the meetings of the *Gram Panchayats* where women were acting as *Sarpanches*, I was trying to attend as many meetings as possible. Out of the eight *Gram Panchayats*, I attended two meetings in five *Panchayats* and three meetings in two of them. There were no meetings in Arilo *Panchayat.*, though I went to the *Panchayat* office on both the dates when it was supposed to take place. All the other *Gram Panchayats* were having their monthly meetings and almost all the women members were regularly attending the meetings headed by the women *Sarpanches* (as mentioned earlier, Paramahansa *Panchayat* was headed by a man and Renubala was Nominee there). Attending the meetings of the *Gram Panchayats* gave me firsthand experience of the proceedings of the *Gram Panchayat*. The women were mostly accompanied by their husbands to the meeting places, but independently managed the meetings. Their husbands either dropped them off and came to pick them up after the meeting adjourned or waited for them in the corridors. I was happy to know that my presence did not really hamper the usual course of the meetings and they did not feel conscious of my presence. This showed the change of my position from an outsider observer to an insider. I was very careful while observing those meetings and updating my field notes there, which were later expanded in order to give a full picture of the meetings. This helped me to understand the real position of these women individually and in a group.

The *Gram Panchayats* in recent years have had an increased share of responsibilities in the rural local administration. The *Sarpanches* have to report on

a large number of issues starting from the finalisation of different beneficiaries' lists to the performance of the primary school teachers and even on the conditions of sanitation of the villages under their *Panchayats*. For all these activities they have to prepare annual budgets, get them approved by the *Gram Sabha* (a six-monthly meeting of all the voters of the villages) and demand more allocation for the ongoing welfare schemes. I could never have imagined that *Gram Panchayat* meetings were so sensitive and these were more so in the second location. There were hot debates on irregularities in different projects and mishaps in the distribution system by the dealers. Meetings were very long and they always ended up with an exchange of bad language, even physical fights on two occasions. The women were usually discussing the issues or some were silently sitting in the corners while men were often engaged in these unreasonable expressions and violent interactions. On some occasions, it all went smoothly and I was happy that their usual methods of ventilating grievances and expressing demands were not hampered by my presence. Sometimes it was embarrassing for my respondents to manage the meetings which became chaotic following some hot arguments. I behaved very carefully in such situations and, though it was difficult, I always resisted passing any comment on sensitive situations. I was conscious of appearing too enthusiastic if someone aired an opinion that particularly fitted my views. In a meeting in Bentkar *Panchayat*, a large group of people from a distant ward attempted to enter forcibly into the office room where the meeting was going on. They were demanding a supply of electricity and drinking water to their village. There were slogans against the *Sarpanch* and the ruling party of the state and the meeting was disrupted by these people from the beginning. The villagers were on a strike in the corridors of the *Panchayat* office. Padmini, the woman *Sarpanch*, with all her male colleagues was trying to explain the causes of the delayed attention to their demands.

From the sites of the meetings, people were always inviting me to their wards and wanted to show me their long-standing problems such as lack of sanitation, lack of health care or bad road conditions and very few facilities for girls' education as schools were not present in each of those villages. It was sometimes a moving experience for me to realise their everyday hardships and also my inability to help them out. It was difficult to realise that the political empowerment of these

women in rural parts of India has not yet been successful in improving their living conditions. It was indeed difficult for them to manage their new responsibilities amidst these long lists of problems in the everyday lives of the rural people of which they were also a part. I could observe how important their participation was and how at times attempts were made by some male colleagues to dominate them on some issues where the lack of knowledge of these women became a barrier.

The women leaders of *Gram Panchayats* were always trying to involve all the other women members in the discussions. The agendas were outlined by them and they were managing the meetings effectively. They always wanted to involve their spouses and other male members of the community in their decisions and discussed things with their families, which helped them to gain their support. The whole experience of staying and working with these women enabled me to gain an insight into the structural barriers which they had to tackle.

Focus groups

Gram Panchayats work on the collective decisions of groups of people. So my respondents operate in a space where collective views are more important than individual opinions. I therefore planned to hold focus groups as these enabled me to explore collective, not individual, ideas and experiences. I hoped to get a picture of their collective voices and also to uncover the pattern of their networking which finally links them to a common world of politics in the lowest units of democracy. My experience of participant observation helped me to improve the design of my focus group discussion. I arranged two focus groups, each of one hour duration and in two locations.

I had to monitor all the logistic arrangements as the village roads were badly damaged due to the rainy season. The first focus group was arranged in a school very near to the Arilo *Gram Panchayat* office and the other one took place in the temple premises of the Kalapada *Gram Panchaya*t. To maintain the homogeneity of the groups, I arranged one focus group with participants who belonged to the Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste groups and the other one with participants from the General Caste and Other Backward Caste groups. The homogeneity of

the focus groups helped to minimise feelings of discomfort when disclosing emotional or sensitive issues among members and, as caste remains an important factor in Indian social life and restrictions on inter-caste interactions are still prevalent in rural areas, I considered that factor important while recruiting participants for focus group discussions. Apart from that I was also careful about the homogeneity in terms of 'cultural capital' (social background, age, level of education, awareness about the system etc.). I had to take extra note of the family relationships between the members and the leaders, as Indian society does not allow arguments from younger members of the family before elders. There were 14 women in the first meeting and 16 in the second.

As Letherby suggests, the focus group should ideally take place in a location familiar to participants and the researcher should make the aims of the discussion clear and ensure that everyone has a chance to speak (2003: 106). Acting as the facilitator, I made my intentions clear when I invited and requested my respondents to participate in a group discussion. It was a new experience for them and I had to explain to each of them how I was going to get the data from it and what form it was going to take.

I understood that time was a critical resource for these rural women as they always remained pre-occupied about getting their needs met. So I decided to have the meetings at a convenient time and in places of their choice. The first group proposed to meet in a nearby High School on August 15th, India's Independence Day. They fixed the time to be afternoon after the celebration in school when the *Panchayat* offices were closed and children were at home. They requested me to provide a vehicle for commuting to the meeting place. I gladly accepted their proposal and provided a car to pick them up. I reached the High School before anyone turned up and waited for them. The driver made two trips and all of them were there. I could see the happiness in their faces as they had come by car and all together. Travelling in a car still remains a luxurious dream for them and they were also very enthusiastic to see each other in one place. They were happy to meet all the women leaders and representatives of the adjacent *Gram Panchayats* in one place.

At the beginning, I decided to speak to them hinting at a number of themes for discussion as to what they were to focus on and to stress that the agenda should not be very rigid. They were all so happy that they started discussing their own things without paying any attention to my suggestions. I could understand that, due to their lack of mobility, as they always had to depend on their husbands to go anywhere, such a meeting without any male relatives was a rare event in their lives. I started to listen to them, and their discussions were ranging from the mundane aspects of their lives to the most stressful situations, like the recent problems of the roads of the *Panchayats* due to the rains. It even included themes like the hesitation of their husbands to invest the time for their work and the pressures the high-caste people put on them in deciding the work orders for the *Gram Panchayats*. After a while, they became conscious of my presence and then came back to the group discussion. There were issues like their problems in exercising power and how they overcome the problems, what played a major role in their elections and what was the meaning of effectiveness from their perspectives. They also talked about the difference in the working pattern of women in *Gram Panchayats* and how they managed to make their voices prominent, and if they did not succeed what were the barriers? The participants listed a number of barriers, among which their lack of knowledge was the most prominent, along with all the other social restrictions or their traditional patterns of living. The collective views were spontaneous and there were sometimes arguments among them before agreeing on a point. It took a little more than one hour to complete the discussions on all the issues that were decided on. Participants in this group raised issues like their lack of knowledge and skill, poverty, their low level of mobility and lack of exposure to public life as the main hindrances in the way of their becoming more effective. These important issues combined together probably led to the much discussed 'proxy women'. The discussion and the collective views of the participants on all these subjects helped me to put the realities and experiences of my participants to the top of the agenda and enabled me to gain a new direction and new perspectives in my research work.

The second focus group was more systematic and productive in the sense that the participants were aware of the purpose of the focus group and there were not

many queries about the aim of the meeting. I realised that this might be the effect of their social networking with women who had attended the first focus group. As these women have frequent interactions these days at the Block office due to the recent schemes declared by the Government for the *Panchayats*, the message was conveyed easily to them. Their choice of meeting place was a temple premises. A temple (place of worship for Hindus) in a village is regarded as a safe place for women and the women also felt secure and free inside the temple premises. In rural parts, women and grown up girls have to gain the permission of their fathers or husbands (the male head of the family) before leaving their houses. So, freedom of mobility is highly restricted, even more so for high class and high caste women. In this location, there were some participants who were from very orthodox high caste and high class families and I had to negotiate with their heads of families to allow their women to come out during evening hours to attend a group meeting. My identity as lecturer in a local college helped me a lot in this regard, as did the choice of the temple. It was a pleasure to discover that they had never had such a gathering of women even inside their own village. This temple was situated in the middle of a group of villages and it was meant to be the common place of worship for all those villages. Some of them walked the distance in a group and some others were dropped off by their family members. As the facilitator I introduced some important issues, inviting their discussion on those points. My points were almost the same as for the previous group. The responses from this group were different and they raised some important points, like corruption in politics and the role of money in the allocation of welfare projects at *Panchayat* level to different villages. They also discussed the barriers and challenges they face in this whole process of empowerment and what effectiveness meant to them. Their collective view was different from individual opinions. Sometimes, they were arguing with each other, sometimes there was complete support for each other's opinion. However, I had to be conscious in this group about the possibility of a false consensus as some of these women were very clever. This group discussion continued for an hour. There were two educated women who were leading the discussions. One was the only unmarried woman leader among them with a B.A. degree who is acting as Vice-Chairman of the Block level *Panchayat Samiti*. She also had some political experience in her student days and she made my task easier here as, being an educated woman, she could understand what a focus group was really aimed at. At

the same time, I also felt that she wanted to dominate the discussion and make her points reign above others'. I had to give others' views importance as well and had to try to convince her about this without hurting her. The women were mostly vocal as in this artificial situation of 'being away from home' or 'free from family pressure' in a focus group speaking was appropriate even for the most docile and submissive participants of the group. However, in the groups, I had to be careful in choosing the voices of people whom I wanted to hear, who represented the group and who were the best spokespersons in their category.

Interaction with focus groups enabled me to observe the meaning of effectiveness to these women and to evolve the questions for my interviews. This led to the generation of important queries to help explore my research questions. A range of new issues that I had not considered important while designing the study came out as important points of concern.

Table 4- The meetings I attended in the field and the number of respondents who attended the focus groups.

Names of the *Gram Panchayats*	Meetings attended	Focus groups	Respondents attended
Arilo	Nil	1	14
Gatiroutpatna	2		
Kandarpur	2		
Nemeishapur	2		
Barada	2		
Tainkana	3	1	16
Kalapada	3		
Paramahansa	2		

Though I recorded their discussions on my digital recording device, I had to make rounds to get different views recorded as it was an open space. So rather than depending on my memory I was always taking notes in my field diary, sometimes with my own set of symbols or in very short form and I expanded these in the evenings before I went to sleep. My field notes also contained the different expressions which were prominent during the group discussion. Women were motivated, enthusiastic, angry, considerate and defensive about their stands. I considered both my focus groups to be very productive and successful.

Interviews

It was often difficult to arrange an hour of uninterrupted time with the women as they were always busy and highly pressed for time. We met in their houses and I requested that they give me some time for a focussed conversation. Some of the participants, particularly those who were illiterate or less educated, were initially reluctant to give me an interview on my first request. I explained to them the purpose of my data collection and how I was going to use it. I often had to spend a significant amount of time for chatting to make them feel at ease before the interview.

My questions were primarily aimed at exploring how effective they had been so far in grassroots politics and what effectiveness meant to them. It was important to know how far empowerment had helped them to be effective and to what extent they had achieved it in their own perspective. The first question was always something like: 'What was your motivation behind coming to *Panchayats*?' or: 'Do you think the quota was helpful for making women effective in politics?' There were also questions such as: 'Do you think you will contest the next term if this seat becomes unreserved?' and: 'Does your family help you in sharing household chores now that you have new responsibilities outside your home?' I was also asking them about how they understand the term 'empowerment' as it has been much in use by the government in relation to quotas for women. Some of the most interesting answers came out of this, which I will focus on in the following chapters.

As a researcher, I had to be friendly with the respondents but 'not too friendly' and to develop a balance between the warmth needed to maintain the rapport and the detachment necessary to see the interviewee as an object under surveillance (Oakley 1981 in Letherby, 2003: 82). I was never prescriptive in my talk while conducting the interviews and I had to ensure that the interview remained an appropriate tool for the collection of data for the purpose of my study. As Letherby suggests, an interviewer's job is to ask questions and promote rapport and it is important that they do not pass judgement or answer the questions themselves (2003: 82). In an ideal interview setting, the flow of questions and answers is strictly one way (Sprague, 2005: 127), but this was not always easy to achieve.

Meeting in places of their choice individually for the purpose of interviews made things easier for me. It helped to make the relationship reciprocal as I took the opportunity to create a 'sisterly bond', which may increase respondents' trust and thus produce better research (Oakley, 1981 in Sprague, 2005: 134). I had to consciously resist the temptation to cut off the narrator as that would break the flow of the story she was constructing and would make it hard for me to see the logic by which she is ordering her experience (Riessman, 1993 in Sprague, 2005: 141). The last questions were designed to allow the respondents to provide any other information they would like to add, such as: 'Would you like to convey anything else?' or a simple: 'How did you find the interview?'

With their consent, I recorded their interviews on some occasions, using a very small digital recording device. Digital recording was helpful for me as I had to translate the interviews into English language later on. Along with recording, I was also noting down any important physical expressions of the respondents in my field notes such as if there were any prolonged pauses before replying to any particular question, if there were any instants of surprise, expressions of nervousness, irritation or attempts at avoidance.

 At this point I had only recorded ten interviews. Five women wanted a written questionnaire, as they considered that writing the answers below the questions made it easier for them. So I left questionnaires for them. Along with collection of those five written questionnaires, I conducted another 23 interviews on my next

trip, after two months of flooding[44]. In my second visit, in the month of December, 2008 my respondents were even more busy and pressed for time as reconstruction work was going on. Meetings of *Gram Panchayats* were still dominating, with discussions on relief work and demands for grants from the government. I had to devote more time to arranging suitable interview times with them, though they were very cooperative. Although I didn't originally plan to stay with them during this visit, it was not possible always for the participants to give me time for our appointments; therefore I had to stay with some of them. I had to follow two participants for five days, as they were very busy in visiting different villages, compiling final reports on the impact of the flood on agriculture.

Dealing with the data

In the first phase of my study, I was in a remote rural location and I did not have the luxury of using a computer or any electronic instruments where I could store the data. I was taking field notes regularly and I was expanding the notes each night. I expanded my field notes by writing them as a narrative describing what happened where and what I actually learnt from the particular behaviour of my participants. I had to be very discreet in my attitude, depending on my memory and expanding on this in my field diary.

As a field researcher, my goal was to collect 'the richest possible data' (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 16). I was aware that there were time constraints since it was not possible for second takes. Time was very valuable as they were really overloaded, as most were married women. Therefore I was always jotting down observations to supplement my recordings. On two occasions, when I joined a community celebration and went to bed very tired and very late, I even recorded my own voice narrating the whole day's experience, and expanded that in the field diary later on. There were some individuals who did not feel comfortable with being recorded, so largely I depended on my well-maintained field diary.

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[44] I had planned to conduct interviews with 38 respondents towards the end of my study. I had to leave the field after there was a high alert for severe flooding and people started preparations to face an extreme flood situation as that locality usually experiences high floods each year towards the end of the rainy season.

When I completed my whole field work and returned to the UK, I transcribed all the interviews within the next six weeks. I also listened to the focus groups repeatedly to note down the important points. I recorded the focus groups, though when I listened to the recorder, the record of the first one seemed to be just like chaotic voices in a crowd. In some parts, it was clear and in some, when they argued a lot, it was like the voice of a crowd. However, the recording of the second focus group was clear and fine. While transcribing the interviews I had to primarily act as a translator. The language that I used during the fieldwork was Oriya (my mother tongue), which not only meant that I was able to use my sociological insight, but also had its shortcomings: how to perfectly address and translate not only the sentences but also the whole contexts from my mother tongue to English was important. However, transcribing those data into English, which is not my first language, again was a complicated situation for me as a researcher. The same word could have different cultural meanings in different languages due to historical and cultural contexts. While coming from the same cultural background enabled me to understand the whole context of my data, I did also bear in mind that there were potential weaknesses while translating from an Indian language to English. If one does not note the different cultural contexts concerning the same words, the loss in translation can affect the quality of research findings. Thus, along with my understanding of English, transcriptions became important since it affected whether I was able to realise the differences between languages in terms of cultural contexts or not. Translating the narratives of rural women (who very often doubt the quality of their own responses) has certainly been a difficult task. When transcribing the interviews, I listened to them many times and translated them as I felt it would be easier for me to understand their points by that method. Tribal people have their own cultural terms which were very much intact in my participants' voices. The terms which reflected their culture and life pattern had no equivalent in English. I felt disempowered sometimes as I carefully tried to find words in English that would have a parallel meaning with the same cultural reflection. As Maclean says:

> Language is the conceptual scheme through which reality is viewed, and in turn the experience of a given culture and the priorities formed as people

interact with their environment and create categories of language (2007: 785).

However, language continually evolves and my understanding of their social and cultural setting helped me to recognise the limitations of language and borders, which are permeable. I was careful when importing words from their cultural contexts into a different language, as many of the words may carry different meanings or no meaning at all.

I looked very carefully for the closest words in English which would give their expressions the appropriate meanings and the cultural context in which words were used. For example, when my participants were talking about taking help from the brothers of their husbands, it sometimes meant that they were also helped by their cousins and distant cousins. As there is no such term to explain the relation of a 'cousin' in my mother tongue, we just describe them as 'brothers'. Further, brothers for married women mean the brothers of their husbands too. Likewise, parents meant the mother-in-law and father-in-law for married participants. As a woman of this locality, I am used to use of this vocabulary, and so I was very conscious of keeping this factor in my mind while translating the interviews and understanding their views.

 In addition to this, I thoroughly skimmed the field diary and organised my observations under different important headings. I also separated the important quotations with full references, for example, who said it, on what occasion or in response to which question, name of her *Panchayat* etc. for my use in the next chapters.

Challenges of doing research in rural India

I faced many challenges during my study including difficulties in terms of language, access, my position as an insider/outsider, along with other unforeseen situations. As women belonging to the same part of a country, my participants and I nevertheless shared a common location in the social world on the basis of our gender. Though this was the basis of gaining access to my participants, there were other factors where I was an outsider, particularly at the beginning of the research

process. When my original access to the first locality was shown to be of no use, it was important to find another way. As my identity was disclosed and I became acceptable to my participants, I had to find extra effort, time and patience to introduce myself to all the other participants, which I did not originally anticipate.

Power relations are one of the issues largely recognised by feminist scholars. I have sincerely attempted to make the power equation change throughout the research process. Feminist literature suggests that feminist researchers could balance the power relationship by appealing to 'sisterhood' (Oakley, 1981: 48). The unequal power relationship between my participants and myself was restructured to validate the perspective of the participants. Though I acted very consciously from the beginning, there were occasions when I felt that they too were very powerful in their positions. I could not meet Kuni Singh, the Nominee of Arilo *Panchayat* (though I attempted to many times), as she did not 'want to waste her time' when she was engaged in more income-generating work. It was her decision which prevailed as she had choice over her priorities. While my position as an outsider/insider researcher gave me some power or control over the research questions and analysis or choosing the methods of data collection, the respondents or participants in my research also retained a considerable amount of control over the research process. They made their own decisions about whether to disclose their experiences and ideas. At times, they continued to talk about what they wanted to and I had to make a conscious effort to bring them back on track. Whilst being interviewed, they often described events completely out of context. Some of them even started asking me very personal questions, which made me feel frustrated. Living in their community, arranging focus groups and taking in-depth interviews, these different methods of data collection with people who did not understand what research means was the most difficult experience itself. On one occasion after completing an interview, when I switched off my digital recorder, the participant wanted to erase it all and to start afresh as she thought she was nervous the first time. I had no option then but to start again from the first question.

Though it may seemed to be very insignificant, but the nauseating smell of the *mahuli* (the country liquor prepared by the tribal people) and *bidi* (something like a cigarette, an indigenous preparation with a very strong smell which tribal men and women smoke all the time) disturbed me throughout my stay with the tribal

participants. My other problem was the village road in the first locality, which was muddy, slippery and very dangerous for someone with shoes. It had become a very narrow passage with big, open holes here and there. I wondered how my respondents managed to cross this road every day as they had to go out for their everyday manual work along with collecting firewood and fodder for the cattle. When I left the field after the first phase of study, roads were already blocked and I had to travel a longer route and my family were very worried about my safety. The following day my whole fieldwork area got completely submerged by the flood. The locality became completely cut off and could only be reached by motorboats. There were nine breaches in that part alone. Life became impossible and my sister-in-law's house where I was staying was the only house which remained unaffected and had five families on the roof. On my arrival, water had started to come into my home, but we did not have any serious problems. I was worried for my participants as I had seen and experienced their conditions. I joined a government relief team after one week and returned to the fieldwork area. I was surprised to see that women members of the *Gram Panchayat*, who had lost everything in the flood, were at the forefront of relief distribution activities. The District administration gave praise for these women's crisis management skills. I was surprised to learn that, on the day of the flood, one of my participants, Padmini, the *Sarpanch* of Taikana *Gram Panchayat*, had reached the people on the other side of the breach by rowing the family boat (which was usually used for catching fish) and had saved people before the administration could manage to reach them. The government made all the *Sarpanches* responsible for the speedy reconstruction work and fair distribution of relief materials in the flood-affected areas, even though most of the *Sarpanches* were still marooned. It was neither possible nor sensible for me to continue my interviews when people were really struggling. I stayed back with them just as a mental support, sometimes trying to facilitate the relief operations in the affected areas.

I returned to my respondents after two months, to complete the unfinished task of interviewing. I met all of the interviewees, including those whom I had already seen. They were all busy with construction work following the flood; there were still disputes over the relief work. I attended some of their informal meetings in the *Panchayat* offices to get some time with them. Most of them were personally

affected by the severe flood. This time they were more occupied and pressed for time. My research was dependent on their words and cooperation. It took me a long time to get in touch with my participants again and book a time slot for a long chat or interviews.

They were all very kind to give me time for interviews and I met them all at places of convenience to them. On my final day of departure, they arranged a get-together over lunch, which was attended by most of my participants. They all expressed their happiness about this opportunity to share their life experiences with me, whom they perceived as a researcher helping them to spread their messages. They asked me to use their original names instead of any pseudonyms and therefore I have used the names and places of all of them, with the exception of three women, who categorically requested me not to use their names. It was an emotional experience for me to leave them.

Conclusion

It was difficult to handle the unforeseen situations, like my gatekeeper proving to be of little use at the very beginning of the study, floods in my field location and frequent physical fights and very heated arguments over sensitive issues in the *Panchayat* meetings, leaving me confused. My family was always worried about my safety as they knew that *Gram Panchayat* meetings have become places of heated and passionate debates, which very often lead to fights. I was fortunate that the common people of the localities and my participants were always careful about my safety and ensured that I was comfortable.

In the process of learning about the effectiveness of my participants, I have learnt many things about myself. As I stayed with some of them in their homes and as we talked for long hours over a period of time, I was no longer a faceless interviewer, and we disclosed ourselves as human beings. In the tradition of feminist research, the words, stories, opinions and beliefs of my participants are brought to light so that their words may speak for themselves. They had never shared their experiences of the public field and the changes which they confronted, or the negotiations they had to make with anyone in such detail.

As a researcher, I had some overall control over the research process, but at the same time had to be very careful with my respondents, especially in the first location of study. Time was the most crucial resource for all my respondents, which I always had to keep in mind and to act accordingly. I had to articulate my interests in a way that was accessible to them and it was also difficult to manage their husbands, particularly in two cases when they appointed family members to eavesdrop while I was conducting in-depth interviews. As a researcher I should be open, transparent and accountable as much as possible. In the next chapter I start looking into how my data helped me to sharpen the key arguments of this thesis.

Chapter Five: Women's Representation and Political Participation in Rural India

Introduction

Most of my participants, who have come into the new system under gender and caste quotas, are functionally illiterate, with few or no productive assets; the majority of them depend on wage labour in a traditional rural society that has rigidly fixed places for various castes as well as each gender (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 2000: 46). Investigating whether or not quotas have helped these women to make their voices heard in local governance remains my concern. Their participation in the activities of the *Gram Panchayats* and the barriers they face at different levels are the particular focus of this chapter. I examine the question of equal citizenship for my participants, considering representation, issues related to their right to vote and political participation as being important factors leading to citizenship. I also seek to explore how far the preferential treatment of the quota system has enhanced their capacities as equal citizens in a democracy. In the following sections, I analyse the experiences of my participants against the background of the effects of wider processes of change and the transitional phase of society and my interviewees themselves.

Women's representation

While creating a space in the public arena has generally been a difficult task for women in rural India, justifying this space has been even more problematic for my participants, considering the traditional discrimination against them in a patriarchal society. The barriers at different levels posed different types of challenges for different categories of women in my group of participants. The caste, tribe and class being important determinants of status and life pattern in Indian society, my respondents also sometimes faced common problems to

different degrees and at different levels. Inspired by the cause of keeping hold of their seats until the rotational system caused the reservation to lapse, men often took the initiative to persuade their women to stand. However, there was also enough evidence to suggest that women were inspired by the quota provision and decided to enter the contest on their own.

> *I was interested in politics from my student days. I was not sure, but then quotas came as a benefit and I decided to contest with the support of my family. It is easy for the first timers as we know that there will be women contesting against us.* (Aiswarya)

> *I was always keen to contest for a post in the Gram Panchayat, but then you know, there were questions like 'what would you do in a Gram Panchayat office?' from many corners. Once the law was enacted, all mouths were shut. I filed the nomination and no one had any objection.* (Renubala)

> *As I am educated, I know how much difference it makes for a woman, so I decided to contest when I came to know that this seat was going to be reserved for women this term …I mean of course, with the consent of my husband and in laws' family..But quota provision helped me in making the decision first. I knew it would be easy for me to get elected and to fulfil my long cherished dream too.* (Asmita)

My first focus group, which included mostly representatives from unprivileged groups in society, responded very enthusiastically to a direct question as to what quotas had to do with women's representation. Before this reform, they were never approached by any male members to contest a post. This experience came to them as a direct impact of the quota, whereby they came to the *Panchayats* as a group. They had never entered into that office before. Considering that they never had any public exposure before, quotas helped them to overcome the anxiety of a single woman in a group of men. In other words, they mustered the courage to represent women as a group. This is reflected in Kalpana's view when she summed up for the first focus group:

We had no idea what is discussed there or what happened there. We came here and we represented our group, which was never here before. We could now ask for or demand plans or schemes which could be beneficial for the welfare of women like us. (Kalpana, for the first focus group)

The presence of women representing women as a group, I mean... apart from their caste, class or other affiliations, has been possible only through this provision of quotas for women. Otherwise, Panchayats were there, in each village, at other levels, for centuries, they were there...who knew about their existence? And, what was their role for women? None of us had even seen or entered into a Panchayat office in our childhood...Our mothers had never had any idea...If you ask anyone, they would say that...Panchayats decide the disputes...it was considered very bad if cases from your household were drawn to the Gram Panchayats..(Laugh)...Yes, I am saying the fact... (Urmila)

A one-third representation of women in the *Panchayats* was intended to bring women into local political institutions by recognising the absence of their voices in the local administration. This also recognised the fact that the local level is most frequently the site of injustice, oppression and exploitation, especially for groups that have been historically disadvantaged on the basis of their caste or tribal identities, as also are women in a patriarchal society (Jayal, 2006: 16).

We never had any chance of giving a decision in public matters. We were never asked for any decisions within our homes. This opportunity has given us the representation as a group and the possibility of networking among ourselves. (Padmini)

Representing women of a particular socially disadvantaged group, and also women as a group, had increased the self-confidence of these participants and this had led to the expansion of their lives in different ways. They could interact with each other in a common place and could recognise their limitations and that led to attempts for further improvements. Together they felt that they had gained power by simply making their point heard in a group or in a meeting.

It feels good to be with women from different villages. It made me feel that my life had taken a new turn and my decisions have a value for the welfare of the community. We are given an opportunity to act for women. Women are deprived of many rights in our society; this is just a step towards giving them justice. (Kalpana)

Kalpana's view echoes the finding that women have developed a sudden gender consciousness through their representation in such large numbers in this grassroots institution. I argue that the support systems provided by the state for women, with potential for supporting their gender interests along with the quotas, have led to important changes in the citizenship status of my participants. While the quotas for including women in at least one third of seats at leadership level and as representatives were mandatory and non-negotiable, the detailed functions of the *Gram Panchayats* and the methods of operation were left to the states to legislate. The state government in Orissa has been very supportive, which has had a positive impact on the lives and experiences of my participants and has enabled them to enter into the public sphere without much speculation about their capabilities. I discuss the state's role and the development of auxiliary agencies to create a support base for my participants further in Ch.6 and Ch.7.

My participants have taken the opportunity afforded by quotas to transform their identities from passive citizens to active citizens striving for the successful working of decentralised administration from the very lowest level of the state. As active citizens, they are interested not only in receiving certain rights from the state, but also in actively participating in deciding how benefits and burdens, rights and obligations are to be distributed, and how collective benefits and burdens are to be shared. Their struggles against different types of constraints have not restricted them from becoming the kind of active citizens who are crucial for a vibrant public sphere. These respondents have justified their right as citizens to equal representation.

You know more how capable today's women are...They are achieving so much in all fields...Why should we underestimate ourselves? If we have managed our households, so we can manage the Panchayats...Government has taken a correct step by providing a quota, otherwise, you know,

women in our villages are shy of coming out. We came out when we came
to know that we have a right now. (Renubala)

We never had such experiences. We seldom used to come out of our homes
and I would have never seen the Gram Panchayat office but for this quota.
When I have discussions with others in the Panchayat meetings, I give
patient hearing to all their demands and objections, I try to take them into
my confidence and finally I take a decision. I know what my rights are,
what my duties are and what my limitations are. So this is all a journey to
know a whole new world. (Padmini)

You know, as a student of political science, I was always interested to
participate in this process of decision making. It's been exciting for me as
I am so young and most of the villagers deal with me just as their own
daughter. So I can be assertive in meetings sometimes and I encourage all
the other women to participate in the discussions. I know some are shy and
some lack awareness, but I am sure they will learn the skills from their
own experiences. (Aiswarya)

These views reflect a new sense of determination to be involved in the activities
for which they are elected. They have exploited the opportunity well to expand
their potential and they are all set to explore a new world of possibilities.

Exercise of the right to vote by women

Casting one's vote may be just one aspect of citizenship, but for my participants,
who were not aware of the implications of the complex concept of citizenship, the
right to vote became the single most important issue. Before the reforms, women
never considered their voting right to be as important as they consider it now.
They were sometimes not allowed by their families to go to vote or they were not
allowed to cast their votes by their own choice. *Panchayats* were so gendered a
place that women never thought of having any rights of entrance into that domain.

I never voted in elections to Panchayats before I came here...never, when before my marriage... I mean, I know it is our right...but no one expects us to go to cast our votes. (Urmila)

Voting for *Panchayats* was mostly controlled by the local power brokers and it was all managed by people of the elite class. Women in rural parts were not aware of their rights as members of a *Panchayat*. Along with the lack of awareness of my respondents, there were a number of constraints they had to face that made exercising their right to vote more difficult.

Barriers to casting a vote

My participants faced different levels of constraints when attempting to enjoy their voting rights. The very act of going to cast your vote includes physical mobility, a time factor and also freedom of choice. It was above all the time factor and lack of information which led to their absence from voting. Electoral booths are situated in places which may be far away from some parts of the villages. This means that it requires a long walk to get to the booth, which takes time that my participants could not always afford to spare. Being women in rural areas, they are always multitasking and are therefore pressed for time. The double burdens of home and outside make time the most critical resource for them. This is implicit in almost all of their explanations. I discuss below a list of other common factors which are important too.

Registration problems

As social norms in India would have it, all women come to live with their husband's family after marriage and they cease to be members of their parental family thereafter. It is almost a compulsion in rural parts as the women are dependent on the family income and they have no independent sources of income. In almost all of my participants' cases, their names were functionally inactive on the electoral lists of their parental constituencies (in most cases, their names were dropped off when the new electoral lists were prepared). So they were no longer insiders there even if for some reason any of them decided to come back to live

with their parents. On the other hand, in the new village which they entered after their marriage, they had to try hard to become insiders as they were considered outsiders here for many years. The head of the family, or the people who are supposed to provide the information for incorporation of new names into the electoral list, usually do not do it promptly as voting by these newly married women is not considered particularly important in villages. Thus, they would have a voice neither inside the family, nor in the public sphere nor in village affairs, as a member of the village *Gram Sabha*, for many years during the early phase of their married life. My respondent Gayatri, who got married in a nearby village, had a different story to share. Her name was on the electoral list of a different booth and her husband never wanted her to go there to cast her vote as that was her parental village.

> *I was not allowed to cast my vote in the previous Panchayat elections. My name was on the electoral list of my parental village, which also comes under this Panchayat. As my family supported a different candidate and this was known to all, so my in-laws did not allow me to cast my vote. I only voted this time when he wanted me to contest as it was reserved for women.*

The whole issue of citizenship becomes complicated with my respondents as often they confuse citizenship with the right to vote only and the right to vote for a candidate of their own choice comes as a rare opportunity for them. Their limitations in terms of lack of awareness due to illiteracy became significant when confronting issues like their inclusion into a new place and so a new electoral constituency after their marriage. Marriage was so inevitable in their lives that all of them had to face this temporary loss of citizenship rights at some point. Even the most educated and only unmarried girl among my group of participants was apprehensive about this consequence of her marriage.

> *As a citizen, I cast my vote for the assembly as well as Panchayats. But does that make any difference anyway? And often I think: what will happen when I leave my house and start to live in another place after my marriage? I will not be in a position to know the people and I may or may*

> *not get my name on the electoral rolls there for some years. So where does my vote go?* (Aiswarya)

Since she was educated, she felt worried about the importance of her single vote and she knew how votes were secured by candidates and that led her have such concerns. While lack of education could be a major barrier to exercising citizenship rights and duties, access to education also sometimes made the women critical about the real value of their rights.

Problems of having connections with a political base

I want to make it clear at this point that political parties do not play a direct role in the elections of *Panchayats* at this lowest level. The candidates do not have affiliations to any political parties and they do not use any party symbols. This may be different in other parts of India, but in Orissa, political parties are not supposed to play any active role in *Gram Panchayats*. It is indeed interesting to see that this policy of reservation for women in *Gram Panchyats* in Orissa was first initiated by the Janata Party, but the political parties are not allowed to be involved either in the campaigns or to offer any other form of support to the candidates. So, my participants were not involved in any party politics. Nevertheless, they were taking decisions which were political in nature and they were working in positions that are considered to be political. They were known to be the political heads and members of the *Gram Panchayats*. What I want to argue here is that, although my participants were working for no particular political party or with no affiliation with any particular political party, they were taking political decisions and so it became hard for them to create a political base in a new place where they started to live after their marriage.

As explained above, all the married participants faced the problem of being outsiders trying to become insiders in a different territory. It was not always the case that they got married in nearby villages, sometimes they came from very faraway places. Some even came from cities and they found it even more difficult. It was like having no connections with the world outside their in-laws' houses and this was very hard for some participants.

> *I was brought up in Cuttack. That was an urban life and when I came here as a daughter-in-law, no doubt my in laws were very accommodating, but I only came out of the house for the first time after six months of marriage. I know this is nothing unusual in this part. I find it very difficult. I could never have imagined at that time that one day I would get to know everyone in this village and would be elected as the Sarpanch.* (Asmita)

All the married respondents no doubt depended either on their husbands or their fathers-in-law to get to know about the village and its affairs. Coming out for elections just could not happen all of a sudden, they had to make efforts along with their families to gain the connectivity with the villagers in order to create a political base for themselves. Many admitted that it was only possible due to the support extended by their in-law's family and other kinship and social relationships. Sandhya had experienced the change in the attitude of her family and was positive about the opportunity to cast her vote independently now.

> *Earlier, we were casting our votes only for the people whom our husbands were supporting and it was decided by them. Now we are judging for ourselves. So I am glad to go to the booth with the women from my neighbourhood and we all cast our votes on our own. It's a great feeling. That makes me feel free, at least for a day.*

Feeling free for a day had added to her degree of confidence, which helped her to use her own powers of judgement. The experience of enjoying the freedom to cast her vote came for her in a full package that included gaining the scope to go out of her home sometimes and getting access to independent space as an individual citizen and this had made a lot of difference to her life.

Barriers in terms of mobility

Social norms restricting the mobility of these participants had always got in the way of exercising citizenship rights or enjoying the associated privileges. For some women, free movement became a problem if their husbands passed away and they became dependent on one of the two families. Young widows who do not have children generally are not supposed to stay in their in-laws' house and

women with children often continue to stay in the in-laws' place after their husband's death. The social norms are completely different and sometimes so humiliating for Indian widows that life becomes a struggle for survival. One of my respondents came back to her paternal family after she lost her husband.

> *I know this is our right. I became a widow after a year of marriage and came back to my father's home to stay with them and they said to me you have no rights to vote now. When this seat got reserved, then my neighbours decided that I should stand as I am educated. I never cast my vote and I was elected uncontested from this ward, so there was no voting.* (Srimati)

It was perceived that women's votes were not important for *Panchayat* offices. These respondents in the early years of their married lives were not considered important in village affairs, so their votes were only the votes decided by their husbands. Candidates never appealed women to vote for them and they were accepted as the extended votes of their households only.

Age also had a lot to do with the citizenship status of women in these parts. Women had greater mobility when they were old or after their children were married. It is as though attaining 18 years of age had no meaning for the women and in no way was it the guarantee of being considered as equal citizens of village or state. My participant Revati reflected on this:

> *When I was newly married, my mother-in-law told me that as a daughter-in-law of this village, people should not see me outside. This was considered bad and I never cast my vote until my children were grown up. I was not coming out very often and it was only when this seat got reserved that my husband asked me to file nomination.*

As some of my participants were still very young, they were facing problems of mobility more than the older participants. Asmita, Padmini, Swarnalata and Gayatri, who became mothers within one or two years of their marriage, were enjoying somewhat more independence in terms of mobility than others. Though it was not expressed by them, it was explicit in their freedom of movement, which others could notice.

> *If you have a kid, then you have to interact with so many people, for the regular vaccines you have to go the health centre, interact with the relatives who come to see your kids often and with the school when kids start their schooling and so on. So, your going out and mixing with other villagers gradually becomes acceptable. This helps when we contest in elections.* (Renubala)

Older women did not find it a problem to go out at all. As they had lived most of their adult lives in this locality, so connecting to people was easy for them. But then there was Bishnupriya, who was not prepared to use this advantage of her age. Instead she asked me:

> *Why should I go out for Panchayat work? I have always voted for the candidates whom my husband supported. I have no interest in politics, my husband does all that. If my husband were not interested, I would never come to the Panchayat office. Nor do I consider this an achievement for me. My husband wanted me to come out of the house, so I obeyed him. I don't know what citizenship is or whether or not a single vote of a woman really makes any difference. I will be back to my own role in my home once this term comes to an end.*

In Ch.6, I discuss how this restriction on mobility could vary depending on the social class and caste affiliation of these participants. While participants belonging to lower castes and classes enjoy a greater bargaining capacity, for the women from higher class and caste groups it is really difficult to negotiate with the cultural practices. I examine how this variation in the restriction of the mobility of women leads to a difference in their participation in more depth in the following chapter.

Other factors leading to exclusion

Social institutions also played their role in limiting women's citizenship rights. As feminists argue, women's oppression is exemplified in the way women experience citizenship rights. On the one hand, the state might grant citizenship rights to women and on the other hand, society will ultimately determine the extent to

which citizenship rights can in fact be exercised by women. Poverty, social exclusion and discrimination can intervene in women's enjoyment of citizenship (Faulks, 2000, in Chari, 2009: 48). Poverty could lead to social exclusion, as in Muni's case. Muni belonged to a tribe where women marry younger men so that when the women become old, the husbands take care of them. With such a practice, during their young days, men usually enjoy being nurtured by the women only. Women were the usual providers and breadwinners and men were allowed to invest their time as they wished. As the provider of the family, she did not think it wise to invest time in things which did not lead to any direct financial gains.

> *Is it going to make any change for me or my family? I don't go to vote in elections as I have to work on daily wages. The Government declares a holiday for the officers, but what about us? We have to work in order to feed the family. Now I don't even go to attend the Panchayat meetings regularly if I get to work on those days. It's just such a small amount of money. You tell me, is it possible to survive with Rs 300 per month? It's even lower for the ward members; they get only Rs 30 for a sitting. Why should women be interested in these posts then? One has to devote a lot of time and we have to enter into so many conflicts, time and again, and finally end up getting such a small amount of money. We can't neglect our daily wages for that. I don't even ask other women members the reason for their absence from meetings.* (Muni)

Muni's remark summarizes the reasons why quotas did not have an equal impact on elected women from different social groups. As this is not paid employment, it is a burden for women of the labouring class who live on daily wages. Obviously they consider their exercising of citizens' rights as coming into conflict with their everyday living. Cultural and regional variations are so prominent in rural localities that even the locations where I was investigating reflected different kinds of social patterns leading to different types of interactions among women. The provision of preferential treatment for women has resulted in a lot of changes in the political status of my participants. However, there were some women, such as Muni or Bishnupriya, who could not benefit from the changed provisions for different reasons. While for Muni it was poverty, for Bishnupriya, it was the strong influence of social culture.

The question of citizenship involves the most important obligation of contributing towards the political and socio-economic terrains of the state on the part of its citizens. Rights, as rightly said, are always followed by duties. In the following part I deal with the question of the political participation of my respondents.

Political participation of women

As I said in Ch.3, political participation encompasses a large area comprising a wide range of activities. However, as the literature suggests (Jayal, 2006; Vidya, 2007; Buch, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Panda, 2002), for the women in the *Gram Panchayats*, political participation means participation in some specific activities in the area concerned. As mentioned in Ch. 3, I focus on the involvement of my participants in activities such as, attendance of meetings, involvement in village work, participation in different committees of the *Gram Panchayats* and participation in other activities of the *Panchayat*.

Attendance of meetings

I attended one village level meeting (*Gram Sabha*) and 2-3 *Gram Panchayat* meetings in each of the *Panchayats* where I was investigating (there could be no meetings in the tribal hamlet). While discussing women's attendance of meetings I would like to treat attending the *Panchayat* meetings and *Gram Sabha* gatherings separately. As I understand that these two are not considered to be of the 'same nature' by my participants, and different levels of problems are associated in attending *Gram Sabha* meetings, I prefer to first discuss *Panchayat* meetings and then the *Gram Sabha* meeting. Recognising this difference is important for me as most of my participants do not consider the attendance of *Gram Sabha* to be as important as attending the *Panchayat* meetings.

I had seen that almost all the women representatives were present in the *Gram Panchayat* meetings. Furthermore, women were more punctual than the male members in all the meetings. There was a fixed date for the monthly meeting of each of these *Gram Panchayats* and the venues were always to be the *Gram Panchayat* offices. So, the findings of early studies, which identified lack of information about the place and time of meetings as the reason for the absence of

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elected women representatives, did not apply to my study (Datta, 1998; Singla, 2007; Vidya 2007). Rather, attendance at the meetings was considered very important by my participants. While responding to a query about her attendance in the *Gram Panchayat* meetings, Asmita explained:

> *I attend the meetings regularly. I never arrive late and never leave before the meeting comes to an end. If people have put their trust in me, I must try to live up to their expectations. I have been made the Sarpanch, if I don't attend, then how can I ask others?*

In fact, attendance at the meetings was given such high priority on all these respondents' agendas that some of them considered that even a silent presence was important for them. For many of them, even coming to the meetings and sitting for two to three hours there without any contribution was good enough to be categorised as being active. The following are the answers of four ward members to the question of their attendance.

> *I always come to the meeting whatever may come. I have never missed a single meeting. I consider that as my first duty towards the people who have elected me as their representative.* (Anita)

> *I have to walk 3 miles on a very bad road and sometimes it gets dark while returning home, but I don't miss a meeting date. It's the men who are mostly absent in the harvest season. On rainy days, when transplantation of the paddy starts, them some of our women members cannot attend the meetings, but our Sarpanch is very considerate. She decides on an appropriate day so that it will be easy for everyone to attend. The dates are usually fixed, but she sometimes changes the dates to ensure maximum participation of women.* (Kuni)

> *I come and listen to them. I don't say much, but I come as our lady Sarpanch is very strict about attendance. She always asks me the reason if I am absent. She knows I don't participate much in the discussions, but then she insists that I must attend and she suggests that gradually I could learn to speak in a meeting if I attend the meetings regularly.* (Golapa)

> *I come and sign on the attendance, then sometimes I stay back to listen and sometimes I leave early. There are other jobs at home.* (Sandhya)

These accounts from my participants indicate that they did not always actively participate in the meetings, but they nevertheless considered it important to be present there. Immediately I wanted to know what could be the cause of their inactivity and the responses were:

> *I don't want to argue with others in the presence of male members of our village.* (Anita)

> *People of our village want me to come to the meeting. I come to the meeting, but I'm not good at demanding something strongly for my ward...I can't...in fact; I'm not of that type. I do whatever our Sarpanch asks me to do. You know we have to prepare the list of beneficiaries sometimes; we have to supervise the Anganwadis and the nearby primary schools. I do all these as people have elected me, but I can't argue in a meeting. My husband comes with me and he sits there in the corridor. He does not want me to talk much, he deals with that part.* (Kuni)

> *I don't know much about politics. I come to the meetings as the Sarpanch is a woman and I want to learn how she handles the issues in these meetings.* (Golapa)

> *They pay so little for attending a meeting, only Rs. 30, but then I come for that as that is the only remuneration we get as members. I don't go out of my home to work, so since I am doing my job as a ward member, I think we should get something as a salary or even an honorarium. Even the Sarpanch gets so little, but we come and attend meetings regularly as we don't want to be blamed by people...like, you know, there's always ill talk like 'women are not capable, they don't do anything on their own'..etc. So I don't miss any of the meetings and I always stay there until the meeting comes to an end.* (Gouri)

They all had different experiences and some of them even realised that they were not doing what they were supposed to do in a meeting. They all had different reasons for their silent presence and different arguments defending their

attendance. However, all of these women were members and none of them was in a leadership position. They all considered attendance of meetings to be the most important thing. However, ensuring attendance was not the most important consideration for the participants who were *Sarpanches*. Instead, many of them expressed how they managed the meetings and led the discussions.

> *I can't sit silently. I lead the meeting. I have to start the discussion and each meeting is important as we meet once a month. There are always a lot of pending works waiting to be done. There are letters from the Block Office and sometimes there are deadlines which we have to comply with. Lots of discussions on the ongoing projects, queries regarding funding, and paperwork for each session of the meeting are waiting for us.* (Asmita)

> *I ask the secretary and then he reads out the letters from the Block Office. That is the most important work as often we have to comply with their orders. Government has entrusted so many responsibilities to the Gram Panchayats these days...you know...each single day, we get a new order. Then there are different types of schemes, projects, targets, supervision work...So on and so forth...we are over-loaded, it's impossible to carry on without the support of the members, the Secretary, the family...I mean, everyone, I depend on them all. I include them all in my work, ask them all and finally take the decisions.* (Padmini)

> *I rely on the male members, mostly on the Naib-Sarpanch. I am learning gradually and our members are very co-operative. I distribute the work, the responsibilities, among everyone and then I ask the co-operation of my husband when something is really hard to understand for me. I decide, but others' opinions are important ....this is a democratic office.* (Sabita)

All of the participants quoted above were in leadership positions and they were concerned about their responsibilities in a *Panchayat* meeting. As noted, one of the women *Sarpanches* even ensured the attendance of all women members at the meetings of her *Panchayat*. It was of course important that, despite their household burdens and the social norms restricting their interactions outside the home, many of my participants were keen on their regularity of attending the

meetings. There were of course exceptions, like Muni who had the freedom of her own choice and she chose to follow the instructions of her predecessor in the office as she perceived it as a waste of time. She asked me:

> *As a young woman, this is my first duty, to work and feed my family, why should I waste my productive time in something which does not pay back?*

Even the reforms which secured the presence of women in greater numbers in *Gram Panchayats* did not contribute much towards the elevation of the economic conditions of these participants. Going out to attend *Panchayat* meetings or even to communicate with the Block Office or operate actively in a public space involved some expenses which were difficult to manage for Muni, who was a daily labourer. I realised that this was the reason for her initial distraction towards me when I met her in the paddy fields as she did not want to waste her productive hours. I had to wait until her fifteen days of transplantation assignments were over.

> *Who is going to feed my family if I frequently say 'no' to the work offers now and go to the Panchayat office? There is also another point; I may not get any work when I leave office if I don't work regularly now. People and the contractors will be dissatisfied, which is bad.* (Muni)

She apprehended that if she did not work her family had to starve. Her parents were old and she was the only breadwinner in the family. Another reason why she preferred to work as a labourer for wages, even sometimes ignoring her official work as a *Sarpanch*, was that she was sure that she would have to come back to her position as a daily worker after her five-year term and then people may not employ her again if she had discontinued working for them. In fact, she told me that she was getting more offers of work as people from all the nearby villages came to know her as *Sarpanch* of the *Panchayat* and she wanted to take this privilege to earn more and make her future secure.

The other respondent who was comfortable with being absent from almost all the meetings was a high caste woman, Bishnupriya, the *Sarpanch* of Gatiroutpatna. Her husband often attended the Block Office meetings for her and this was pointed out to the Block Development Officer by other *Sarpanches* and by the

Nominee of her *Panchayat*, Aiswarya. It led to a big hue and cry for some days, but the office could not prevent him from doing so as he was a powerful person in the area. Bishnupriya lived in a locality which was in fact very near to the Block Office. It looked strange to me that while women *Sarpanches* from many distant *Panchayats* were taking the strain and coming regularly to attend the meetings of the Block Office, she was never seen there. Her husband was even putting a signature for her in the attendance register of the office. When I asked her about this she was very honest in her reply.

> *Is it wrong if he puts a signature or talks on my behalf? Do you think so? I don't think so…For me, it's all the same. My husband asked me to contest as the seat was reserved for women. He has his own business and needs the political connections, for which he wants to go to the Block Office. I don't know anything about politics, what will I do there?*

This clearly indicates the reason of Bishnupriya's aloofness and also her husband's intentions behind pushing her into the public field. He wanted to maintain his hold on the *Panchayat* for his own selfish interests and therefore he supported Bishnupriya. However, most of the other participants were attending the *Gram Panchayat* meetings and they were mostly regular in their attendance.

Gram Sabha or meetings at the village level presented a completely different picture. All adult voters are members of the *Gram Sabha*. So, as members, it is their right to be present there and to express their own problems or complaints. This acts as the first place of appeal for any and every kind of problem arising in villages which are very small in size, sometimes only comprising 20-30 families. So even silly things sometimes come up in the discussions and the only *Gram Sabha* meeting I could attend had no agenda at all. I had become known to the villagers during my stay in Kalapada, which was the second location of my fieldwork and, as I mentioned earlier, this was a known locality for me, so there was no problem for me when I expressed my interest in being present at a *Gram Sabha*. I arrived there with my participant Asmita, who was the *Sarpanch*, and after a while her husband arrived and she returned home to attend to her children as it was getting late. Her husband carried on from that point until the end of the

meeting to respond on behalf of the *Sarpanch*. When leaving me, Asmita became apologetic and said:

> *See this is our problem, as mothers of young children, we have to go back after a certain time and these are sometimes prolonged for just silly matters and everyone has a voice here, you can't make anyone sit quiet. If I try to suggest an agenda, then it may lead to discontent among the villagers as it has never been like that before. My husband wants to be here, so I have to leave, to be at home.*

The meeting lasted for almost five hours and many times issues were discussed about the *Panchayat* office and the woman *Sarpanch*. The husband was accepted as the spokesperson of the *Sarpanch*. Villagers were even addressing him as the *Sarpanch Pati* (husband of the *Sarpanch*) while asking him to clarify the decisions taken in the *Panchayat* office about specific issues. The issues ranged from the biased behaviour of the licensed dealers and distributors of ration supplies to the alleged corruption of a ward member in allocating work orders to a youth club in the village. Later on, while interviewing my other respondents, I asked them why they did not remain present there to defend their own actions or to convince the villagers about the great jobs they were performing for the community's welfare. Their points were interesting and noteworthy.

> *They know what we are doing. They don't want us to be there. This has been here for long years, who will change the mindset? We rule in Panchayats, as there is a quota, here in Gram Sabha, there is no such compulsion, so they are there.* (Sunati)

> *It's not practically possible to attend the Gram Sabha meetings as they continue for long hours. This happens twice in a year, so all of the villagers have got to say something and it becomes so long that it comes to an end sometimes at 12 am. So how could we remain so long out of our houses and who would look after our kids and household chores after all?* (Jyothsnarani)

Sunati mixes up the point of social attitude with her lack of awareness of the fact that the presence of the *Sarpanch* and the ward members is mandatory, though it

is not usually the case in practice. The schemes of the *Gram Panchayats* have to be approved by the *Gram Sabhas* and there is a provision that if the *Sarpanch* or ward member, in spite of being informed of the meeting of the *Gram Sabha*, does not attend it, then the *Gram Sabha* may decide against their decisions as far as the allocation of work orders specific to the village is concerned. In Orissa, *Gram Sabha* meetings also need a quorum of one tenth of its members to be present and one third should be women. However, in a village gathering, social practices dominate over the prescribed ones.

Jyothsnarani's responsibility for child care and household chores leaves her with no option but to be at home since these meetings are lengthy and often finish late at night. As almost all of my participants were young and had young children to look after, it was a problem for them to be there, whereas women like Renubala, who chose to go against her family, could make it, although she understood how difficult it could be for other women.

> *In Gram Sabha meetings, I often feel alone in this male gathering as there is no other woman. My daughter is grown up now and I don't cook for the family. My husband no longer interferes in my public life as he knows how adamant I am. It's a problem for other women as they have their children, some of them have elderly parents-in-law to look after and most importantly, the husbands of these women are also members of the Gram Sabha, if both of them would attend these late hour meetings, who will be at home?* (Renubala)

> *The Sarpanch attends the Gram Sabha, but if it is a woman, it becomes difficult for her as these meetings often become very violent and often so long that they continue up to very late hours of the night...but, it is changing now, our Sarpanch attends it mostly.* (Purnima)

It was observed that this issue was even more sensitive where an SC woman or woman belonging to a lower caste was elected as a *Sarpanch*. The *Gram Sabha* never wanted to include her or to invite her to decide about questions involving the higher caste people of the village. It was seen as something derogatory to let an SC woman interfere in the matters of high caste people. Therefore Padmini,

though very popular in her own village, was never invited to attend the meetings of other *Gram Sabha*.

> *The Gram Sabha expects my husband to come there, instead of me. If I go, it becomes like a deviant behaviour, as there are seldom any other women. But I don't mind really, I go there if I know that important issues are on the agenda for discussion.* (Padmini)

Aiswarya was my only unmarried participant and therefore she had no specific household responsibilities, such as childcare or cooking. When asked about the *Gram Sabha* meetings, her response was different.

> *You know, we live in a village which is a kind of suburban area and this locality is very unsafe for women. They always fix up the Gram Sabha meetings in a remote corner so that only male members would be able to attend that. I can't risk going there and coming back late at night. Besides I always come back to my home before it gets dark. And Gram Sabha meetings start after the male folk return from their work fields, I am not regular in attending that.* (Aiswarya)

As a woman belonging to the same region of India, I am aware that girls and women in rural India seldom go out independently. They are always provided with a male escort by their family.[45] So, they depend on the availability of male members of the family when they have to go out of their homes. There is a big concern about the safety of girls. This also leads to the absence of some married participants.

> *Who will go with me to such a distant corner in the dark? Though the venue is inside the same village, the road is dark and unsafe. My husband*

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[45] It is worth mentioning here that social and cultural practices in India have their roots in *Manusmriti*, a very ancient and one of the most important sources of family laws for Hindus in India. *Manusmriti is* regarded as a comprehensive social code of conduct introduced by the ancient sage Manu and its date is unknown. According to Manu, a woman is considered as someone who must never be independent. During her childhood, she should be under the guidance and control of her father, during youth, she is to be protected by her husband and during old age, she is to be under her son (Verma, 2005: 26). If we think that the social position of women could be problematic due to this cultural sanction, on the other hand, it also puts men in a position where they must accept it as their duty to offer their protection, co-operation and company to women.

never allows me to go there. My husband stays in the city and he can't come here just for a Gram Sabha meeting. My mother-in-law supports me a lot, but I know she won't allow me to take that long walk all on my own. So, I never ask her. (Kalpana)

All of the married participants have had to come to live with their husbands in their in-laws' villages. This means that they started to be included as members of a different village after their marriage. This invariably involved coping with a new set of social norms specific to the family and the locality. This had all taken a large portion of their life and it sometimes made some of the respondents' positions difficult in a new village. It therefore followed that there were important decisions in their lives which were controlled by other members of their family or society. Also, for all these married women, it is difficult to get involved in any activities which require their coming out of their homes. I argue that, in spite of this, my participants were trying to cope with the responsibilities stemming from these meetings.

However, I do not consider the absence of many of my participants in *Gram Sabha* as problematic since I observed that many of the respondents felt no discontent about this as it would make their negotiations difficult. I find it to be one of their concerns as they want to include their families in their decisions. They noted that it would be inconvenient for them to attend those oddly scheduled meetings and talk against and with the men, which was not allowed in many cases by kinship norms.

My husband defends me as I let him know about all my decisions and it's he who helps me in the discharge of my functions in office. So he could easily reply to whatever is asked there. Sometimes I can't go, then he is there. (Padmini)

Anyway, we come to know about all the discussions. The presence of my husband is regarded as our presence. It's good for me as I realise that it would be difficult for me to talk against the males of the village who are otherwise related to my in-laws' family. (Sandhya)

> *Someone is a 'jeth',[46] someone is a brother of your father-in-law and someone may be your husband's uncle or mother-in-law's brother, ...this is my situation, what can I say in front of them?* (Sunanda)

> *It's not considered good if we argue in a male gathering. Villagers will go against us if we argue or even talk a bit loud in those meetings. So we don't go there.* (Muni)

Thus, my respondents, who were mostly regular, punctual and active in attending the *Gram Panchayat* meetings, were sometimes irregular in attending the *Gram Sabha* meetings for obvious reasons. However, it was somehow acceptable to my respondents that their husbands attended the *Gram Sabhas* and conveyed the decisions to them. This leads to establishing the position of the husband as '*Sarpanch Pati'* or '*Member Pati'*, which makes the approval of the family easy for these participants when they make decisions on their own or when they need to go out of their homes. Throughout my investigations, I constantly found that the approval of their family members and their acceptance of the behaviour and the choices of the women had a strong impact on their effective participation.

Extent of involvement in village work

Involvement in *Panchayat* work requires women to go out regularly and mix with people from the different villages under a *Panchayat*. However, this was simple for the ward members as they were representing only a ward mostly comprising of a single, or sometimes two villages. This was less time-consuming and less strenuous for them, whereas for a *Sarpanch* the work involved a cluster of villages and covered a large area. So I wanted to know from both the members and the leaders how much time they really spent in *Panchayat* activities per day. A significant number of women (29 out of 38) said they spent one hour a day on average for village work. This time included activities such as attending the *Gram Sabha* meetings, listening to the complaints of villagers, meeting government officials, visiting people in need or visiting the primary health centre, *Anganwadis* or sometimes even the primary schools of the locality. However, most of these

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[46] '*Jeth*' is the husband's elder brother. It is strictly forbidden for women in rural parts of Orissa to talk to him or even to come in front of him without covering their heads and the upper half of their faces with their Sari, which is known as '*ghungat*'.

were part of the assignments of the *Sarpanch*, which she sometimes performed herself or delegated some women members to do on her behalf. This had made the women *Sarpanches* overloaded and most of them had to devote more than two hours on average per day. There were some participants who faced difficulties in going out every day and this part was mostly shared by their husbands.

However, as Hust (2002) mentions in her study involving women from some other parts of Orissa, *gaanjhias* (daughters of a village) have greater social sanctions and fewer restrictions on their mobility and social interactions than the *gaanbahus* (daughters-in-law of the village). A daughter of the village has known the men of the village since childhood and can deal with them in a more carefree way, whereas a daughter-in-law of the village has hardly any social intercourse with men of her husband's village. From the experiences of my participants, I agree with Hust's view that daughters have a greater freedom of movement and are generally less oppressed by social restrictions regulating their public behaviour than are the daughters-in-law (2002: 10). This, along with her higher education, enabled my participant Aiswarya to exercise her power in the public field effectively even though it was her first entrance into village politics.

> *I have no problems to go out or mix with the people of my Panchayat. I was born and brought up in this village, so all of them know me as a daughter of this locality first and now as the chair-person. Elders consider me as their daughter and the young people as their sister. So I give almost as much time as needed for my Panchayat. As the chair-person of the Block, I have this office and I come here every day. I sit here from 9am to 5pm four days a week. On the other days, I go into the village and talk to the people.*

For Aiswarya, it was not a problem, as she is a daughter of the village, which makes her position very clear, and she is comfortable to come out as it is socially accepted. However, for married women who belonged to the *Panchayat* as someone's wife or someone's daughter-in-law, it was a problem which they had to negotiate.

These days government has doubled our responsibilities. We have to come out of our homes every day and that needs the co-operation of the family. (Renubala)

My husband shares my responsibilities and he sometimes goes to the school and supervises the teachers or even goes to the ration dealer to check how he distributed the supply. Without the family's support, it's very difficult. (Bishnupriya)

We can't go out whenever we feel it necessary and we just can't go out with anyone, we need men to accompany us and they are to be recruited by the family, at least the family should accept them as someone with whom we could go out. This makes it difficult sometimes. (Harapriya)

It is interesting to see that all of them find it a problem, but they don't think it is impossible. They realise that with support of their families, they could do this and they have shown that they negotiated within their families and came out whenever it was necessary for them to do so.

Participation in committees

Participation in *Panchayat* committees was something that was unknown to many of my participants. As per the government norms, there should be different committees in each *Panchayat* to deal with separate subjects. As *Panchayats* have been entrusted with many tasks, ranging from village welfare to health, sanitation and education-related jobs, there should be committees for each of them. Unfortunately, very few of my participants were recruited as members of these committees. I agree with Jayal that as 'there is no provision for a quota-based representation of women on *Panchayat* committees, this provides a convenient handle for excluding and marginalising women members' (Jayal, 2006: 22). I was surprised to observe that a very large number of my respondents (32 out of 38) were completely ignorant about the existence of any such committees. When asked about the committees of the *Panchayat* some of their responses were as follows:

Are there committees in our Panchayat? I'm not sure what they do. No one ever asked me to be on a committee. I'm sure, if there were any, our Panchayat Secretary would have informed me. (Muni)

What are these committees? I have to check it with my husband. (Bishnupriya)

I think there are some committees, but I don't know. I would love to know about them. I will ask the Panchayat Secretary and will ask the Sarpanch too. (Sabita)

I know there are different committees in the Panchayat. The Block Office asks us about the performance of the Committees sometimes. We do meet and take decisions on important issues after the monthly meetings of the Panchayat. I know in most of the Panchayats committees only exist on paper. I push my Sarpanch as I am working in the Block Office and I meet the officials every day...so you know it's difficult for me to avoid their queries...I want the committees to work responsibly, but it's not always easy as the husband of the Sarpanch in our Panchayat interferes too much. (Aiswarya)

However, there were also Swarnalata, Renubala and Sunati, who were members of the Health Committee in their *Panchayats*. *Sarpanches* were ex officio members of many of these committees, but four out of seven *Sarpanches* had no idea about their role in such committees. Two *Sarpanches* (Asmita and Padmini) were executive members of the Women and Child Welfare Committees and they were very actively involved in their work. But overall, this turned out to be one section of participation about which many of my respondents were ignorant.

Involvement in Panchayat activities

The final determinant of participation is the degree of involvement in *Panchayat*-related activities. The state government provided that the women in the *Gram Panchayats* were to deliberate, debate and decide important policy matters. The involvement and claims of women have also been ensured in the process of

planning, policy formulation, execution of rural development programmes, and funding allocation for different welfare schemes for the beneficiaries of the *Gram Panchayats* and controlling and supervising the functioning of the different departments operating in rural areas under the *Panchayats*. Mohanty states that: '...once the women become aware about the issues they try to execute programmes successfully and in the process their self-perceptions undergo change. This has a multiplier impact on the children, the family, the neighbourhood and the village' (1993: 31).

Many of my respondents were engaged in work related to literacy, roads, water supply and better health and sanitation for their villages. Construction of good roads was at the top of the priority list for many of them. When asked on what was their first work in the *Panchayat*, respondents discussed their attempts to make communication better for the village as the most important concern. As this area included some villages that were deprived of even electricity and drinking water facilities, these were also equally important for women from those villages. In particular, after a devastating flood the roads were washed away in many of those villages and women were the worst sufferers in such situations.

> *A good road to my village is the first thing. We have demanded it so many times and I am happy that it's under construction now.* (Asmita)

> *A good road, a girls' school and some tube wells in my village, these are my plans for my term.* (Renubala)

> *I have been trying for the construction of our linking road to the city. I am also concerned about the water supply to each house of the Panchayat. Works have started in that direction.* (Aiswarya)

> *Can you imagine, after so many years of independence, we are living in a village which does not have electricity? You can see the electric poles, the electric lines, wires…everything, we have been seeing these for many years. I have made this my priority and I will try my best for the connection of electricity to my village.* (Revati)

> *Our children are still using kerosene lanterns. You have seen the forest surrounding our villages, when it gets dark, then even the strongest man*

would fear to walk on that street. I walk back to my home regularly at
night and I know how horrible that is. I have promised, and I will see that
my village gets electricity during my term, if nothing else. (Kalpana)

It is worth mentioning here that when these respondents were discussing their concerns about the different problems of the villages, their husbands and sometimes fathers-in-law were also joining in. These were their concerns too. While the women in power expressed the problems of getting things done, their families also felt involved in their concerns. My participants were more likely to be effective in their work and in challenging traditional power structures when they had the support of their families. However, the traditional patriarchal social pattern had an effect on the women who were brought up in those settings. It was amazing to notice how husbands' control could in many cases be tactfully converted into husbands' silent support by many of my young participants, although some of them were 'proxy women'[47] in some of the activities. It was interesting to see that some of them were very active in some arenas, whereas they chose to be represented by their husbands in other fields.

Invisibility of women's work and the reforms

Tribal women, like Gouri and Lata, who belonged to the outskirts of Paramahansa village, which was predominantly a *Brahmin* village (highest caste people), had a different type of socialisation, which led to them living in a different type of social pattern. They had limited freedom of mobility and they were also not working as waged labourers. The male members of their families were working and these women were running the households. However, for these women of low income families, household responsibilities included certain duties like fetching water from distant places and collecting firewood from nearby forests that involved going out regularly. Going out to collect drinking water or watching the field occasionally when the man was back at home was something different from

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[47] 'Proxy woman' or 'proxy women' (Mohanty, 1998; Buch , 2000; Baviskar, 2003 etc.) is a commonly-used term to depict women who were working as the 'de jure' heads, controlled by their husbands or other male members of the family, in the early years of the reforms in the PRIs. (See Ch. 3).

going out to attend *Panchayats*. The husband's control had to be tactfully dealt with by these women in the early years of going out frequently and mixing with people from different villages.

I felt embarrassed when I first rang Swarnalata, the *Sarpanch* of Barada *Panchayat*, and the call was received by her husband who introduced himself as the *Sarpanch*. I knew that I was supposed to talk to a woman, so when I insisted on talking to his wife, he told me that I should rather be aware of the social pattern whereby it was the husband who owned a mobile, never the woman. This was my very first experience of how patriarchal the pattern could be. Though I was not a complete stranger to the norms of rural Indian society, it had not occurred to me that things still stood there as they had been years back, on some points at least. So I talked to the man for some time and convinced him that I would like to talk to his wife and would fix up a time to visit their home. I explained to him about my project and how I needed their support for its completion. Then he was of course very happy to invite me (on behalf of his wife) and handed over the phone to his wife to continue.

In almost all the villages I covered, I felt a prominent preference for sons over daughters. Sons were given the opportunity of education and daughters were asked to share the household responsibilities of their mothers. Sometimes girls were even taking care of their brothers who were older than them. However, in the families of my respondents, where I stayed with them, there was a change in the picture. The mothers who were either the leaders or members of a *Panchayat* were treating their daughters on a par with their sons. Even their families had already accepted this new arrangement as a normal trend, which had worked as an encouragement for my participants. This marked an important change in the attitudes of the women who were able to participate in public life. I argue that their exposure to the world outside of their homes has led to this shift in their perspectives towards un-biased treatment of sons and daughters. Aiswarya, who was primarily elected from a village *Panchayat*, was the only unmarried girl among my respondents and she became the Chairperson of the Block *Panchayat*. She got the full support of her brothers and father and was encouraged to make politics a career option. She summarised:

As an unmarried girl, my family does not expect me to contribute towards household work. They know I have an official role now and they support me in my work. But I know, doing household work is just like doing nothing. For years women are doing such hard work inside their houses, and this is never calculated as a contribution to society.

I asked all my respondents in Kalapada and Bentkar (the second locality where women were traditionally not allowed to work outside their houses) a common question with the intention of observing my participants' own perceptions about their never-ending household chores inside the house. My question was: what were they doing before coming to politics, and their answers echoed almost the same theme.

Nothing really, we were cooking for the family and taking care of the children. (Sabitri)

Social norms and family structures in rural India manifest and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. Rural women brought up in such a social life are often conditioned to internalise the traditional concept of their submissive role as being natural, thus sometimes inflicting an injustice upon their own lives.

It was almost like all women's jobs, cooking food, washing utensils, collecting drinking water, feeding the cattle etc. We had no time to think about anything, we were so occupied, one thing after another work used to follow...You can never understand, how relentless and unending these household chores could be.. (Jyothsnarani)

Oh, me? ...nothing, I was just a housewife. I was taking care of the home and children. I still do that, but things have changed. (Kalpana)

I had no education. I got married at 17, got my children at 18 and so what could I have done? I never thought of working. I just stayed at home and all my time was spent in taking care of my home and children. I really never worked before this. I never came out of my home on my own. It was also out of the question then. (Sulochana)

The instant response in most cases was '*nothing*'. When I engaged with them, talking more and more about their daily lives, then they mentioned these chores. The common perception was that doing all those things was a part of women's lives. As they were all women, so they had to do all these things and they did not have any complaints about this work remaining invisible in the long run. It has been estimated that only 6% of Indian women workers are employed in the organised sector, while 80% of economically active women are found in agriculture (census, 2001).

A large part of my respondents' work was thus invisible as housework or family labour. Even high caste and upper class respondents expressed that the work they did from early morning to late at night was never considered useful by others and whatever their men were doing was considered more important. Whatever the husbands did and however little they had seen of the money they earned, they had to manage the household expenses with that. This further restricted the mobility and freedom of the women in the long run. The management of household expenses by these women remained unnoticed for years and their capabilities within the private sphere were never recognised before they came into the *Panchayats*.

However, some of my respondents who belonged to the tribal communities showed a different pattern, which was significantly different from the participants from the other locality. Another important observation was the freedom of the lower class women compared to the women belonging to a higher class. The working class women had greater powers of negotiation than their contemporaries from the higher class. The fact that they had been contributing towards the family income had successfully empowered them in the private sphere.

Conclusion

Most of the studies on women's representation in *Panchayats* have shown that women could never have been elected to these institutions in such large numbers in rural India if not for the quota (Buch, 1999; Kaushik, 1998; Datta, 1998; Mohanty, 2000; Hust, 2002). The experiences of my respondents were quite

different from those of their predecessors who were in power in the early years after quotas for women came into existence, and the remarkable difference was quite visible in almost all the spheres. I would argue that, by providing for a minimum number or definite percentage of women in *Gram Panchayats*, quotas ensure a more comfortable atmosphere of interaction for women by substantially reducing the anxiety often felt by single or token women (Dehlerup, 1998: 2). So, gender quotas for rural women in this part of India have positive effects in some ways (though this may not be true for all situations and places). They definitely compensate for the very real barriers that prevent rural women from taking up their fair share of the political seats.

On the one hand, constitutional provisions and the support system provided by the state government in Orissa are certainly working as enabling factors for facilitating the inclusion of women by creating a space for them in the *Panchayats*. On the other hand, there are inhibiting factors in the form of exclusionary practices, both social and institutional. There were some participants who were very independent and certainly learnt to make their voices heard, but there were two women who preferred to be represented by their husbands. The largest group of respondents was very enthusiastic about the possibilities of expansion, which could be marked through their entrance into the *Panchayats* and into the public arena. This group obviously had the potential to become role models for all other women in rural societies. The participation of all my participants in the activities of *Gram Panchayats*, and also their exclusion from certain places inside these institutions, had created an awareness of alternative roles and a more positive self-image than that which they had internalised over a 'lifetime of patriarchally-defined gender identity' (Jayal, 2006: 32). As the experiences of my participants have evidenced, quotas for women have proved to be an important impetus to bring them into the public field. On the other hand, it became obvious that, in order to make their places secure in this public domain, additional strategies have to be employed that promote the self-reliance of women (economically as well as socially), build up women's capacities and remove structural obstacles. I argue that providing for their participation and inclusion in the *Gram Panchayats* in such large numbers is very important as a mechanism through which such changes can be expected to take place.

The importance lies in the fact that all citizenship rights include the distribution of resources, and obligations are always exercised within a social context. So discussion of the importance of political participation necessarily involves a consideration of the element of power. How much power and who exercises it still remains important for evaluating the level of political participation. I did not plan to consider the empowerment of my participants as such, but as things developed from one point to another, the investigation eventually led to their empowerment replacing their effectiveness as the important concern. The next chapter deals with how far this provision of gender quotas for rural women has led to the effective involvement of my participants, both in the private and public spheres and how they deal with the huge changes it has brought into their lives.

Chapter Six:
Barriers, Negotiations and Empowerment of Women

Introduction

While focussing on the experiences of my participants, their representation, their effectiveness in the decision-making process as a whole and the impact of their presence, I understand that their effectiveness depends substantially on the socio-economic context. They were offered an opportunity by the reservation policy which they have utilised to bring gradual changes in both the social and economic spheres. In general, the transformation of society by and for these women was largely encouraging. In listening to the experiences of my participants, I attempt to explain their continuing struggles against the barriers and problems of participation in the *Panchayats*, their potential and the support of families, communities and other social collectives. In this chapter I consider whether and to what extent this new role has led to their effectiveness in the grassroots units of democracy and how far their effectiveness has enabled them to gain a new sense of confidence. Are they still considered as 'trespassers, deviants and guests' (Molyneux, 1986: x) in a public domain where they do not belong? To what extent have their own perceptions about the change in their identities led to their empowerment? Along with these important concerns of the research, I also explore the different ways in which my participants have negotiated within their home and the private world surrounding it in order to effectively exercise their power in a public place.

Continuous participation leads to effectiveness

As the urban-rural divide of the population in India is huge [48], bringing 'one third' women into all levels of the *Panchayats* was and continues to be a social

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[48] India has a 72% rural population and Orissa has an 85% rural population (Census of India, 2001).

experiment, quite apart from the political implications. All of my participants were either encouraged or pushed by the men of their family or village to contest for the positions. All of them were from families with no or very few political connections. As seats in such large numbers became reserved for women, so men had to push, encourage and support the women from their known corners or families, or else seats would have gone vacant. Vacant seats in *Gram Panchayats* lead to the particular village lagging behind when welfare schemes are provided by the government. However, just getting women leaders or representatives elected does not necessarily ensure the effective participation of these women at the decision-making level. Being first-time entrants into the public domain, they had to struggle constantly both in and out of their homes.

Quotas definitely offered the participants an opportunity to get involved in the affairs of *Gram Panchayats*. Their role includes deliberation, debate and making decisions in important policy matters related to 29 government departments[49] located in rural areas, such as land reform, agriculture, healthcare, elementary education, drinking water, sanitation, animal husbandry etc. Besides representation, these women have been provided with an opportunity to take part in public life, including social and cultural ceremonies, and to develop personal and higher levels of leadership qualities without the consideration of traditional social and cultural barriers. Thus this opportunity has contributed towards the improvement of their socio-economic and political perceptions. However, some of the participants were restricted by their familial and cultural traditions and they were deprived of opportunities by their circumstances. As I have explained in Ch. 5, there were participants like Muni and Bishnupriya who were in leadership positions (*Sarpanches*) but because of traditional constraints they were not keen on exercising their powers independently. There were some ward members, such as Sunanda, Kadambini or Umavati, who were not capable of a very high degree of participation as there was a lack of exposure and other constraints for them. However, undoubtedly the political status and effectiveness of my participants will mainly be determined by their actual participation in the decision-making process on certain policy matters and 'the kind of role they play in the discussions

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[49] There is a list of all 29 items that come under the authority of the rural local administration as per the eleventh schedule (Article 243 D) of the Indian Constitution in the Appendix to this thesis.

of meetings at *Panchayat* level and their actual involvement' (Mehta, 2002: 72) in the public domain. Most of my participants faced inhibiting factors, such as low levels of education, lack of information and restrictions on their mobility to varying degrees, which got in the way of an effective public life. The impact of these factors is also visibly different for women belonging to different castes and classes. Politics being a predominantly public activity, which demands the investment of a great deal of time, my participants went through hard times before evolving their own independent strategies to deal with the time factor, which is the most critical resource for all of them. In the next sections I discuss the barriers faced by my participants in the public and private world, followed by their strategies to deal with these.

Barriers in public space

Education as a barrier

Most of the participants I talked to had a very low level of education. Among my whole group of 38 respondents, only Aiswarya and Asmita had higher education. Almost 80% of the group were illiterate or had learnt to sign their names only after they were elected. Education informs and lack of education is obviously a handicap for these women. My participants' lack of education put them in a vulnerable position when letters from the Block Office were issued to them in English. Though there is a strict legal provision for issuing all Governmental letters in Oriya, which is the official language of the state of Orissa, bureaucrats are generally callous and careless about this[50]. I have seen the *Panchayat* secretaries struggling to explain the details of letters from the Block Office to my participants. When I applied for an official permission letter from the Block Office to attend the *Panchayat* meetings, I got the letter of introduction in English only. When I asked about the language, I did not get any satisfactory answer. So,

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[50] This may be due to the fact that the present Chief Minister of Orissa, who has been in office for the last three electoral terms, does not speak Oriya (the official language of the State) at all. He speaks in English and has been highly criticised for this, but that has not helped to ease the situation. All the official records are to be maintained in English in this State where the literacy level is still not very high.

to understand the meaning of the letters, my respondents mostly depended on the representatives of the Block Office who used to pay very rare visits to the *Panchayats*. This sometimes posed problems, particularly when a deadline was to be met.

Almost all of these women were worried about this important barrier, which has been difficult to overcome. The lines of communication between different levels of *Panchayati Raj* institutions make the bureaucratic control of the lowest level very visible. The letters or instructions from the government reach the District collectors by post. The District's highest office instructs the different Blocks through letters, and important messages that need immediate attention are delivered by fax or telephone. Then, the Block level office, which is headed by the Block Development Officer, interacts mainly with the village level *Panchayats* directly, sometimes by sending special messengers or through the village level workers who are appointed by them.

> *These officers knowingly issue letters in English, so that we have to depend on others and they can get scope to prove us inefficient. If they know that most of us are unable to read even Oriya, why should they issue these letters to us?* (Purnima)

> *If they don't issue us letters in our mother tongue, they should send some educated fellow from their office to explain the letters. They don't do that, they want us to depend on them; sometimes we have to go back to them just to understand the meaning of an office letter.* (Padmini)

> *I think it's just ridiculous. They send a letter which tells us about some complicated schemes and projects through a special messenger and then they don't contact us for some days. When a last date is there, then they ask us. We don't understand what is written there and they know each one of us. Why don't they help us to understand what's there in the letter?* (Sabita)

These participants showed a clear note of discontent in their tone against the officials. Apart from a knowledge of English, lack of education also affects their level of awareness about their political responsibilities. So, the low level of

education and information of my participants sometimes made them vulnerable in the hands of the local power brokers. Though there were many other barriers for my participants, lack of education and their lack of information were considered to be most important by them. Uneducated participants were honest in expressing their limitations.

> *We have no education, so we can't even read the newspaper, so it's not easy to know about the developments or the change in policies of the government. We had no interest in these affairs earlier, so we have a low level of understanding too. We have to ask someone first to read something, then to explain the meaning. That makes our work difficult. We often have to approach men who have political connections. They sometimes interpret it wrongly too... Then we have a problem.* (Sunati, speaking for the second focus group)

Lack of education and their inability to access information restrict the women's area of operation and compel them to go along with the dictates of male members who are educated (or at least well informed) even without understanding their moves. Gayatri pointed out that:

> *Had I been educated, I would have never feared the male members of the Panchayat. Some of them are educated and all of them have more knowledge about the outside world, so I have to submit to them on some important points, which I don't want to.*

My respondents Muni and Kuni were largely controlled by some of the male members of their respective villages. Both of them belonged to Scheduled Tribe groups, which usually do not denigrate women into a secondary position in their social lives. However, I was not surprised to discover the reason behind their almost inactive and dormant status in their *Gram Panchayats* once I talked to them. On being asked why she always depended on her predecessor even for small decisions, Muni replied to me:

> *It's because I have much less knowledge. I'm afraid that my signature on some points may lead me to jail. I do not understand the official language. As he knows all this, so I depend on him... You know, he was the Sarpanch*

here, he always goes to the Block Office and he knows the officials there. It's also easy for him to make time for these things as he is a man and he is interested in doing so.

Kuni's reply, though it was somewhat different, carried the same meaning.

I do not know why they have provided such reservations for women like us. This is fine for the educated women. For us, it's like a burden, always like walking on the edge of a sword. How can we handle it without any education? So I accept what others think to be right. The men of the hamlet asked me to contest, otherwise I would have never thought about this. I ask them and follow the decision of the majority in the meetings. It's mainly men who know all these affairs more than the women of our village.

On the other hand, educated participants, such as Aiswarya and Asmita, were very comfortable dealing with the meetings or taking decisions. They also helped and encouraged the other participants to exercise their power wherever it was possible. They felt confident about their decision-making and were well informed about their functions. The degree of confidence in Aiswarya's voice was clearly noticeable when she said,

As I am educated I am able to understand and officials co-operate with me. I don't have to fight for anything. It's like, you know, they can't fool me. So, so far it is all smooth for me. I am confident about my effectiveness. I never hear 'no' for whatever I demand in the Block. It means also that I know what is reasonable to ask for.

Aiswarya's selection as the Vice-Chair Person of the Block level *Panchayat* from among all the representatives from the village level *Panchayats* was largely due to her higher educational qualification. She was known for helping other, uneducated, women to understand their power and rights in their new roles. She often encouraged other women from different village *Panchayats* to say something in the Block level meetings. Asmita, the only *Sarpanch* with a Bachelor degree, also sounded very confident when she attributed her popularity to her higher education, which she believed had helped her to win in her struggles

against many odds. She knew that people in her village and community were very happy with her decisions because they respected her as an educated woman. She used to manage her meetings well, she made sure that all members attended the meetings and she explained each of her decisions to the members. Being the most educated in her office, no one had ever had any doubts about her decisions. This enhanced her freedom to take difficult decisions.

> *People love me because they know I have a power of judgement. I am giving much importance to girls' education in my Panchayat as I know how education has helped me to solve the real problems. It increases your confidence level and then people really start respecting you and your words. My members know that whatever I do, I do for the larger benefit of the community and they have faith in me as I am educated.* (Asmita)

Rotation of reservation

As provided by the reforms, the provision of reserved seats for women on quota continues for one five-year term only. The seats are not reserved permanently, so some of my participants believed that all the good work done by a woman during her term in a *Gram Panchayat* does not necessarily pay back. Next term the seat becomes unreserved or the basis of reservation is changed, so that a seat reserved for a Scheduled Caste woman this term may be declared to be reserved for a Scheduled Tribe woman or for an Other Backward Caste woman for next term. If the seat becomes unreserved, the women have to negotiate with their family members to contest against male candidates who are politically seasoned. My participants were of the view that the reservation of seats on the basis of rotation means that many of these hard-working women go unrecognised in the long run. My participants were a bit sceptical about this provision of the quota for women. This is evident from Purnima's views,

> *I am interested to contest for this seat next term. I know it will be unreserved. It depends on my husband, if he allows me to contest against a male candidate or not. He may, but then it's not only about him, his family also has to permit this. This is so complicated. And particularly, if there is*

*a male contestant who is close to the family or someone powerful, then the
family does not want to feel uncomfortable.*

Rural society often does not accept a woman standing for an unreserved seat. So,
next time when the seat is reserved for a woman belonging to any group, another
woman has to start from scratch, which leads to the possibility that the
experienced women leaders will disappear from politics. All of my participants
except Renubala were new entrants into *Panchayats* and also into politics. Even
Renubala was elected for the first time, although she had contested for the post
twice against male candidates in the past and was defeated. In her view, it was
difficult for her to win as she was contesting against male candidates.

> *My father-in-law allowed me to contest against a male candidate. My
> husband was against this. Though people of my village liked me, I realised
> it is very difficult to win if you are standing against a male candidate at
> village level. There's every possibility of your character assassination.
> Society does not accept it and you don't get many votes. I had to put up
> with unpleasant talk behind my back and even many women did not
> support me. It was a bad experience for me.*

However, Aiswarya had a different view on this rotation system.

> *I think rotation is to give this opportunity to more women and also the
> seats would not belong to particular women by that. But for now, as things
> stand, contesting for an unreserved seat is difficult for a woman in a
> village. Also, the women who are doing good works are not getting any
> recognition by this rotation. They cannot possibly nurture a Panchayat for
> the long term as the Legislators for the State Assembly could do.*

I could understand that Aiswarya had a reasonable point in saying this. However,
I do not consider rotation of the seats to be a problem for women, in general. I
agree with Aiswarya that, in a way, it helps to include more women and to bring
new women into the politics of the *Gram Panchayats*. However, it is also true that
women have to begin from scratch as seats are reserved on rotation. Though I do
not think that their work would be unrecognised in the long term, most of the

participants perceived this as a problem for them as they have put in extra effort to create a base for themselves.

Negotiating the barriers

Handling the factors that inhibited their participation in a public place was not easy for my participants, though they have attempted to create women's agencies and social networking to make the journey smoother for the next generation of women. They have adopted a wide range of strategies for accessing power and intervening in the realm of politics: inserting their agendas into the existing discourses, or leading their own movements, forging alliances, negotiating rights and creating their own strategies and organisations. In the course of my interactions with my participants I was amazed to observe the range of constraints that these women had to face in their day-to-day life as well as the coping mechanisms that they employed. I was surprised at their willingness to learn about their roles in local governance.

> *In the beginning, it was a problem. I really had to learn everything, starting from where to put my signature to how to understand the accounts of the office and the allocation of schemes. Panchayats have to exercise power in different matters related to villages, which one has to understand. I went to the Block office and asked the officials all about this. They were really nice to me.* (Sandhya)

> *I knew I would have problems from the date I was elected. I never gave up. I wanted to learn letters and I started attending the adult learning class right from the next day. I was managing my time to attend the classes regularly. I got my husband's support. I was not ashamed about my lack of education and I learnt the letters soon. I knew it was impossible for me to have a degree in education, but I became careful about each word that the officers were delivering and that helped me.* (Basanti)

These women have shown amazing energy when they got the opportunities and they displayed sophistication in negotiating new spaces for themselves in order to expand their possibilities. Their struggles against bureaucracy, the local power

brokers, the age old societal norms and sometimes even against their own families have so far remained largely untold. These uneducated women have shown interest in knowing about their new responsibilities and crossing the important barriers and they have developed their own strategies in doing so. Padmini explained her strategies of dealing with these problems thus:

> *It's so unfortunate that even people from our own villages are sometimes trying to defame us. It's because they have been given much importance in Panchayats' matters by our predecessors and got their percentage from them, so they also pressurise us to take bribes to allocate them work orders. I ignore them tactfully; sometimes I ask my husband and other male members of our extended family to intervene.*

Padmini is a very successful *Sarpanch* in her *Gram Panchayat*. She has completely changed the working culture of the *Panchayat* during the last three years with her hard work and intelligent handling of issues in trying times like a flood or a community disturbance. She negotiated with her family, with the respected members of the village and sometimes also with the Block Officials and has managed to get support from all the expected corners. Her views echoed the confidence that she has gained from her experiences.

> *I was quite sure that I had to do my duty, by hook or by crook. So I took the help of educated people of the Panchayat and I felt they were very co-operative once I started to ask them. My husband also has limited knowledge, so it helped when I took the advice of educated and responsible people of the village. They also felt involved by this. I believe there are ways to solve things, if there are problems.*

Interestingly, some of the participants, such as, Sunati, Basanti, Manorama or Golapa, who had never been to school in their childhood for obvious reasons, have come out of their houses to learn the alphabets and how to sign their names after being elected. There are even cases where these women have attended classes of the National Literacy Mission. Participants who did not know how to sign their names learnt it in the adult literacy classes. They were enthusiastic about sharing their experiences of handling this major problem of lack of education as their struggle against all these barriers still continued. All of them

told me that their capability and effectiveness had been constrained due to their lack of formal education. The participants said that they were constantly learning from their experiences and were strategising to overcome their lack of formal education. Sometimes, asking help from male colleagues also made them more popular and accepted in their positions. They had not missed any opportunity to increase their skill and capacity. Capacity-building programmes were being organised by the government, about which some were very enthusiastic. They emphasised the need to attend training provided by the government, which could be helpful in overcoming their problem of lack of education. But, some of them were very dissatisfied with the quality of training provided by the government and the location of the training. Swarnalata made her objections clear when she suggested that:

> *Training provided by the government only takes place in the state capital, which is a faraway place. I had to depend on my husband to go to attend the training. Besides, it is not possible to go to the state capital for two consecutive days for this training leaving small kids at home. That means the whole family stops working for two days, which is a problem.*

However, apart from the training provided by the State Government, other Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and agencies have been set up to provide orientation and training to these newly elected women in the *Panchayats* all over the country. Besides these training programmes for elected women at different levels of *Panchayats,* there are a number of supportive provisions from the state, including the Total Literacy Campaign, Operation Blackboard, *Mahila Samakhya*, *Lok Jumbis*, District Primary Education Programmes and mid-day meals have been attempted to attract girl children to enrol in schools (Mohanty, 2005: 10), so that future generations of rural women will not face lack of education as a major constraint.

Unfortunately, no Non Government Organisations had ever organised any training programmes in this Block, though they do take place in other parts of the state. So, although some of my participants admitted that training was helpful to learn about the different issues concerning the exercise of power, it was not possible for all of them to commute to the state capital to attend the programme.

While these women were putting in so much effort and trying hard to overcome one set of problems, there were still institutional barriers, such as some cases of bureaucratic callousness or the rotation of seats on a different basis every five years, about which they could do nothing. It is up to the administration to realise the gap and bridge it accordingly so that these things do not pose a problem in the empowerment process of these women.

Barriers in private space

Education, lack of information or language, or institutional barriers like rotation of the reserved seats may be some of the common barriers that were difficult to overcome for my participants, but there were also other factors related to the private role of women and these are highly complex in a stratified society. As Mohanty notes in her study, discrimination against women in fields such as healthcare and education are prominently visible across castes and classes in Indian society (1995: 3347). There were significant socio-economic factors, such as lack of equal status and equal access to opportunities inside and outside families, social restrictions on freedom of mobility, the double burden of family and childcare alongside their public activities and lack of economic freedom which were affecting the effectiveness of my participants. The consent of the family, usually the consent of husbands in the case of married women, seemed to be very important as they had to always say where and when the meetings were going to be held, when they would be finished or where they were going if it was for other duties, such as the supervision of a primary school, health centre etc. The important concern here remains whether or not women have gained any real autonomy, or it is only a different form of dependence? The contradictions showed a complex structure of hidden power relations where cultural norms were quietly modified by the participants.

Though I do not aim to compare the varying degrees of effectiveness of my participants from different castes, tribes or classes, I realised that dealing with the double burden of household chores and childcare along with the public roles assigned to them and dealing with a major social problem like the restrictions on mobility for women had varying impacts on women belonging to different castes

and classes of Indian society. Mobility was highly restricted for higher caste women while for lower caste and lower class women poverty and managing time have emerged as important barriers. While class is based mainly on economic criteria, caste is a somewhat socially constructed factor. Though this is rather complicated, there were participants who were from lower castes, but belonged to the higher class of the society and vice versa. Whatever the social basis of stratification may be, often lower class participants had greater freedom of mobility. So I deal with these problems separately as faced by participants from different sections of society.

Dealing with the double burden

Women are entrusted with the traditional responsibilities of doing the household chores and taking care of the elderly and the children, and so time has become a critical resource for them. Most importantly, for my participants, carrying the double burden hampered their level of performance in their new role in the *Panchayats*. As in most parts of rural India, my participants lived with extended families, and after coming to this political office there was a substantial increase in their responsibilities. Since society still sees women of the house who work outside as deviant women, it follows that there was the established practice of doing all the household chores before leaving for any public work. As Sabitri puts it:

> *If I had to go to heaven or hell, I have to cook for my family and to see that all the housework is finished, so sometimes I neglect the Panchayat's work unintentionally. It was very difficult to manage both things, but of late, there has been a significant change in the attitude of my family. With their help and support, now it's much better.*

This is a common problem for all rural women irrespective of their caste or class. Having no financial independence, it's hard for them to get any helping hands as they may not be able to afford it most of the time. Even in very high caste families, due to the concept of untouchability (a typical practice which designates all lower castes as untouchables), nobody other than the women of the houses are

permitted into the kitchens. In Brahmin families (highest caste), elderly people do not take any food served or cooked by outsiders. As Sunanda said:

> *You know, my mother-in-law is a widow and she keeps fasting twice a month. I have to be very careful about her as she does not eat any outside food or food touched by any outsiders. Even when I am sick, I have to cook for her. So I do not go to Panchayat meetings if it is a day following her fasting day.*

Ultimately this meant that women performed all the household chores. This made it difficult for my participants to manage family responsibilities along with their new political responsibilities. If time was a problematic issue for women who had to work for their daily bread, keeping the family thread intact and managing the double burden became the concern of women belonging to a higher class.

Mobility of women

As I mentioned in Ch.5, the degree of restriction on mobility and the bargaining capacity of the women differ according to the cultural practices of the particular caste and class group in rural Orissa. I deal with this issue separately for my participants from different categories of society in this section.

High caste women are the honour of the households

Indian society has been maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious beliefs related to different castes. Caste largely determines the function, status and available opportunities as well as the handicaps of an individual (Vidya, 2007: 103). Not all higher castes belong to higher classes, but it is expected that the women of higher castes do not go out of their houses. My participants belonging to this group were supposed to do all the household chores and go out only with male members of the family. They were not allowed to step out of their homes without the permission of the male heads of their families. It was often a problem for me to convince their families to let them talk to me somewhere out of their homes. It was also

prominent in their conversations that they would prefer to make compromises with their positions rather than to disturb their family lives.

> *You see, we live in extended families. This is not a big city. People are interfering and nosy. They ask us many things each time we go out ...even the neighbours, who are distantly related; you have to understand how difficult it is in a village. So, it is always better to keep them happy, if I want to do something on my own. I ask them, if they have a real objection, I don't go. After all, at the end of the day, it is this family for which we live.* (Sunanda)

Most of the participants fought against this with their own strategies, ranging from negotiating space to a small family fight. However, they made it clear that there was a difference between merely letting him (the husband) know what they were doing and having to ask for permission to go somewhere on official duty. For Bishnupriya, Renubala and Aiswarya, who were from high caste groups, the degree of restriction on their mobility was surprisingly different. Bishnupriya was married and had always preferred to be a good wife to her husband, while Renubala's husband was against her and Aiswarya was unmarried. There was a marked difference of reasoning in their opinions on their choice about going out.

> *As a woman from a high caste, it is very difficult for me to go to the Block office, attend meetings in Panchayats or settle the disputes in Gram Sabhas. I mostly avoid going to the meetings. Only my husband goes there. We are a well respected family in this locality. I have never done anything against my husband's wishes. Why should I commit a sin by doing that, at this age?* (Bishnupriya)

> *I was fed up with all these restrictions soon after my marriage. I could never get support from my husband. I managed to get permission from my father-in-law to go out. Then there were other restrictions, like someone (a male family member, who may be even younger than me in age) would go with me wherever I went and I had to come back before it got dark. These were difficult and often I was feeling frustrated with these restrictions. I made it known to them slowly that I did not like it. Then I overcame it*

slowly, but I lost my husband's support forever, we don't even stay together. (Renubala)

I am not married, so my family is more concerned about my safety. In our castes, girls are considered by parents as 'others' property' (paraya dhan)[51]....so you know they are very protective about my movements.... Though my father and brothers helped me in all my decisions, I am careful about my movements. I put reasonable restrictions on myself, like I must come back before it's too late, I inform my family in detail about my plans for the whole day, so that they won't be worried. My mother is always worried till I am back...I know she keeps on waiting for me, so I don't want to make them feel that I am disobeying them. I inform them, ask them about going out and usually they don't say 'no'. (Aiswarya)

In their own ways, all these participants from high castes reflected on their perceptions of the position of women, the position of the family and on husband-wife relationships in high caste families. While Bishnupriya considered it a sin to go against the wishes of her husband, Renubala attempted to negotiate and Aiswarya handled it carefully. None of them had gone completely against the family, but eventually two of them also exercised some freedom of choice about their mobility. The traditional norms in high-caste families restricted their freedom of choice and they had to look for other methods of reconciliation with family members if they really needed to go out. Sabita, who was a ward member, also a high caste woman, said that her husband was very co-operative, but on the other hand she had to inform him if the *Panchayat* meeting was delayed and had to explain the causes of the delay, which was very embarrassing. When I wanted to know specifically 'what about getting permission every time you have to go out', Sabita replied:

Yes, I have to. My husband is very strict. It's he who pushed me to stand for this post and now he does not allow me to attend the meetings. I feel suffocated sometimes, but I can't risk my family life for this temporary

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[51] As girls are considered to be the property of other households *(paraya dhan)*, where they are supposed to go after their marriage, young girls lead a more restricted life. This is probably the reason why most of the women being elected to *Panchayats* are married.

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work. I have two sons; I have to think about them. If I always fight with my husband, it will affect them. I know he is otherwise a nice guy, caring and responsible, so sometimes I submit when he says it's against our social norms and his parents would feel disrespected in the community by my act of going out regularly or at odd hours.

As Beteille rightly says, 'Indian society is a notoriously hierarchical society' (1999: 589). There is a difference in the degree of restrictions on women from high castes depending on their marital status. The social norms are rather flexible for unmarried daughters like Aiswarya, while they are highly rigid for widows like Srimati and Prativa. High-caste widows had to face more restrictions on their mobility and they were secluded. Srimati was managing to get the support of her in-law's family at times, and at other times when it was not possible she did not go against the norms.

> *Since I am a widow and still not very old, so there are very strict norms on my daily life in our caste. I could not show my face to my in-law's family if something wrong would happen to me. So I go out with my husband's younger brother or my father-in-law. If they are not free, I have to ask my mother-in-law to go with me. Each time I ask them, I don't mind missing a meeting, but I won't go against their wishes.* (Srimati)

> *I am a widow from a Brahmin family, which means I am supposed to live under a rigid code of conduct. I am judged by my practices of daily life and that's even stricter as I am living in a village. I cannot go out on my own. My in-laws arrange to send someone with me. So, it depends on many factors...I mean people are good, so I manage...but at times, it is hard to make a decision.* (Prativa)

In both these quotes, there is an underlying tone of helplessness and lack of freedom of choice. In fact, Prativa was not even free to give me time for an in-depth interview. She was doubtful about her political life. Both Prativa and Srimati were living secluded lives. Though they told me that they had their in-law's support, I could understand that it was difficult for them to transgress the boundaries marked out by high caste society for young widows. My participants from high castes were not expected to work outside of their homes, or even to go

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outside of their homes without being accompanied by male members of the family. Even some poor families who belong to very high castes sometimes do not allow their daughters or daughters-in-law to work outside. Caste and class being the determinants of social status, they contribute to constraining women in rural India from participating in public life.

Mobility of tribal participants

Tribal women in rural areas often belong to a lower class and their women have to work outside their home for their livelihoods. The tribal women among my participants were migrant workers whose families had lived for the last fifty years in the present locality. Womenfolk from this community were used to going out of their homes and even out of their villages quite often for daily wages. So this was not seen as a problem for them as far as going alone to meetings or to other places was concerned. As I have said elsewhere in this thesis, I met Muni (ST) for the first time when she was doing transplantation work in the paddy fields, which was a distant place from her own home. She described how she used to go to very far places for her daily wages. She said:

> *Going to different places all alone is not a problem for me. I go to many work sites and our community traditionally is very open about this. In tribal societies, women are not restricted from going out of their homes and in any case we have to work for our daily bread.*

Another participant, Kuni, who was very hesitant about giving me an interview and finally got it written down by someone for her, responded to my question on freedom of mobility that:

> *Our families don't restrict us. I have never felt any pressure or restrictions. We go into forests to collect firewood, on summer days we fetch water from far distant places for our families, if there would be restrictions on our movements, then who would do all these things? Moreover, we don't discriminate between girls and boys in tribal families.*

Lata, the other tribal woman, explained that, although they very often go out of their houses to work in the fields for their livelihood and in their society there were no such restrictions on the mobility of women, their lack of information did not offer them many choices of freedom of mobility. She said she had a problem in knowing about the bus routes and times of the transportation service as she was not used to travelling in buses, which was the reason why she did not dare to go to Block level meetings. Her movements were highly restricted as she had anxieties about catching the right bus at the right place. She said:

> *We go to the field, work hard all alone, but going to the city involves knowing about the bus route and again locating the office, so that becomes a problem for uneducated women like us. We have to ask and ask others till we get back to our home, all tired and restless.*

Flexible norms of mobility for low caste participants

Low-caste[52] groups do not necessarily belong to the lower class. Women in low economic classes work out of their homes and so they usually have fewer restrictions on their mobility. However, two of my participants, Padmini and Asmita, were from lower castes but they did not go out to work for daily wages. They were educated and their families were supportive and so the norms became flexible for them. On the other hand, there were many participants, like Basanti, Sunati and Umavati, who were poor and were going out to work. They had more freedom than the higher caste women since their contribution towards the family income enhanced their capacity for negotiation within the family. They could participate more effectively in the *Panchayat* activities as they had more freedom of choice. I agree with Chhibber that lower caste women enjoy a greater freedom 'associated with marginality' (2002: 418) and this helps them in going out on their own. In some families, however, the concern was different. Though low class participants had greater mobility, there were other reasons that made male family

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[52] When I say 'low caste', I mean the Scheduled Caste participants, not the participants from the Other Backward Caste groups, as they are not considered as 'low caste' in Indian society. Their OBC status is only a recent development based on the Report of the Mandal Commission (more in Ch. 3), which has nothing to do with the traditional caste-based social hierarchy.

members vigilant about the movements of their women. When I was talking to my participants, there were two incidents where particularly the husbands were eavesdropping. They were very alert about their wives as there was always a fear in their minds of being duped by outsiders. It was interesting of course that towards the end of my stay there was no such sense of suspicion in their attitude.

While discussing barriers like caste-based inequality, it is important to recognise that discrimination in different forms against women belonging to lower classes are also major barriers confronting these women in rural India. There have been cases in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where lower-caste women who were elected as *Sarpanches* were not allowed to sit in the chair. Along with strict patriarchal norms, this caste-based discrimination is recognised by Rai as an additional reason for women's absence from the public sphere (2008: 106). However, there was no such evidence in my field while I was conducting my interviews. Obviously, it was there in the early years as my respondents sometimes reflected back from the experiences of the women *Sarpanches* of the past:

> *You know, the first woman Sarpanch of our Panchayat who belonged to a washer-man community was not allowed to be in the chair throughout her term of five years. She only decided to fight against it after three years and then Block officials intervened to solve the problem. Even then she was ill-treated in the meetings and never got any co-operation from the higher caste people. However, things have changed now.* (Gayatri)

Manorama described her sister in law Kabita's experience when she decided to contest the elections in 1997, when the seat was reserved for an SC woman for the first time:

> *She was boycotted in the village when she declared her intention to contest for a reserved seat in 1997. Officials came to the village and made a compromise by convincing the higher caste people that this was provided for by the law of the state and was for women's empowerment.*

However, irrespective of caste or class, in some cases husbands felt that their primary duty was to give protection to their wives and this sense of duty made

them highly possessive, which resulted in restricting their movements, apart from other reasons connected with their caste or class. Renubala argued that this was an important reason for the low degree of involvement of some of the high-caste women:

> *Women Sarpanches are even returning very urgent official notifications without putting their signatures on it if their husbands are out of station. Very rarely do the high-caste women dare to go against their husbands' wishes. I decided to live my life on my own, so my husband has had no relation with me for the last 10 years. But I can't say that this is the ideal way to deal with things and also all cannot afford to go against their husbands.*

Strategies/compromises

Though Indian society is very patriarchal, it is interesting to note that men have often facilitated the advancement of women. There are social norms restricting the free mixing of women with men, on the other hand there are also socially approved norms which make women's interactions comfortable in certain ways. Chitnis mentions the typical Indian tradition by which men and women unrelated to each other by blood or marriage, but belonging to the same neighbourhood, village or circle of acquaintances, address each other by using appropriate kinship terms (Chitnis, 2005: 23). The western tradition of calling brothers or other relatives by name is unimaginable in Indian families. Particularly, calling elders by name is not done at all. Apart from norms of address, the relationship is also supposed to be maintained with the same respect. Societal norms do not allow addressing people by their names unless they are assured that there is no age gap. To make it clear, if one would address his own brother as '*Bhaiya*' or own uncle as '*Chacha*', one has to address all the brother's friends as '*Bhaiya*' and friends of '*Chacha*' as '*Chacha*'. There are many such kinship terms denoting a particular relationship, which means that relationships between contemporaries of the opposite sex are channelled into the easily-accepted brother-sister relationship. This creates relationships by which a woman becomes related to many men in her in-law's family after her marriage and these are regarded as being as sacred as

blood relationships in rural societies. A culture which segregates the sexes so rigidly approves of this interaction as safe and secure. Chitnis further sees this as a process by which men and women are able to offer each other warmth, protection and support without any of the aggressiveness of sexual possession or dispossession (2005: 23). My participants had explored these kinship norms to get support and necessary company in times of need.

They had utilised the opportunity to expand the possibilities of networking outside their own or in-law's homes through this unique kinship support system. This came to their aid as they could easily approach people of the opposite sex, in different relationships, and secure their support for understanding and exercising their power in political positions. Gayatri, Renubala, Kalpana and Kadambini depended on the younger brothers of their husbands as this relationship between the '*Dewar*' (brother-in-law) and '*Bhavi*' (sister-in-law) helped them to resolve misunderstandings inside their families too.

> *My 'Dewar' is educated and earns much more than my husband. So he has a voice in our family. When my husband does not dare to talk to his father, I ask my 'Dewar' to help me. And when he is free he will go out with me. My mother-in-law is also fond of him. So, I rely a lot on him. He was the one who helped me most by trying to change the mental attitude of his parents.* (Gayatri)

> *My 'Dewar' has many friends and I'm Bhavi to all of them. They all help me, from understanding an instruction to carrying it out. My Dewar stays in the city, but he comes back if I ring him. I feel much more secure when I'm with him.* (Kalpana)

> *After my father-in-law's death, my position was very bad in the family. My 'Dewar' came to my aid, even though my husband does not stay with me, my 'Dewar' and his wife are always with me. His wife takes responsibility for the house and he helps me in all my outward activities.* (Renubala)

> *It's easy if someone from your in-law's family is with you. People don't dare to talk ill about a woman in rural parts if she is with her Dewar. My Dewar is much younger than me, but he takes care of his parents. If he is*

free, he is the one who comes with me to the Panchayat Office. If he is with me, then my family is not worried about my safety. (Kadambini)

However, things were not always easy when women had to deal with their family members. Less educated husbands had also attempted to convince their women about their own experience in politics, which was not always acceptable to these women. It was sometimes difficult to say honestly to a husband that he was wrong to do certain things and at the same time to do so in amicable ways. Padmini said in her interview:

> *My husband was not happy about my regular attendance of the meetings. He was sitting in the Panchayat meetings to which others had objections. I tried to convince him and he became convinced after my in-laws supported my stand. He now co-operates with me and never interferes in my work.*

Making compromises for the maintenance of peace and understanding in personal life appears as the first option for these high-caste women. As such, family comes first for them and though they know that they are supposed to play a more active role outside once they are in power, they rarely go against their families. Rather, they negotiate, using different strategies ranging from compromises with husbands to peacefully convincing their fathers-in-law. Compromise is positively regarded by high-caste Indian women as the most acceptable accommodation of conflicting obligations, of pressures satisfactorily resolved, as against the western concept of compromise, which generally describes a situation of denial of autonomy and freedom, an unhappy compulsion to accommodate the needs of others into her plans and operations (Chitnis, 2005: 22).

As Asmita, (SC) explains her strategy of overcoming the situation:

> *In the beginning, my husband and in-laws did not permit me to go frequently out of my home. Then I made it a point to request my husband to accompany me wherever I had to go. Sometimes when he has no time, he appoints some of the male members of the family to accompany me. I solved my problem tactfully.*

Women have shown tact and a kind of adaptation to new situations while fixing their priorities and gaining the independence they needed to do so in *Panchayat*

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affairs without affecting their family relationships. Sometimes they used their feminine charm, which led to positive results in convincing their husbands at least. My participant Revati shared with me her unique strategy of gaining whole-hearted support from her husband.

> *My husband was always insisting that I wear red Saris in bed as he likes that very much. You know that's such a silly thing...I was ignoring it for years for which he was going out of our bedroom even at night many times. When I became Sarpanch he expected conflicts which I consciously never allowed to come in. I have been careful in my dealing with him, giving more attention to his 'likes' and 'dislikes'...you know these small things make a difference...I have been wearing red Saris only since then and he is very happy. This helped me to get his support for my larger goals.*

Many of my respondents also stated that there had been a change in the attitude of the older generation and that fathers-in-law have come forward to support their daughters-in-law, which is regarded as very progressive by the social scientists. I even met very elderly fathers-in-law who had expressed pride over the fact that their daughters-in-law were now actively participating in politics. I suggest that the relationships within the family have been changing radically since my participants came out of their homes to start their public lives and they have been successful in dismantling the traditional norms of a patriarchal society. The age-old system of patriarchy is breaking into different blocks, it is no longer monolithic in rural Indian families (Mohanty, 2001: 7).

Participants in one focus group discussion talked about using their inherent negotiating skills, which enabled them to handle new challenges. Negotiation at different levels, within the family sphere and outside it, had helped them to maintain a balance between both roles.

> *Now people invite me to social gatherings. I had never seen my name on an invitation card before this. I am glad that now I also have my own identity, not only someone's wife or daughter-in-law. Also my family treats me with more respect. This gives me satisfaction.* (Golapa)

Even for the participants who depended on their husbands, the power relation between husband and wife had undergone major changes after women came to power. Some husbands also understand and appreciate the fact that they get a chance to come into the public sphere because of their wives (Mohanty, 2001: 7). So, husbands became prepared to share the household responsibilities. Some of the very dominating husbands had become comparatively considerate by this time, and this had changed the dynamics of relationships inside the families. The respect that they enjoyed as husbands of *Sarpanches* had also elevated their position in society. In some cases, husbands were sharing household chores, even neglecting their own engagements if they could afford to, as Asmita admitted:

> *It is only because of my husband that I could become actively involved in official matters; he takes care of his elderly mother and sometimes, of our kids too. You can see how difficult it is to manage with two small kids... (my daughter is three years old and my son is just a year now). My husband has sometimes neglected his own legal profession and helped me in my work. He goes to the court only on days when I am at home. Of course, his profession allows that flexibility.*

I observed that husbands and male members of their families were taking an interest in my participants' work. Some of them were so enthusiastic about their women that they were talking for hours about how sincerely they wanted them to excel. I suggest that in cases where the support of men is not sheer dominance one should see it as positive rather than negative. As Buch argues, this support of husbands in most cases is to help the functionally uneducated women who were elected for the first time to the *Panchayats* (Buch, 2000: 9).

Support systems helping women's negotiations

Some years back, it was not expected in rural parts to get services to help with childcare, which claims an important share of the time of these women. The provision of *Anganwadi* centres in each village by the state has now arrived to help these women. These *Anganwadi* centres, with women attendants and instructors, have become places where women can leave their small children for

five hours a day. These are of great help for women with small children. Besides offering babysitting, these centres also provide health care for children below five years of age. Trained women acting as instructors and assistants are also helping children to learn their first lessons. In a way, they are reducing the burdens of women who need to give more time to their public role. Previously, having no economic freedom, these women had to depend on their husbands for their daily needs. When they go out more, the expenses increase and their husbands are against this burden. Dealing with economic freedom has become somewhat easier these days for these elected women as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are working very actively. SHGs are co-operative groups encouraged by the government to empower women by forming them into collectives and translating their skills into action. The SHGs and micro-credit programmes have helped the process of visibility of these women and this in turn has paved the way to a higher degree of political representation, a synergetic relationship by which the process of social mobilisation has been enhanced (Mohanty, 2003: 16). I argue that, in this locality, SHGs are considered helpful in granting economic freedom to my participants. The best part of this is that these groups are working in co-operation with the elected women in most of the *Panchayats*. My participants have managed to broaden their access to economic power and influence while maintaining their social networking. In addition, these Self-Help Groups have been able to provide primitive banking services that are cost effective, flexible and without defaults, based on local requirements (Verma 2005: 253). As a result, they have increased their power through working with *Panchayats*. Frequent meetings of these Self-Help Groups allow my participants to tackle the challenges they encounter due to their socio-economic class or gender by means of discussing the issues and possible solutions communally. SHGs have also created a support base that allows marginalised communities of women from SCs and STs to be active in community affairs. These groups have helped to increase women's participation within the *Panchayati Raj* institutions, and have encouraged members of the *Gram Sabha* to elect the representatives who were most aware of their agenda for social justice. They are now an important asset in the agenda-setting initiatives of these participants. My participant Basanti, Nominee of Kalapada *Panchayat* (Scheduled Caste), has been running the most successful Self-Help Group with a sizeable regular monthly income and has recruited fifteen other women from her

village. There have also been different supportive schemes from the banks and non-government agencies which have helped these women to overcome their lack of financial freedom. Women leaders are getting help from these schemes and are also encouraging other women of the community to take advantage of these new opportunities.

While caste and class are important social hierarchies (more in rural India), the experiences of my participants also hinted at a number of other unknown indicators resulting in differences in their effectiveness. This confirms the place of women in a marginalised position in all strata of rural Indian society. Poverty being a dominating factor in rural areas, the stories these women told of their struggles were more or less painful. The restrictions on the freedom of mobility of women emerged as a common hindrance for women belonging to all groups. A preference for boys over girls being a common experience in rural India, women lacked the opportunity to gain education and better nutrition in almost all castes or classes. So, across the lines, they all belong to a marginalised group, as Indian rural women. It is interesting to observe how my respondents, irrespective of their caste or class, have gained more respect in the community since their election. This has apparently become an important factor in the building of a new identity for these women and it is important to identify the differences in this perceived respect. Respondents described how both people in the village and bureaucrats treated the elected women differently after the election:

> *Now after the election people in the village speak to me differently. The officials are addressing me as 'Madam'. They offer chairs. The bureaucrats now treat even Tribal women like us equally.* (Gouri)

However, this was not true for all tribal women who were in leadership positions or members of *Panchayats*. Muni was working for daily wages and she did not depend on her family. She followed the instructions of the previous *Sarpanch*. He controlled her actions and he exercised power over her. The ex-*Sarpanch*, who belonged to a general caste, decided everything about the *Panchayat*. This was, in fact, the only *Panchayat* that never had a meeting during my stay there. I had to wait for the dates of meetings and the woman *Sarpanch* was also there, even some of the ward members were present, but all were waiting for that ex-*Sarpanch*, who

was engaged in other work and could not make it. In a tribal society, women are not generally denigrated to a secondary position and there is no preference for boys over girls prevalent. In this case, poverty had become the reason for Muni's dependence. She worked for daily wages and could not possibly afford to devote time to acquire the knowledge required for her new role. She was supported by her predecessor in her election to the office, which she said was 'against her own wishes'. She explained that she only filed her nomination due to pressure from the community. People of the locality knew about her limitations, so she did not feel disempowered or even less empowered due to the fact that she followed the instructions of her predecessor. After she became the *Sarpanch*, people took it as a cause for pride to appoint her to their worksites and daily work, which strangely she felt as an improvement of her position. She could earn more money now as she worked for more days, which she considered to be an enhancement of her financial security, and this made her happy. However, Muni could be considered a case of a controlled woman, or what they call a 'proxy woman', without the real exercise of power. She was very much convinced that her new position had increased her capabilities as she had gained in terms of financial security, although this was not apparently acceptable to me as a researcher. She explained:

> *I am getting work offers every day since I got elected. Earlier I was not getting work from construction contractors which I am getting now. They pay much more than all other work. I am earning more than before and I can even save money. This, I think, will help my condition. So, I feel better now.*

It is very important that these women are feeling empowered in one way or another. It may be simply a case of being offered a chair in a public office where they had previously never been or being invited to speak on a public occasion, or maybe being regarded as someone important at a social gathering. There has undoubtedly been an increase in confidence and a higher degree of contentment in them. Moreover, this unique opportunity of participation has allowed for the growth of their consciousness. The space created for my participants by the gender quotas has ensured a place for them in the political arena, which sooner or later has led to their political participation. Overcoming the different barriers and

negotiating in the private world for their effective participation has led to a whole new world of experiences for these participants. I will not call it political empowerment of the women in the first place; rather from the statements of the participants, I would like to interpret it as a new form of empowerment based on a sense of control and an ability to exercise their own choices that could lead to their political effectiveness.

A new perspective on empowerment

As I said in Ch.3, I look into the issue of empowerment from my respondents' point of view. Whether or not their new role has brought a change in their lives was the concern of my investigation. I see empowerment as an enabling environment for offering a new set of opportunities to my participants. One has to keep in mind the fact that my participants were rural and mostly less educated women who had never had the freedom to go out of their houses on their own. Kabeer defined empowerment as a process of opening up new options for people who were hitherto in a disempowered position:

> People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be *very powerful*, but they are not *empowered* in the sense in which I am using the word, because they were never disempowered in the first place (Kabeer 2001: 19).

I argue that the quotas provided them an opportunity to come onto the public field and this has definitely led to an enabling atmosphere for them. This has also opened up an entirely new world for my participants with all its prospects and challenges. However, not all my participants were able to bring major improvements or positive changes in the quality of life for themselves or their communities. They were not all equally confident, neither did all of them enjoy an equal degree of participation in their political role, nor were all of them considered very capable. As they did not all start their journey from the same point, with equal potential and with the same type of support systems, so it would be improper to expect them all to be equally efficient or effective. Nevertheless, what surprised me was their eagerness to be part of a world where they had never

previously been. This is due to the opportunity provided by quotas, which has offered them 'many different choices' now. I argue that most of my participants have gained this freedom of choice, which has made them feel different in their own places. If not all, most of them feel that they have gained 'something', 'some sense of identity', 'a bit of happiness' or even the satisfaction of 'being an important member' within their family or being 'a member of another world'. They came out of their private lives and, with their families' and communities' help and support, have moved on in a definite direction of change. As less educated rural women, most of the participants had their own interpretation of 'empowerment', based on their new experiences and changed identities.

Asked about what empowerment means to them, my first focus group almost unanimously said that:

> *Empowerment is our control over our lives and the freedom that we have gained through our new roles. It has given us a new sense of identity.* (Swarnalata, speaking for the first focus group)

All my participants had different responses to my question on empowerment, but there is a resonance in their voices that connected their feelings and opinions. While social barriers, educational level or lack of economic freedom have different impacts on the lives of women belonging to different castes or different classes, questions concerning issues of empowerment led to answers that were almost inter-related or equal in some way or another. Asmita, (SC) said that:

> *Empowerment is my gain in knowledge which has led to an increase of my self-confidence. It makes me feel like being connected to a larger, more important world.*

The answer from Muni (ST) was very unconvincing for me when she said that:

> *Empowerment is the power which I have got now, to decide in community affairs, which in turn also affects my personal life. This has led to new earning opportunities for me. I am not active in Panchayats, but I'm now gaining more financially as I am the Sarpanch. People came to know me.*

Muni related her opportunities to work with new employers with being known to them through her position in the *Panchayat* and a lot of work orders from these people were allotted by her signature only. Though she only put her signature where she was asked to, in a way she helped these people and they got to know her. That in turn was repaid to her by a preferential treatment by these contractors at the work sites. However, the gain of confidence in her voice that she felt empowered for whatever reason was itself no less important. If the goal of 'empowerment could be left to the disempowered groups to decide' (Subramanyan, 1993: 1, in Datta, 1998: 129), then Muni was no doubt empowered from her own perspective.

> *Quotas for women have empowered the rural women in the sense that we are now getting respect inside the family and in the villages. Almost all the women have also become more confident to speak before others or to claim their demands.* (Renubala)

> *If empowerment would put me in a position of contest against my husband, my father-in-law or other male members of my community, I wouldn't be happy to be empowered.* (Padmini)

> *I feel empowered when the officers in the Block level offer me a chair, when I am invited as a guest to address a gathering inside the village or even when my father-in-law asks me before taking an important family decision, these have all been life-changing experiences for me, which I could never have expected when I was not an elected representative of the Gram Panchayat.* (Gayatri)

> *I feel a new sense of identity when I see my name on the invitation cards or my husband seeks my suggestions in important family matters; this is such a wonderful form of recognition for a woman, a bit of happiness which brightens up my life.* (Sunati)

> *Empowerment for me means the power that I have to decide about issues concerning my village, my community and my family. It has helped me to overcome my lack of confidence as a woman.* (Basanti)

The public role of all these participants has helped them to feel more confident and responsible about their roles inside the family. Thus, for my participants, empowerment could just be a change, a change in a positive direction which started in the public space and was transmitted into their private lives. A space created for them in the public sphere through gender quotas has finally led to them being confident, happy, positive and responsible members of their families and communities. My respondents who came to power on quota have highly valued their gain in knowledge about politics in general, and as a result of this acquired knowledge they have now developed more interest in politics. This in a way leads to a higher degree of effectiveness. While discussing the empowerment of women in local democracy, Dreze and Sen argue that women learn by carrying out their role in *Panchayats* and a successful *Sarpanch* can also influence others as a role model or by helping to spread 'the various skills involved in local democracy (e.g. the ability to hold a meeting or to deal with the bureaucracy)' (2002: 17) and this enhances their participation and creates a new political culture in local governance.

> *I did not know the a, b, c of politics when I came to power. Now I have started understanding the ways to exercise power and it is so interesting to have your voice in decision-making that, given the choice, I would always like to be involved in politics. It makes you feel like a person.* (Sabita)

> *Once we came to power, then we wanted to learn how to exercise it. There were problems no doubt, but we took our families and other male colleagues into our confidence, we asked them and gradually we are coping. I never imagined that I would get such help and co-operation from villagers in my in-law's village. It would be unthinkable if we were not in the Panchayat offices.* (Asmita)

Based on the words of my participants, I argue that quotas have helped them in the first place to know about a public space and then to think about it, and they have definitely attempted to learn while exercising their power. This has now become an important feature of democracy, what Dreze and Sen describe as 'learning by doing' (2002: 17). Women also highly value their new freedom to go out of their villages and their integration into village affairs. Their perspectives

about their own capacities and limitations have been completely changed. As such, all of them have attained a greater visibility in village affairs, in community gatherings and in important meetings, both quantitatively and qualitatively. I argue in line with Karlekar, that empowerment for these women could be understood as a process aiming to evolve different strategies to overcome their constraints (2004: 146). For women of higher castes, such as Laxmipriya and Malati, it was like a revelation of their own capabilities, which they had never realised that they had.

> *As a higher caste woman I was never allowed to go out of my home, but this position has brought that opportunity for me which I really enjoy. I am happy that I can play an effective role in village affairs and this has increased my own self-confidence.* (Laxmipriya)

> *Empowerment through this new role in politics has opened my eyes. This is the opening of a new door for me; I never imagined that I had the capacity to lead a meeting or a campaign.* (Malati)

It is not only about the women's own perceptions; there has also come a gradual change in the attitude of others in perceiving the women in their new roles. Almost all of my participants felt that there had come a sea change in the attitude of society towards them in their villages. Lata's mother-in-law told me in an informal conversation:

> *....see these women have got so much power and they can even walk all alone on the village roads which we could never have dared to in our times.*

It is evident that these women have been successfully gaining access to different resources and changing the quality of their lives, sometimes even by challenging the traditions of society. What I find remarkable is that they were all doing it quite convincingly and, by taking time over it, they were leaving a space for their family and society to understand the effects of their empowerment. They had developed a nascent gender consciousness as a result of their public roles and their actions are reflected in the change in their attitudes towards their daughters too. 'Now that I have realised the importance of education in life, I would always

encourage my daughters to read as much as possible and I will never discriminate against them', said Padmini, who had had a long fight against her own lack of education. Their change of attitude towards their daughters and daughters-in-law also supports the argument that they had developed a new sense of gender identity, which would enable them in future to create a wider support base in society.

Participants in both the focus groups reflected on the issue of lack of education for a long time. They all agreed that it was unbelievable for them in the past that they could contest *Panchayat* elections. They considered themselves as underdeveloped and disadvantaged without any educational qualifications, and all the more so as they belonged to lower caste groups in the social hierarchy. This lower-higher divide within rural Indian society was also an important factor in their lower degree of self-confidence. As the new government laws did not discriminate against them, they were happy to come to power and empowerment for them virtually began with this opportunity. Before this, they had never even heard a term like this, though they had always felt bothered about their lower position in society. Serving the higher caste people or earning wages that were decided by them was the rule for many years. The change in the laws had also brought a change in others' attitudes towards them. Inside their households, their condition as women was even more vulnerable, working the whole day, taking care of old and young, at the end of the day they had to live on the left-over food. They were not aware what a constitution was, what an amendment meant, but they realised that there had been sincere efforts by the State to change their conditions and this had borne fruit now. For most of them, this new gain in terms of knowledge that enabled them to have access to the public world was nothing less than a feeling of being empowered.

It is difficult to evaluate how far this new sense of identity or gain of knowledge has changed the intimate terrains of my participants' lives, but I argue that they have become more conscious about their needs and rights as women. I asked them specific questions about their everyday lives and the changes in their perspectives which occurred after they came to the public field and their responses resulted in the data which I present below in a table. I have only taken into consideration the changes that have come in the perceptions of my respondents and subsequently

the changes it led to in their lifestyles and practices, particularly going against the usual norms, but with no strong opposition from outside.

Table 5 - Changes in the perspectives of the participants

Nature of change perceived by the participants	In numbers
Changes in attitude	
a. Woman's equal rights	38/38
b. Woman's right to education	30/38
c. Woman's ability to handle issues	30/38
d. Woman's voice inside the house	32/38
Changes in everyday life	
Sharing of household chores by others	30/38
Going out regularly	25/38
Gaining more confidence	35/38
Gaining more knowledge	32/38
Talking about family planning	30/38

Though it was not always easy to measure the intangible changes which I could perceive during my investigation and interactions with my participants, it was important to observe how they had worked as catalysts in the process of a magnificent change. As the above table shows, the most important change in the perspective of my participants was equal rights for women and the next was the importance of education, which in almost all cases led to equal learning opportunities for their daughters. It is of course important to observe with women in *Panchayats* that most of the villages had their own girls' schools. None of my participants regarded the unequal treatment of the girl children as proper. Though some of them still practised the habit of veiling (covering their heads) when going out of their homes, they considered this to be a traditional and useless practice. Almost all of them were confident that, given the scope and opportunities, women

were capable of dealing with important matters. It was important that even some of these participants who had to struggle a lot to make their voices heard had a very positive notion about bringing women into the power structure. 13 participants found it difficult to go out regularly, whereas for others, with the co-operation of family members, it was somewhat manageable. They were happy to negotiate with their family members about going out, which was a vital part of *Panchayat* politics. As politics involves outside activities and all these 13 participants regarded going out as unnecessary, for them it was their lack of access to the outside world which made them feel so. In villages, there is a practice that showing your face to the elder brothers of your husband is considered very bad, it is like deviant behaviour by the women. Again, it needs to be kept in mind that this was not always only about the direct brothers; it was also to be maintained in the case of people whom husbands regard as their elder brothers in a village. So it was difficult for these women to go out where such people were expected to be present. There was again the issue of the bad road conditions and concerns about the safety of women in villages, which meant that these respondents faced problems when they wanted to go out for work. They had to choose some male who would be acceptable to the family and the husband to escort them if they had to go out. So this had been problematic for some respondents. Sexual rights or the right to plan your family was something which my participants had never felt to be important before they came to power. However, partially due to a provisional constraint by the Government of Orissa[53] that a person with more than two children could never contest for *Panchayat* offices, my participants had been enabled to take this control into their own hands. There was the fear of being declared disqualified or ineligible for contesting in the elections for *Panchayats* in future, even for the men. Eight of them who were aware neither of this nor the importance of family control measures also wanted a

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[53] A unique provision of the Orissa *Panchayati Raj* Act bars persons having more than two children from contesting *Panchayat* elections. The Government's argument is that this encourages family planning. This has been contested by NGOs, voluntary organisations and activists on the ground that there should be similar restrictions followed for candidates seeking elections for local Assemblies and National Parliament too. Otherwise, it is a discrimination against PRIs. I would rather argue in line with Baviskar (2003: 7) and Patnaik (2008: 25-30) that this two-child norm is a specific hindrance for the women since in rural parts of India women seldom enjoy control over decisions about their reproductive life. It is mostly the husband or the family who is the deciding authority on the size of the family.

small family due to their financial constraints. The sharing of household chores by other members of the family was the most effective change that affected the lives of my respondents positively and, except for only a few, they were confident that this opportunity had in many ways opened up new opportunities of learning for them. They had a greater degree of confidence, and exposure to the public sphere had benefitted them immensely in improving the quality of their lives.

Conclusion

Simply their presence in large numbers in all these grassroots political institutions has offered these women an opportunity for networking and organisation. So, 'critical mass' definitely mattered in this case. This also resulted in the creation of a sense of psychological empowerment in them, which is also very important for the long-standing goal of political empowerment. While I agree that empowerment is a long-term process and it is not as simple as to say that these women are amply empowered now, it is noteworthy to mention that the paths these women have chosen and the choices that they have exercised through their capacity to negotiate in public, while keeping the private world intact, is certainly commendable. They understood the values of the Indian social system and had explored the possibilities of creating a support base out of them. To a large extent, most of them were being successful in doing so. This is no less than a recognition of their powers of judgement and their abilities to find a balance between the two worlds that until this point had been so contrastingly different for them. Their voices are now recognised inside their families and the family budgets are now controlled and laid down by these women, meaning that there has been a change, gradually and from the very base of the system.

Essentially, empowerment consists of bringing changes in the lives of men and women (Kabeer, 2001: 19). This change in the attitude of society towards the women and of the women themselves is quite evident from their own voices. I argue strongly that the quota has successfully created a space for women in the public sphere and has forced the *Gram Panchayats* to operate in a gender sensitive way. Rural Indian women are negotiating their inclusion in local politics by trying hard to maintain their own cultural practices. As Beliappa says, the

choices and associated responsibilities of Indian women are in conflict due to the conflicting expectations of the culture (2009: 251). On the one hand, they have to negotiate the demands of their new roles, which need continuous attention and, most importantly, substantial amounts of time, and, on the other hand, they have to keep intact their family relationships and social networking. In a patriarchal society women are traditionally responsible for social networking and the maintenance of stability inside the home. I was impressed by the amazing energy these women have shown when they are provided with the opportunities, and the sophistication they displayed in negotiating new spaces for themselves in order to expand their possibilities. My research is privileged in a way, as seventeen years have passed since the introduction of quotas, and this is a reasonable time span to evaluate the impact of such a progressive act on traditional Indian society and how the perceptions of that society and the women themselves have changed over the period. Despite all these women facing hard times and barriers at personal, institutional, social and other levels, they felt that there was a sense of achievement throughout these experiences. The change in their own perspectives have been successful in bringing many changes to the village *Panchayats*. Though still struggling to overcome different levels of barriers to achieve their deserved share in the decision-making process, their own feelings of being more effective than ever before makes the world of difference. While it cannot be claimed that these women are fully 'empowered' now, I want to argue that a certain gain in power has occurred as a direct consequence of the quota. In this respect it appears that the quota can be a viable instrument, especially in the given framework. Finally, I agree with Subramanyan's feelings when she discusses indicators of women's empowerment, that ' ...for women, the process by which they learn to sit on a chair or sign their names, or even opportunities to enhance their mobility are empowering and carry great potential for transformation' (1993: 7, quoted in Datta, 1998: 129).

The next chapter deals with a description of my respondents' experiences, a brief analysis of their choices and the changes that were brought into the *Gram Panchayats* when my participants came to power.

Chapter Seven:

Outcomes of the Effectiveness of Women

Nothing short of a small revolution occurred during President Bill Clinton's visit to India last March. In the rural heartland of Rajasthan, a dozen village women sat around on plush blue sofas, in resplendent dress, to discuss issues of democracy and power with the U.S. president. First they introduced themselves: all are elected representatives of their village councils (panchayats). Together they run a women's dairy cooperative and have initiated several small credit and loan schemes for poor, landless women in their communities. They had discarded the age-old custom of hiding their veiled faces behind home walls. Now, they explained, they had to go to the bank to draw and deposit money, and to their district headquarters to attend monthly meetings.

Even as they spoke in their native tongue, the women freely used English words such as 'loan', 'credit ', 'Internet', 'public' and 'no confidence'. They complained about the lack of jobs for their educated sons, spoke about the need to open a school close by for their adolescent daughters, and their ongoing fight for drinking water, better roads, seeds and farming tools for their villages.

(Mrinal Pande, news anchor for the state television network Doordarshan, former editor with the Hindustan Times Group, founder of the Indian Women's Press Corps)

'India's Nurseries of Politics'
(http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_06/uk/doss24.htm#top)

Introduction

I begin this chapter by quoting this encouraging long paragraph by Pande from an online source as this reflects how the lives of elected women from the *Gram Panchayats* in Rajasthan, India, have changed and how they talked to Mr. Bill

Clinton, the then President of United States of America, during his official visit to India, in March, 2000, about different issues using many commonly-used English words. This gives a picture of another region of India where women leaders of the grassroots were particularly conscious about their choices. With some regional and cultural variations, this picture can be seen in many parts of rural India today. My participants showed confidence, maturity and effectiveness, suggesting that women excel when they are provided with opportunities. They negotiated at different levels and evolved their own strategies to exercise their choices. It obviously added another important aspect to my investigation to consider whether or not my participants were able to make their own choices in selecting different schemes and while distributing resources and if so, were these choices different from those that male members would have made?

One of the important objectives of democratic decentralisation was that it would enhance local development; hence, powers to manage local resources were devolved. The impact of the *Gram Panchayats* has been immense in the area of welfare support: improving nutrition and health care, education and communication facilities along with better transportation provisions. This is reinforced by the community, who perceive them as welfare institutions. The regional government has been very progressive so far in creating a systematic support base for the women to compensate for the barriers with which they are perceived to struggle with. The participants of this study who were at decision-making levels have made their choices clear through their decisions. The remarkable changes which have come after this amendment are the changes in the perspectives of the women themselves. This is something immeasurable and the effects are felt significantly in the changes in the attitudes of villagers towards the young girls in their communities.

The clear intentions of my respondents to make a significant contribution to the welfare of the local communities were visible in many such examples. They had solicited the help of other men and women of their *Panchayats* to initiate meaningful ventures. The increased participation of women is often associated with better utilisation of financial resources, increased harmony in villages and the prioritisation of some important but neglected aspects of development, such as girls' education and sanitation (Dogra, 2008: 2). In the tribal areas, social reform

measures such as a reduction in alcohol consumption and domestic violence clearly got more prominence on the agendas of the women members. Some participants (10 out of 38) claimed that they have played an active role towards women's empowerment by taking initiatives in providing widows' pensions to poor women who have lost their husbands, protesting against injustices like child marriages, dowry or helping women to register cases of sexual harassment or domestic violence. Some (3 from the 38), however were still inactive and made the point that they were not allowed by the men of their family or *Panchayats* to have their say.

The results of the reservations for women in the rural local bodies in a defined proportion after four rounds of elections[54] suggest that it has indeed affected policy decisions. Presence of an increased number of women helped, so 'critical mass' worked, at least for these women from rural Orissa. My participants who were representatives worked actively under women heads and there was an environment of trust and co-operation in place among my participants. However, they felt inhibited to speak, especially when they were in large, male-dominated assemblies. Some of them expressed the fact that when they mustered up enough courage and strength to speak in male gatherings (such as *Gram Sabhas*), they hardly received any attention. I observed that they repeatedly explained that they felt comfortable in networking with each other through different agencies and small groups like the Self Help Groups. The government's role has so far been more or less supportive, though participants like Bishnupriya, Renubala, Asmita and Aiswarya were not satisfied with the quality of capacity-building programmes offered by the state, as I have described in the previous chapter. What I would like to suggest, based on the words of my participants, is that women and men have different policy priorities because women experience their lives in different ways in a less privileged condition in a patriarchal society. Mohanty's study also supports this when she mentions that the working culture of the *Panchayats* in

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[54] Elections are held every five years for local administration and in Orissa, 'one third seats' have been reserved for women since the 1991 elections. There were incorporations of other provisions of the 73rd Amendment into the Orissa *Gram Panchayat Act*, 1990, and according to these amended provisions, elections were held in 1997 (See Ch. 3). So, there were women in 'one third seats' in the *Gram Panchayats* of Orissa in the 1991, 1997, 2002and 2007 elections, which has brought thousands of women villagers into the *Gram Panchayats* as leaders and members.

Orissa has changed because of the presence of women and the development work has become engendered (2000: 9). Jain believes that women are making the state sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustices and that the success of these women in important positions in *Panchayats* lies in the possibility of transforming the state from within (1996: 12).

Though my group of participants did not involve any men, women talked often about the men and there were elected men of the *Panchayats* present in the meetings which I attended. The discussions during the meetings involved projects which had not been accomplished during the tenures of the previous male *Sarpanches* and there were always proposals to carry out the promised jobs.

As I have stated elsewhere in this dissertation, Orissa is one of the poorest states of India and the general infrastructure (like roads, electricity, water supply and health care facilities) is very poor. The participants of this study were obliged under the prevailing legal provisions to implement the Employment Assurance Scheme, where they demonstrated their capability to execute projects that benefitted the community. Among many other schemes, these included the NREGS (National Rural Employment Scheme) and OREGS (Orissa Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes), SGRY (*Sampurna Gramin Rojgar Yojna*), GGY (*Gopabandhu Gramin Yojana*), SGSY (*Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojna*) along with the ongoing IAY (*Indira Awas Yojna*). The IAY provides housing facilities for the poorest people having no houses of their own and all the other schemes are designed to offer or create employment opportunities for rural youth by providing job cards and guaranteeing at least 100 days' employment opportunities. Local waged employment is generated annually by the implementation of these schemes, which undertake small-scale construction projects within the localities of the *Panchayats*. This was designed to benefit households below the poverty line which are recognised by the state as consisting of below the poverty line (BPL) people. The implementation of these schemes is decided and delivered through the office of *Gram Panchayats*. The *Sarpanch* and the ward members, along with the nominees, decide the ways of implementation of the schemes after preparing a list of BPL people. However, a lot of them complained that most of their time was spent fighting with the bureaucracy to provide them with clear-cut criteria for preparing the lists of beneficiaries. As

such, the community considers that the main focus of future activities of the *Gram Panchayats* should be the generation of paid employment opportunities.

The participants and their choices

Evidences from the literature suggest that women in politics act in a different way from men. Datta notes that women go for more 'need based' and 'sustainable works'. This has been suggested in her study that '...governance by women is expected to be more honest, less centralized and more efficient' (1998:16). My participants had a range of choices and they dealt with it quite tactfully. Some of them chose the ones for which they were assured about the support of the other members, while some wanted to decide for the works which were need based.

> *There are many problems in the villages. It's difficult to say what is important and what is not. There is the immediate need for a supply of clean water to all houses. It is unfortunate that we are unable to provide drinking water for all. There should be a high school for girls so that parents would not hesitate to send their girls to schools. We must try for providing pensions to all old people, widows and those with handicaps. I will work for this in my term.* (Aiswarya)

> *You have seen how we suffered during the last flood. It has become a regular story for us. I will try to make the village roads concrete and lots of funds are now flowing from the Central Government for this. I will also see that the villages which are not yet electrified should get a supply of electricity by the end of my term. Above all, there are the schemes like employment for villagers inside the village. There are many things waiting on the list. I will approach them one by one; let's see what is possible during my term. I always start with issues which are need-based and for which I can get easy support.* (Asmita)

> *It's not about my personal choice. It's all about the village, communities and all members of the Gram Panchayat. We have to also look carefully at what are the needs of our village and how much funding is provided for this. There are many factors which influence our decisions.* (Renubala)

There were participants like Aiswarya, Padmini, Asmita and Renubala who made their own choices and prioritised certain issues over the others according to their own experiences and personal struggles. In spite of the fact that the priorities of the state were so clear in terms of providing employment opportunities for rural people through different plans and schemes, issues related to communication facilities, transport, education, sanitation and health care were at the top of the agenda for most of the participants. I argue that, my participants' choices could be seen as linked to their own experiences where they had been deprived of better opportunities or had faced problems due to the lack of these facilities.

> *I ask my male colleagues before asking for any assistance or putting my demands for anything in the Block. I know I cannot operate without their support. I ask my husband, my father-in-law and they interact with more people. They helped me to solve conflicts and encouraged me to go ahead with something which is a real need. It's the people who have elected me directly, so it's my obligation to respect their demands.* (Sunati)

> *I do whatever I am asked to do by all…in the Panchayat and in the village too.* (Sabita)

> *I know where I get support and where I do not…I act accordingly.* (Kalpana)

> *I was elected as Sarpanch by the people; when the seat was reserved for women, men of my community asked me to stand for elections. I was a housewife, had never seen the Panchayat office before…..so I accept it as their right to be informed about whatever is going to be decided in the Panchayat. If I have some problems at home, then my husband attends the Gram Sabha and he reads out the details about all our decisions. Besides that, we work as a team; there is no question of me dominating here.* (Swarnalata)

There were other participants, like Sunati, Sabita, Kalpana and Swarnalata, who ascribed more importance to the demands of the people of their communities and they preferred to work towards issues for which they could easily secure the support of the men in their offices and also from men in their personal circle.

There is evidence from earlier studies that women act in a different way than the men in *Panchayats*. Duflo (2001: 4) argues that in the *Gram Panchayats* headed by women leaders, there were significantly more investments in drinking water, infrastructure, recycled fuel equipment and road construction. Health workers were monitored more closely in reserved *Gram Panchayats*, whereas teachers were less monitored. Mohanty, in her studies (2001: 5) of 235 elected women representatives from 22 *Panchayats* in Orissa, argues that women take up not only issues relating to basic needs like drinking water, availability of doctors and teachers in villages which are dear to them, but also general developmental activities like irrigation facilities and ask for more funds for rehabilitation of people after natural calamities. Rewards from the state for their different initiatives also encouraged them and increased their level of self confidence. Each year, women *Sarpanches* from different parts of the country are rewarded by the National government for their different achievements. This was started only after women came to power under the quota.

The participants who were acting as representatives or members had no direct role to play in the process of decision-making, though they were performing an important role in reflecting and representing the demands and support of the people of their localities towards some important issues. They were also involved in convincing villagers about the importance of one issue over others. But there were seven participants who were acting as *Sarpanches* (Asmita, Padmini, Swarnalata, Bishnupriya, Muni, Sabita and Jyothsnarani) and six Nominees (Aiswarya, Renubala, Basanti, Sunati, Kuni and Sabitri) who were taking decisions or having a direct influence on decision-making. It was explicit from these participants' views and their courses of action that they prioritised certain choices over others.

Table 6- Choices of the women leaders.

Name of the *Panchayats*	First choice *Sarpanch*/Nominee	Second choice *Sarpanch*/Nominee	Third choice *Sarpanch*/Nominee
Arilo	OREGS[55]/ Roads	IAY[56]/Girls' school	Water Supply/IAY
Barada	OREGS/OREGS	Girls' School/IAY	*Nirmal Gram*[57]/Water Supply
Bentkar	OREGS	Water Supply	Girls' school
Gatiroutpatna	Water Supply/Water Supply	OREGS/Pensions	Girls' school/IAY
Kandarpur	Village Road/*	OREGS/*	Roads/*
Nemeishapur	Village Road /*	Girls' school/*	IAY/*
Paramahansa	*/Health Centre	*/Sanitation	*/Village Road
Kalapada	OREGS/Roads	Electricity/ IAY	Rations /Roads

(I use * (asterisks) in Table 6 to indicate that there were men in these positions in these *Gram Panchayats*, so they were not included in my study).

Table 6 shows a list of the choices expressed by my participants, in order of priority. I asked all of those participants who were in positions of leadership

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[55] OREGS stands for Orissa Rural Employment Generation Scheme.

[56] IAY is the short form of Indira Awas Yojana, (in the name of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the only woman Prime Minister of India so far), which aims at providing *pucca* or concrete houses to all poor people who do not have a house of their own.

[57] *Nirmal Gram* is the name of a sanitation programme for villages. More discussion follows later in this chapter.

(*Sarpanches* and Nominees[58]), 'what are the three most important steps you would like to take for the benefit of your *Gram Panchayat*?', in order to generate the data presented in this table. This shows clearly that there were differences in the choices of the participants. Though they were all women and had very similar experiences in their lives, their choices also reflected the specificity of the needs of the localities they represented. The prominence of the Orissa Rural Employment Generation Scheme in this list may be due to the fact that this actually comes as a complete package. Women realised that this was a scheme which facilitated many other schemes. Rural employment generation created job opportunities for the people and enabled villagers to contribute to the development of the basic infrastructures of the villages. A village road was a top priority for the *Sarpanches* of Nemeishapur and Kandarpur, who had no connecting roads to their villages and were living in flood-prone areas. Each year in the rainy season, their road usually got washed away and they had to struggle to come out of the villages. Being women, these participants suffered more in water-locked areas as they also had to take care of the children and elderly people in their homes. Water supply was important for the *Sarpanch* of Gatiroutpatna as she had made that promise to the villagers while campaigning for votes. Education facilities for girls were also considered important by my participants who felt that lack of education was a handicap for them, or if there was a demand for a girls' school in their localities. As I deliberate more on these choices individually, discussions about the different schemes provided by the state Government and the attempts of my participants towards the enforcement of these schemes are unfolded in the following sections. However, there were other important choices which are not shown in the above table as it only reflects the three most important choices. I argue that, apart from their own experiences, they prioritised their choices according to the needs of the locality and also in some cases, depending on the expectations of the community.

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[58]*Sarpanches* and Nominees were supposed to initiate all the proposals in the *Gram Panchayat* meetings. They had immense impact on the decisions made by the *Panchayats* and therefore their choices really mattered a lot.

Orissa Rural Employment Generation Scheme

The basic objective of the Orissa Rural Employment Generation Scheme is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed waged employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. This work could serve other objectives in the long run, such as generating productive assets, protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural-urban migration and fostering social equity, among others. The aim of this scheme is to provide employment to rural people in the development works undertaken in their own villages so that there would be an effective check on the migration in off seasons when people have no work in the agricultural fields.

When I was investigating the priorities of my participants, I not only asked them about their own choices, I also observed the discussions at the meetings, questions asked by the women and the issues which often came to the table. At their homes, I very often heard about something called a 'job card'. There were people waiting for the *Sarpanch* to ask about their job cards and I could also overhear lots of dissatisfaction among the villagers regarding the distribution of job cards.

When asked about these job cards, their responses were interesting.

> *All of them are demanding a job card while the guidelines allow us only to issue job cards to members of families who are below the poverty line. People are not educated enough to understand the reality, so sometimes we have a problem. You won't believe how people queue up in front of my house in the early hours of the morning for job cards. They don't understand that even if they are poor, if their names are not included in the BPL list, I cannot help them at all*. (Asmita)

> *The Government announces over the media, both on the radio and television that this empowers ordinary people to play an active role in the implementation of employment guarantee schemes through Gramsabhas, social audits, participatory planning and other means. They say it repeatedly that this is an Act of the people, by the people and for the people. Nowhere do they mention that this is for BPL people only, so it*

ultimately leads to all the confusion. When there is confusion, then it's either the Sarpanch or the Nominee who are targeted. We have explained it all to the ward members, but people do not stop asking us. (Renubala)

When I enquired about their strategies to convince people about their inability to provide them with job cards, there was a note of discontent about the role of the Government and the auxiliary agencies which were all associated with the welfare schemes of *Gram Panchayats*. Mostly the individual benefit schemes are for people who are below the poverty line and if the list was incorrect, then my participants were in a problematic position.

You know, the BPL list is very problematic[59]. It's not updated regularly, and when they do, there are always errors. We are trying to distribute the job cards to the deserving villagers first, I mean on the basis of the existing BPL list of course. As we do it, we keep on spreading the message through the women ward members, the family connections and through the Panchayat meetings too. (Asmita)

It's hard to understand why all the people of the villages here want to get hold of a job card without even understanding its implications. They don't know that this is in a way asking for their consent to work for the village only and to work for a limited wage which is approved by the Government. (Padmini)

While the villagers were enthusiastic about getting job cards, my participants also considered this to be one of the most important schemes. Most of the participants were working towards the preparation and distribution of job cards to people and wherever I went this came up as the single most important scheme from amongst

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[59] The present BPL list (supposed to be a list of people whose per capita income is Rs.323.92, approximately $7 or £4) was prepared way back in 1997. There was a survey for a new list of BPL in 2002 which did not result in the preparation of any new list. Since the survey was made public and people who were to be included on the basis of the fresh evaluation were informed about this officially (Source – Government of Orissa, *Panchayati Raj* Department's Official web Portal), so villagers were not happy to accept that their names were not on the BPL list.

many employment generating schemes of the Government. I was interested to know the reason for the popularity of the scheme among the women leaders.

> *We give much importance to this as we know that mostly women are going to be benefitted by this. Men almost don't come to work for the construction of roads, bridges or culverts or even for the preparation of a playground if it is inside their own village. They go to distant villages and want to earn more money. So, finally, this is a scheme for women who want to stay inside the village and earn their wages.* (Jyothsnarani)

> *Women could save time if there's a proper road inside the village, they feel easy if there are facilities like electricity supply or water supply or even a better road available to them and women prefer to stay within the village for obvious reasons. They have to look after their families and kids. I find women to be more interested in this scheme and that is the reason why I also work towards this.* (Swarnalata)

> *I think this is important as all the women in my hamlet are going to be benefitted by this. All the young people are unemployed and if we would get 100 days of waged labour inside our village, we would not have to walk long distances and would get more time for our children. I have asked other members of the Panchayat to ensure that all in the BPL list should get job cards. We are mostly poor people here, and so I think this is good for us.* (Muni)

So, taking steps towards the implementation of OREGS served two purposes. It helped the women of the villages to get employment inside their own villages and contributed to better infrastructure for the villages. Women always appreciate proximity, so my participants realised that job cards guaranteed work opportunities for women within the villages, enabling them to save time and have a better balance between home and work. It is clearly visible from the choices of my participants that women work in different ways from their male counterparts. There were many villages where the roads were bad for years and there was never any importance given towards that in the *Gram Panchayats'* agenda. But the

question which was continually coming to my mind was 'do the women really have a choice to act differently?' Apparently, there lies the way to all the differences. Fortunately most of my participants did have the choice. They had the support of their male colleagues and villagers to take a different step or to act differently. The head of the *Panchayat* enjoys the authority to spend the money according to the needs of the *Panchayat* by taking the members into her confidence (Mohanty, 2001: 03). There was tremendous mobilisation of people in the villages to come forward to support my participants, which they frequently acknowledged while talking to me.

See, if we are working differently, we are working in consultation with one and all. Nothing is possible here without the support of the villagers. If we have come out of our houses with the support of the families, we are operating here only due to the support of the villagers and other members of the Panchayats. (Sabita)

You can say that anywhere women have come to power, the first thing they have done is get a better road. Even where they could not have done it, there were always sincere efforts towards that goal. Roads become very important for us as we have suffered personally due to bad road conditions. (Swarnalata)

Roads and communication

All of my participants were living in rural areas at the time of the study. Some of them had to collect firewood for everyday use and some of them walked a long way to collect drinking water. They were the worst sufferers from bad road conditions. So, better roads were obviously the first things they could think of when they arrived at the decision-making levels.

There was no bus communication to this village. We had to walk a long way to catch a bus. We were so happy when the bus came to our village. It was only because of the new road. (Sabita)

I was always feeling so bad about the road to our village. It was so bad that we even had to struggle to take old and sick people to hospitals. It was very painful for the women of the village when they used to go to collect drinking water or firewood. My first step was to provide a road and the villagers are very happy about this. (Asmita)

My daughter could not go to the high school as the road was so bad. We even started a Self Help Group five years back, but could not sell the products, so we had to close that. (Susama)

Each year the temporary roads were washed away and we were disconnected from the outside world for months in the rainy season. (Sunati)

It was very difficult to go to the Block and to the nearby city as we had to walk on virtually no roads; they were very narrow lanes with ups and downs. People were even not prepared to get their daughters married in this village as there was no road. Now we are happy that we have got a proper road after so many years. (Padmini)

These were elected women representative from villages that had the worst type of roads before they came to power. They were among the poorest and most slow-growing villages, but the growth was accelerated when there were better roads. These women had realised that better roads and transport enhanced the value of every other rural investment. People could more easily buy and sell their products. Children could go to their schools easily and the sick could get to the health centres. The provision of permanent connectivity also brought a lot of other indirect effects as well as these direct impacts. Government officials are now more willing to come to the villages regularly or to be posted to villages with good connectivity and health workers are more regular in their visits, which this also led to more rural productivity. As Jain observes, "Women value proximity,

whether it be to a drinking water source, a fuel source, a crèche, a health centre, a court of justice or an office of administration. Poor women have to walk to access these facilities, which is exhausting and consumes valuable time" (1996: 13). Better roads saved time and better roads meant speedy delivery of welfare benefits to the people, which in turn helped my participants to create a support base for themselves at the local level. I would argue that, better roads also empowered both men and women, (including my participants) from these villages through improved mobility and access to better opportunities.

Expansion of education facilities (for girls)

In a country where education is still a dream for half of its rural population (Census, 2001), recognition of the need for education as an empowering factor for rural women was an important commitment by the respondents. Earlier studies found evidence that women in *Gram Panchayats* in different parts of the country had always related their struggles in the power hierarchy to their lack of education (Datta, 1998; Mohanty, 2000; Kiswar, 1997; Buch, 2000). However, the hopeful point is that the census report shows a steady increase in the rate of literacy among women in Orissa (from 34.7% in 1991 to 50.5% in 2001) after women were brought into the *Panchayats* (Census, 2001). Apart from this, the regional government has been very supportive by providing free education for girls. There are now many initiatives by the government for increasing the take-up of girls' education. Ranging from providing school uniforms and books to providing mid-day meals for school children, all these additional facilities have made my participants think in favour of expanding educational facilities for the children of their *Panchayats*. It was not only the non-existence of schools inside the *Panchayats* that was restricting the girls or the children of the villages from going to school; it was also partly due to the lack of consciousness of women which caused the absence of girls from schools. Education or lack of education was identified as one of the most important hindrances by my respondents. They all had to struggle at some point with their limitations of knowledge due to lack of education. This led my participants to recognise the importance of education, especially for rural girls. This made their choices clear to take initiatives for

establishing more schools in the locality or to start girls' schools inside the villages. As they have felt the need of education themselves, and as they have felt a sense of confidence in their new roles, so they wanted and attempted to provide education for the young girls. This followed with their initiatives to open new schools for girls in the villages or sending their daughters to the existing schools. Going out of their village provided them with the knowledge of the outside world that they cherished so much today. Exposure to the outside world has helped them to widen their vision and they realised that it could have been easier for them if they had been educated.

> *I don't want our daughters to go through what we have experienced. We have all decided to send our daughters to school. We have already started a school inside our village*. (Kuni)

> *I have learnt letters in the adult literacy camps. The government instructor told us that it's never too late to learn. I remember that and always encourage our ward members to take these opportunities*. (Golapa)

> *We have got our duty to supervise the teachers of the village schools. I regularly visit the schools and see that teachers are coming and teaching. We have the power to report them, which may lead to their termination if they don't do their duty properly*. (Renubala)

> *We have only one high school for 5-6 villages. We are demanding another one so that children will not have to walk so long to go to school. I also want to open a girls' school as some villagers are reluctant to send their grown up girls to read with the boys*. (Asmita)

The participants in this study who had no higher education felt that their lack of education had made it difficult for them to bargain for a position in the political sphere. They were not only trying to open up new opportunities for the girls, but also their perspectives in relation to the girl children were changing. Education was never easy for girls in those villages where a preference for sons over

daughters was a prominent feature of social practice. The respondents could recognise this as discrimination against girls and hence they were all sincerely working towards the removal of gender bias in some corners of their social lives. Education for them was also a part of their capacity-building for their new roles outside their homes. In spite of their triple burdens of home, reproductive obligations and *Panchayat* activities, they joined the adult learning classes to make themselves better equipped. This sufficiently explained their determination and sense of responsibility towards public life. The young girls were helping their mothers with household chores or by taking care of the children and sometimes even with the collection of water or firewood from distant places. I argue that, after my participants started working as leaders and members of *Gram Panchayats*, there had been a significant change in the minds of the elders and the women themselves towards this social practice of gender discrimination. All of my participants were sending their daughters to school and some of them had even successfully convinced the other villagers to send their girls to school as well.

> *You can't see a single girl above 5 years of age in my village who is not going to school. The children below that age are also going to the Anganwadi centres where they take up their first lessons. The Anganwadi workers have helped us in achieving this. I hope we will achieve this in the whole Panchayat very soon.* (Aiswarya)

The respondents were very positive about these steps and they were confident about the support of the other agencies too. Families had shown considerable faith and trust in their capacities while being supportive of their decisions. All these have enabled them to operate confidently and in a different way.

The problems of the villages were mostly related to each other on some planes. The bad road conditions had always led to a lack of such facilities as education, business, better health facilities or even the other infrastructures like electricity or water supply. Roads to villages are like the lifelines that bring with them so many facilities for expanding and improving terms and conditions. Of late, the state had recognised this and had provided enough funds for the development of these infrastructures. The central government had also initiated a number of sanitation

projects, among which the two that were most popular in the locations of my study were known as *Nirmal Panchayats* (cleanest *Panchayat*) and *Swajal dhara* (own water) projects.

Sanitation and cleanliness (*Nirmal Panchayats*)

Nirmal means clean and *Nirmal Panchayat* refers to recognition given by the National Government and an award of cash to the *Sarpanch* of the *Panchayat* where all the households have their own individual toilet facilities. While I was doing my second field study I came across discussions of this and two of my participants were busy pushing the villagers and all ward members to work in that direction. Asmita had organised a meeting of all the *Anganwadi* workers and health workers to involve them in the project. It took a long time to convince the villagers to have their own toilet facilities, apart from the financial constraints. In fact, the local government was also providing the materials at subsidised rates to the villagers to build their own toilets in each of the households. I was also present at that meeting and it was interesting to see that all were women and they were confident about their capacities to convince. These provisions were all in place before, but the recognition part came only recently as the central government wanted to recognise the efforts of the leaders of the *Gram Panchayats*.

> *I am trying to make my Panchayat a Nirmal Gram. With the support of my members and other villagers, I think I could make it*. (Asmita)

> *It was so difficult to convince the villagers. They do not understand about the environment. They do not bother to think about the unhealthy impacts. Some of them were just adamant. They won't have it...then, you know, I arranged a special meeting of the Gramsabha where we discussed this. I pushed many women to be there though this was very unusual. Then when we discussed having our own toilets in each house, all the young boys and girls supported us. In a way, guardians[60] were pushed to support it. We*

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[60] 'Guardian' is the Indian English for parents or the decision-making authority of families.

> *took a voice vote and then it all started. Of course, all are now waiting for*
> *the realisation of the project*. (Aiswarya)

It was not an easy job to convince the hundreds of villagers to have their own toilets. The government had earlier taken many initiatives for this and there was no result. I was impressed to observe how my participants were trying hard to meet each and every villager to explain about this. They were starting with their own villages and were launching large-scale awareness campaigns. I was surprised to see their capacity to convince and the patience with which my participants were discussing the issue with the villagers. Sabita was excited about her experience of interacting with the supervisors from the centre, who were in that *Panchayat* for the inspection of the project.

> *You know, my husband had also spent so much of his time convincing the*
> *villagers about this. The Block office supplies materials at subsidised*
> *rates, still it took a lot to explain to the villagers. People did not want to*
> *invest even a 'paisa'[61] for the toilets as they are used to managing with the*
> *open fields. Then I requested the local assembly member, he came and*
> *convinced the people through the party workers. The supervisors were so*
> *happy that they recommended my name for the award.*

Sabita was still waiting for the announcements from central government when I met her last. I argue that when these women decided to take some new steps, they did not leave any stone unturned in their efforts to get it done. These outcomes were interesting as they indicated that the presence of these women at the decision-making level had had a significant impact on the implementation of these policies.

Water supply (*Swajal dhara*) projects

In rural villages, it was considered the duty of the women to collect water from faraway places for the whole family. Sometimes, even very old women and small

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[61] 'A paisa' is used here by my participant to denote the minimum coin, like 'a penny'.

children had to join them as it was difficult for one person to carry enough water for the whole family. The fetching of water for the family had been the responsibility of many of the women who were participating in this study. Having water supplied through *Swajal dhara* was something to which all of them had given importance. *Swajal dhara* refers to a drinking water supply project. Two of the women *Sarpanches* had already provided a supply of drinking water to the households they represented. Four others were in the final stages of getting things finalised. Even one among them, who was otherwise not at all an active leader, had donated a part of her family property for the installation of the water tank when no land could be negotiated among the villagers for common use.

> *This is the only promise I made to my villagers. I realised that this was a need for our Gram Panchayat. We are so near to the urban areas, still people in our village used to depend on ponds and rivers for their drinking water. I thought of this as a sacred work. I am very happy that my husband agreed to this. I think drinking water is the most essential facility and I am glad that we have it now.* (Bishnupriya)

Bishnupriya, who otherwise seemed to be under her husband's control, was very happy as she exclaimed that this was the only work where her husband supported her. This indicated that her other choices might have been subdued due to her husband's dominance. This was something which was promised to ensure the votes of the electors, which might have led to her husband supporting her in this. While talking to her, her husband was very enthusiastic in explaining about his contribution as he was of course doing this in order to get political mileage out of it. What I want to emphasize here is that family structures and the pressure coming from families could not always be challenged or negotiated successfully by all of the participants, but they were successful in some way or another.

> *This came as a real boon to women. It was for me the toughest of all jobs. I was never drinking enough water as I had to store it for others.* (Kuni)

> *We had to go to other villages to collect water. On summer days, they were not allowing us to get water from there. We were suffering worst. In*

> *scorching heat, we had to distribute water among our children. We would*
> *ask them to drink less water, as it was a problem for us to fetch it.* (Muni)

In many of the rural parts, drinking water was a real problem and with this project it was gradually solved. Those participants giving importance to water supply only signified the fact that this was a difficult experience for them. It was hard for me to believe that women had to restrict their own thirst because they had to provide water for the whole family. Understanding the hardships of their everyday lives provided me with an insight to imagine their physical and mental burdens along with their public engagements. It should of course be mentioned here that now the state is also supporting these women in many ways by providing suitable provisions and timely legislation. In all of these *Gram Panchayats*, projects for the supply of drinking water were on their way and villagers were also getting employment from this work.

Facilitating healthcare for women as health workers (*Asha karmis*[62])

Some of my respondents were working as *Asha karmis*, which meant they were responsible for taking care of pregnant women in the *Panchayats*. They were paid some incentives by the Health Department and had to encourage the villagers to make use of the facilities provided by the government health centres. They were taking care of women from the early months of pregnancy, were taking them for regular checkups, educating them about sanitation needs and finally had to take them to the hospital for delivery of the babies. Renubala was able to gain popularity among the villagers through her work as an *Asha karmi* and this in a way helped her to gain acceptance within her community as she was largely considered to be a deviant woman (for not living with her husband and going against his wishes).

> *I took this as a mission. Apart from my responsibility as a Nominee, I*
> *consider this as my personal duty to the women's community. If women*

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[62] '*Asha karmi*' may be translated as 'hopeful worker (for women)', in English.

from my Panchayat do not get proper health care, what's the benefit of women like us being in the Gram Panchayats? It's not an easy job...you have to be always there when someone needs you. Villagers who were doing silly talking against me, their mouths are shut now, rather some of them have changed their stand too. (Renubala)

Earlier, many women were dying at the time of childbirth. We convinced the members of the Panchayat to raise this issue in the Gramsabhas and then it was decided that in our village all the deliveries of babies are going to take place in hospital only. (Swarnalata)

Being women, they had gone through the experience of the risks and problems of childbirth in their homes and so, when given the opportunity, they made attempts to provide the facilities to the women of their villages. It was not easy to convince the pregnant women and their families as in rural India delivering babies with the help of elderly women was the normal practice. Traditionally, some untrained old women were working as midwives and due to this practice there were always cases of women dying in childbirth.

This was so difficult, you cannot imagine. Women were not ready, husbands were not prepared and then we passed a rule in the Panchayat that we would fine[63] anyone who tried to deal with pregnancies on their own. (Jyothsnarani)

I know how painful it was for me. I came back to life from the doors of death. My mother-in-law did not allow me to go with my father during my pregnancy. Then there was no health centre inside this village. It was midnight when I got pain and it was so painful. I was horrified to see the

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[63] The term *'fine'* is Indian English which refers to financial punishment and the interesting point is that my participants used the English terms, such as 'fine', 'rule', 'meeting' and 'pregnancy' while talking in their mother tongue. Though they were mostly less educated women, they have learnt to use these words as they are interacting with the public and coping with the vocabulary of public offices in Orissa. It is interesting to observe how they use these words frequently, particularly when they address a public gathering.

midwife who was so cruel in her words for many days after that. I shared this with all the women in the Panchayat meeting and asked them to work towards this. These Asha Karmis come to help the women now. (Padmini)

As women, most of my participants worked for providing better health care for women as they have been through the traumatic experience of child birth at home. Since all of my participants had experienced different problems, so their decisions were affected by this. These participants had decided their choices and worked with much determination to get them accomplished. They had found innovative new ways to make the people aware about health needs. The participants in this study were working in different capacities in the different welfare activities of the villages, setting up role models for other young girls of the locality. There were different projects from different departments and the *Gram Panchayats* became the focus of operation as all of these were controlled by the *Panchayats*. The villages had become real little republics on their own after these women came to power.

Bargaining with the affiliations to caste, clan or tribe

Some of the ways in which my participants are changing the colour of governance are evident in the issues they chose to tackle, ranging from alcohol abuse and domestic violence to water supply, employment generation for rural youth and better education facilities. While there was very little impact of the class, caste or tribe of these women on their decisions, they were all conscious about their gender identities.

It is not always the case that a *Panchayat* where the seat is reserved for an ST woman as *Sarpanch* is mostly inhabited by the tribal people; there may be other categories of people in the majority. So Muni, the only tribal woman who was in a leadership position among my participants, had to take decisions for the whole of the *Panchayat*. There were participants like Asmita, Padmini or Renubala who had to take decisions relating to the lives of the tribal communities living in their own *Gram Panchayats* too. Though there were specific issues, like protecting

women from the alcohol abuse of their husbands or banning the preparation and taking of country liquor inside the tribal hamlets, the participants had to be very careful while dealing with such problems. In their *Gram Panchayats* of Kalapada or Bentkar, both the nominees, Sunati and Basanti, were also from the Scheduled Caste communities. So for most of my participants, the problems of their respective *Panchayats* got priority over the problems of their own caste groups.

> *My house is on the outskirt of the village and it was neglected by all previous Sarpanches. So I asked my members and they were convinced that there was the need for the construction of the road. Otherwise, I would not have approved this as there was the apprehension of losing support.* (Padmini)

Caste consciousness, or doing a favour to people of one's own caste, had to be bargained in a way so that others supported the cause. Padmini did this whenever she had taken decisions to support her own hamlet. It was easier for Asmita to work freely, as she shared something different.

> *I have never done anything for my own community. Everyone knows that people in our clan are rich and they don't really need any help. So I was in a way free to take decisions for the other villages. There were never any conflicts over 'my village' or 'their village'. I have always taken steps in consultation with my members so that no one would be against me. I know I need their support to continue my good work.* (Asmita)

> *It's not easy to do something specifically for our own group. If all are convinced that there is a need, only then did we do it. Yes, people within my caste group have their demands for certain things. After a flood, our 'basti' was mostly affected. It was clearly visible in terms of loss. I requested in the Block Office to send some voluntary organisation teams to help our people. If it were from the Government, then there would have been complaints like 'she is thinking only about people of her caste'.....the upper caste people are rich in our village, even then they have this feeling...but then, thankfully, we got help and no one had any discontent*

about that as people know that voluntary organisations usually choose to help the disadvantaged groups. (Sunati)

The participants in this study had been tactful in dealing with the issues related to their caste, class or clans to avoid difficult controversies and they had shown their maturity in handling political positions so that their leadership of the whole *Panchayat* was not challenged.

Conclusion

I would argue that my participants had fixed their priorities in favour of policies related to the welfare of women and had clear support from their male colleagues in doing so. They had successfully explored the possibilities for the expansion of existing provisions for better networking among themselves and supporting each other in the possible extensions of terms and conditions. These rural women had attempted to prove that they were capable of utilising the new political space created for them. The evidence suggests that changes leading to the development of infrastructure and better provisions for girls and women were top priorities for my respondents despite the multiple handicaps and burdens they continued to bear in some cases. Of course, it has to be kept in mind that family structures could never be challenged in the Indian rural setting, or even in urban India, as family is considered to be the most important thing in this country. It should never be compared in any way with western society. In Indian society, women are considered as a part of the household, and it has been an important change that my participants were considered to be important parts of their families. Families have come out as the most supportive social institutions, particularly for my participants now after twenty years of the practice of reservations for women in public space. The state and civil society need to support the efforts of my participants in organisation, training and with information packages. India is such a big country that regional and cultural variations may make differences. While I am not ruling out the possibility of women still not effectively delivering to their capacities in other parts of the country, or even the region, my participants were

working as responsible agents of social change by utilizing their personal experiences and social networking skills well. Many of these participants were considered as important agents of change in their localities. As members, as representatives of the *Gram Panchayats* in the Block Office and as heads of *Panchayats*, their positions pushed them into the policy-making and policy-implementation process in a very big way. They were doing their part of the job diligently, taking their family networks into their confidence and keeping a perfect balance between private and public life. Working with my participants, I was hopeful that quotas have been proved to be powerful instruments for my participants, and probably in other regions also, 'for addressing women's exclusion from political life' (Rai, 2008: 112).

These participants realised that they needed the support of their families, and they worked purposefully towards that end. They had always included their families and other male members of their communities both inside and outside of the *Panchayat* offices. They had attempted to smooth out the margins between the boundaries of public and private and, to some extent, they had also been successful in achieving this. This is no small achievement for these rural women, who had never thought of or aspired to arriving at a decision-making level. Possibly this is why the National Government has announced that it will increase the quota for women in village *Panchayats* from 33% to 50% (which will be implemented in all states at the next elections to *Panchayats*) as per the approval of the cabinet committee on 25th August, 2009.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

It seemed a bit strange to my friends and odd to me sometimes that I would come to the UK in 2007 to undertake research on how rural women in the *Panchayats* in Orissa, India are exercising their voice after specific seats were reserved for them and how reforms had changed this rural local self-government system. I had never anticipated that a whole world of new knowledge was waiting for me which would never have been possible had I undertaken this research in India. Undertaking this research in the UK has enabled me to learn about feminist theories, which has not only shaped the direction of my research, but also offered a new direction to my thoughts and understanding processes.

 When I was with the participants of this research, I was often reminded of 'my story' in their narratives and I was surprised by their strength and dedication. I am well educated, never went without food or clothes and still I was never able to prove to my family or the people of my community that I had the right to make my own decisions. These women of the *Panchayats*, who are today in decision making positions, have convinced their family, their society and their communities that they have the right to make decisions for their communities. They are mostly uneducated or less well educated; many are poor and living on daily wages and they certainly have more obstacles in their lives than me.

When I started my research, I had a set of preconceived ideas about my research plans and my own perceptions about the lives of the women who could be my potential interviewees. At the end of this process of investigation I realized that all my ideas had been replaced by new observations. This has been a completely new experience for me, enlightening as well as eye-opening. I saw the women of my own localities from a different perspective. I have dared to assess and evaluate their struggles for a place in a public space that originally did not belong to them. I have lived with them and explored the new energy they have gained from the confidence of their voices.

In a country like India, where society is 'highly gender-segregated', quotas for women have 'an additional relevance' (Hust, 2002: 17). That is why the 73rd amendment in 1993 became a path-breaking intervention, which not only reserved one-third of seats for rural women, but also opened a whole new world of opportunity for the poor women of the Indian countryside. It not only created the required 'critical mass', but also helped in making the environment woman-friendly. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, quotas have been an important tool for creating this new world of opportunity for my participants. Reflecting on Dehlerup's (2005: 3) analysis, the creation of a 'critical mass' has been helpful for these women to initiate a series of 'critical acts' which also includes the recruitment of more women in politics and bringing changes to lives of these women and other women. Evidence suggests that the presence of these women in an increased percentage in the *Gram Panchayats* helped the women to break the cultural and social barriers. Their inclusion in the *Panchayats* has also helped them to be active citizens, shifting their positions from just being the beneficiaries of the privileges of citizenship to a position where they are involved in negotiations with the state and the civil society. My respondents were all women from women-headed *Panchayats* from a block where the vice-chairman was also a woman. This selection of sample, in a way, helped me very much to put forward the voice of women, because they had personally experienced this whole process of seat reservation and participation and this has also helped me to examine whether or not their participation in *Gram Panchayats* has led to their empowerment. My primary objective was based on a feminist perspective to examine the respondents' own experiences and lives relying on their voice and their own words. Although social change in a fast-growing country like India is difficult to measure, it is also important to evaluate and understand how the people involved live through social change. My respondents' participation in the public has led to gains in their knowledge and helped them to feel confident pushing the age-old boundaries of the society. I argue that their participation in these political bodies has also a transformative potential. As mentioned in Chapter 7, this has led to a change of their perspectives on a range of issues. This change in their attitudes and shift in their priorities is a kind of empowering experience for these women. I argue in line with Kabeer, (1999: 47) that empowerment involves a series of changes in the life. These women have experienced these

changes and in their own words and understanding, quotas have been helpful for them to feel empowered and to gain a new sense of identity. Empowerment is not participation in decision-making, this is also about being able to take control of situations and exercise choices. As discussed in Chapter 7, my respondents have not only been in power, they have also exercised their choices and made the difference in the *Gram Panchayats*. I argue that gender quotas have created a scope for the participation which these women have utilised properly by their negotiations within and out of their private lives. This empowerment of these women, who were mostly less educated, has definitely led to give them a prominent voice within their private world. Quotas have succeeded in the rural Orissan villages and I argue that this opportunity has helped them as a compensation for the structural barriers that make fair competition fail (Dehlerup, 2002: 11).

The literature available on the women in *Panchayats* provided a space to present the voice of the women involved who needed the help of their husbands or other male community members. Previous empirical studies conducted in Orissa (Panda, 2002, Hust, 2002, Satpathy, 2003) studied women who acted as leaders of *Gram Panchayats* or women *Sarpanches*. The concept of proxy woman has been very common and an important concern for almost all previous studies. In the current research, I have attempted to go against this common observation by suggesting that 'helping out' or 'giving a hand' to the women coping with a new space where they barely had any experience should not be considered as a 'proxy' problem. This is more so for my participants who never considered their husbands' or male colleagues' help and cooperation as a threat to their power. Though I am aware that regional and cultural variations may lead to presence of some controlled women in other parts of the country, I argue that most of my participants were managing meetings and coping with their new roles and must not be seen as 'proxy women'.

I had a set of research questions in my mind and an open-ended questionnaire when I started the investigations. There were many changes in the circumstances leading to reshaping of my strategies. I stayed with my participants and became one among them several times during the investigation. I shared with them incidents and experiences from my life and it helped us to form a closer bond of

trust, the power relation became more flexible and I was aware that the shape of my investigation was dependant on the cooperation of my participants. I became just another participant of this whole process where my respondents had to give me time out of their over-burdened schedules of both their private and public lives and their words were final. I needed information from them for my research and they would get nothing out of this whole process. It often left me in a less powerful position. I also experienced some unexpected problems during my field work. Had it not been disrupted by a severe flood, I would have been able to stay several more days with my participants and I could have finished my field study in one trip. However, I do not believe that this has had a major impact upon my findings since clear patterns have emerged from my data. It was startling in the first location of my field study when the tribal women uniformly declined to accept my friend who was supposed to be my access because they perceived that I was a representative of the government. I had to change my strategy and did not stay with his family, nor allowed him to accompany me on my next visit when I had to start my work. I stayed with the tribal women in their hamlet and my admiration for them grew as I realized the difficulties of their everyday lives. The whole process of staying with my participants, being able to look into their lives from such a close perspective as well as the outcomes of my interviews and focus groups discussions were illuminating. Even my experience with the respondents at the second location, which was a familiar place to me, was completely unpredicted and that made my investigation such an interesting event for me (Ch. 5). In both field study locations, my respondents were from different castes, classes and tribes of society, but that did not show any significant effect on the power relationship as most of the time it was their time and words on which my investigation largely depended. They never considered me as someone from urban society or from a higher caste or living in a different country and the fact that that they ignored my position assisted me in gaining more intimate access to their lives and experiences.

Throughout my research journey I was continuously attempting to gain their confidence and to build up rapport. I did not often find myself in a convenient, expected position of an insider researcher and so had to put extra efforts in to understand the family dynamics of my participants by creating this sisterly bond,

which is core to feminist research. It was interesting to observe my participants at their homes, in the fields and as the head or members of *Panchayats*. The narratives of the participants gradually unfolded struggles, barriers and their acts of perseverance to learn a new skill of which they had no previous knowledge. Exploring the barriers at different levels such as social, cultural and political was also an important question for me. It emerged that most participants were encouraged to contest the elections where the seats were reserved by their husbands or other male family members and the community at large. Apart from two participants, all were first-time politicians and thus had little knowledge of the political world. However, this did not affect their level of participation once then were elected to office. It was revealing for me that my respondents had no complaints about their family members. This was also important as this gave me an insight into the priorities of these women, which were so different from typical urban women. For Indian rural women, home and family come first. While my respondents acknowledged that it was a problem to deal with the pressures of both their private and public worlds, they still found ways of coping with it. Most of them were happy with the assistance they received from their male family and community members at different levels in exercising a power to which they were not previously accustomed. Even if these interviewees were all new to their positions, the phenomenon of women leaders and representatives and accepting them as the decision makers for villages, communities and largely for *Gram Panchayats* has become familiar in rural India, which has made the scenario more amenable for my respondents (Ch.7). In addition to the burden of the triple role of the women, a lack of education, restrictions on their mobility, occasional callous behaviour of bureaucracy and other factors such as stereotypes of rural women have also been obstacles that have handicapped them. However, I did not find any lack of decision-making capacity in respondents who were less well educated than others. The entirety of the barriers have to be understood from their point of view that they would always see them as personal challenges and attempted to overcome them with all their effort. There were of course some women among them who did not think it right to go against the wish of their husbands or other male mentors who were instrumental in pushing them into this political space, but mostly the participants were emphatic about their ways of negotiating inside their families to exercise their power in the public arena. This

private public divide was observed to be gradually melting away for my participants as they had secured their family support and could take their public activities into their private domain without any hesitation. While discussing the barriers, my participants often expressed their concerns regarding the rotation of the reserved seats which does not allow them to get elected for the second time from the same seat on quota. I do not see it as a problem as I realised that it would help to include more women in long term, most of them expressed their dissatisfaction. However, I understand that the problem is that the experiences of these women are not utilised or channelled in a proper way. It seems right now, that there is no mechanism available to include these women as mentors for the future generation of women leaders and representatives. I suggest that they should be integrated into a mechanism of capacity-building and inductions for future generations of women leaders and they should be rendered an opportunity to share their struggles, experiences and negotiations, which could be really helpful for society.

Having explored the barriers of the women in exercising power, I turned to exploring the negotiations they had made in their private lives to make their public lives more productive and engaging. I found that my participants were constantly negotiating conflicts and tensions arising both from their public role and their role as a woman inside the household. They successfully explored the possibilities of expansion of kinship relations and their relation with male community members, which is unique in an Indian context. As women in India, and more so in rural Orissa, are traditionally considered as a part of the family and their individual identities became less important for all practical purposes, these women could share their responsibilities with other family members as their own strategies evolved over time. They were happy with the fact that in a village where they originally did not belong they were offered help and assistance to hold a position of respect. The recognition they received from this whole process was very satisfying for my respondents. I could see how networking among the women became a good way to overcome barriers between different castes and classes; this would also enable them to learn from each other.

Capacity building programmes for all women in the *Panchayats* could be a good way of breaking barriers of caste, class, kinship and ethnic differences, and for NGOs[64] it is a perfect opportunity to help each other and exchange knowledge. Unfortunately many of my participants were not able to attend the orientation programmes intended for them, which were arranged in the state capital. The distances involved and their personal life engagements did not allow all of them to travel there and stay there overnight. There were also no attempts from any NGOs to offer any such orientation programmes for my respondents. So I strongly suggest that there is a need to plan these training programmes in a manner that enables the maximum number to participate. The choice of venue, timings and days need to be sensitively negotiated so that this would meet the needs of the targeted beneficiaries. Facilities such as transport arrangements would enhance the participation in the training programmes to a greater degree.

While education will improve the confidence and effectiveness of the new women politicians, I think it is also important to supplement this education with active programmes of social change to encourage mutual respect among men and women politicians and among the general population. The Kerala model social campaign[65] (Anderson and Bohman, 2001) or organisations like Mahila Samakhya of Karnataka (Jayal, 2006), to encourage all the people, men and women to become involved in the issues related to *Panchayats* could be the best solution for sensitizing the whole of society about women's issues and could contribute towards weakening some of the inhibiting social factors which are still very much present at different levels. That is why I see a strong need for large scale training and orientation programmes, not only for women, but also for government officials, family members and the general public. Government officials and the elected male politicians need to be sensitized to the problems faced by elected women. Therefore it is important that all sections of rural

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[64] NGOs refer to Non-Governmental Organizations.

[65] In 1995, following the 73rd amendment, a democratization process named the 'People's Planning Campaign' was launched by the Government of Kerala which focused on increasing the awareness of political empowerment of women at the *Gram Panchayat* level. Kerala boasts that its Human Development Index parallels that of some Western countries (Anderson, 2001).

societies should be involved in these orientation programmes, so that it leads to an eradication of the stereotypes. It is also important that government officials should be directed to listen to these women patiently and acknowledge their suggestions politely which would help to boost the morale of these women. However, it is not only society's view of women but also their own perception of themselves that requires changing. It is also hard to change the view that you are raised with; the change must be done in the family not just in society.

I wanted to investigate the process of 'empowerment of women' from the respondents' point of view (Ch. 6). I was wary of using the term 'empowerment' as this is so often misused in the media's propaganda and I therefore discussed with them about the possible expansion of terms and conditions of their own lives due to the power coming out of their public roles. Whether the 73rd amendment has been successful in fulfilling the aim of 'women's empowerment', which had been the focus of the Government's agenda, was a question that seemed very ambiguous for me though I valued the idea of empowerment from a different perspective. I was rather attempting to learn from my participants how they would evaluate their own power. Considering their views it became clear that the processes ensuing from political power or participation do not follow the same course in every given socio-political context. The elected women in the second location were more autonomous and confident than the women from the first location. Again there were some villages inhabited by low caste people that were more gender sensitive than other areas dominated by high caste people. For example, there was Bishnupriya who did not consider it wrong to depend on her husband completely while representatives from her *Panchayat* were very much against her husband signing on his wife's behalf in important meetings. There were women like Asmita and Padmini who secured their family support so much that they did not feel the burden of their household chores.

The political space created by the historical amendment and the reforms in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions certainly worked as a precondition for the effective participation of my participants. I argue in line with Afshar that these type of 'women-centred development policies' (1991: 7) and legislative interventions are just the first steps, there is the need of a non-discriminating and conducive environment for women to participate effectively in the political sphere. Evidence

suggests that my participants had succeeded where men encouraged and helped them in exercising their decisions. Their success or failure was highly dependent on the level of support they obtained from their families and other male community members. There were of course individual cases of men not being supportive and women in these cases faced many problems. I sympathized with these women and could understand their positions as I have experienced this in my personal life. I would like to argue in line with feminists that quotas may not be very helpful for removing some of the barriers for women such as, double burden or many of the other barriers that elected women face, but if properly utilised, it certainly help the women to overcome some of the most important constraints to their equal representation (Dahlerup and Freidenvell, 2005: 42). From my study, I am convinced that quotas created a 'critical mass' which helped my participants to come to power and they worked to make it a successful experience through their choices.

Analyzing the experiences with my respondents and giving due consideration to their perspectives of empowerment, I would agree with feminist scholars that empowerment, in fact, is 'both a process and an outcome' (Parpart, Rai and Staudt, 2002: 4). They suggest that, empowerment as a process is dynamic and unpredictable whereas, as an outcome, it needs proper evaluation of the struggles of people concerned which may be context-specific and against the expected results. The expected achievements could be the qualitative changes in the lives of my respondents, which this reservation had made possible. I am reminded about an interesting incident while I was with my participants in a *Panchayat* meeting in Kalapada. On the same day there were a group of journalists reporting on the reconstruction work after the severe flood, mentioned earlier. Kalapada was worst affected by the flood and its devastating effects were still visible at that time. The journalists found me there (an urban looking woman in the *Panchayat* office) and suddenly showed interest in my research. They wanted to interview me with some of my participants. There were cameramen, light engineers and sound recordists and other members of the television team. I was a bit nervous as to what would I say and what they would ask me. However, the interview started with my respondents and interestingly they were so confident in replying to the questions

of the journalists that I soon overcame my nervousness. I would never have expected this from the rural women of the same locality had they not been in political power. Their instant discourses with unfamiliar people and the clear and confident message reflected a sense of confidence in them symbolic of their empowerment. It was a day of celebration for them that they could appear in a television programme and let the viewers know about their *Panchayat's* problems and issues related to the ongoing relief work. These rural women have certainly worked towards changing their self-image and this has definitely led to social change. Their new gained image in the public space enabled them to participate at a decision making level and made it possible for them to create a space for the next generation of women. The results of this newly gained identity are reflected in the enhanced rate of literacy over these 15 years, the improved health facilities, the provision of better education for girls and better communication for villages. It is appropriate to mention here that I have used the original names of the places and my respondents except for two cases where the women requested not to be identified by name. Most of my participants, all of the *Sarpanches* and the vice-chairperson of the Cuttack Sadar block waived their right to anonymity and they were rather keen to be named. They would all be in the same offices by the time my research is completed and they wanted to be acknowledged in this way. I see this as incredible as they wanted to spread the message of their participation in the public space through my investigation.

I was unable to make a comparative analysis of the changes in the self image of participants belonging to different categories of social structures though I had a sample consisting of respondents from different groups like schedules caste, schedules tribes, other backward castes and women belonging to general castes. This was because of time constraints. The 'caste' and 'class' structures are so much interwoven in rural society that it was difficult to untangle those threads in such a limited period of study. However, I strongly believe that in the current study there were no severe tensions among different sections of society. I did not experience any such incidents during my stay with their families or during the long discussions with interviewees. During my period of stay or in depth discussions with the respondents of the study they never shared any of their experiences that were predominantly associated with their caste, class or tribes,

which made me almost oblivious about considering the level of their participation in such contexts. I consider this as a limitation of this study and would like to extend this research to devote a separate chapter to this in future while considering publication of my work.

While concluding this thesis, I argue that quotas have been effective for providing an opportunity for my participants to participate effectively in *Gram Panchayats* and as these women have taken their families into their confidence, they have gained an increased sense of identity, both inside and outside their homes. Their new roles have brought changes to their lives and also to the society at large. In analyzing the identified perceptions it becomes clear that the elected women's situation is more multifaceted than has often been previously described. This coexistence of possibilities and obstacles can be seen as an argument against the view in earlier research where elected women were portrayed either as 'proxy women' or full-feathered politicians. From my own experience in the field of study, I want to argue that most of them were not 'proxy women' and they were handling the power of making decisions on their own, of course by taking their families and relatives into confidence. Some of them, who are depending on their husbands or other men of their families, mostly not as 'proxy women', but as Buch says, it may be a part of their attempt to explore the easily accessible and socially acceptable support mechanism when confronted with their lack of education, ignorance, seclusion or other such strong patriarchal social norms restricting their movements outside their homes and also a high degree of anxiety related to their personal safety (2000: 9). This research incorporates feminist perspectives on gender relations with the focus on the specificity of rural women's experiences, through which I hope to make a contribution to the body of knowledge of women and political power at the grassroots level with reference to a rapidly changing society. I am aware that the findings of my research may contradict some feminist perspectives that believe that men are the reason for women's subjugation and secondary social status. This may find its place in line with the studies which stand against the feminism's 'universalising language' (Rai, 1998: 25). The final result of the study also contradicts some feminist analyses which do not consider the role that males play in women's public lives. I do not wish to contest this view strongly; however, I would like to suggest that, in

different cultures, in different situations, women have secured support from men, which has enhanced their participation in public life and helped them to achieve difficult goals. I have attempted, indirectly, to appreciate all the good work of husbands, fathers and fathers-in-law who have given their time and practical assistance to encourage the participants of this study. I was surprised to see how much effort the family members of my participants gave and the amount of time they devoted to helping these women. There could be no real empowerment at the grassroots level if families, communities do not support women to maintain a balance in their private and public worlds. I hope that I have put forth my participants' voices and based on their words I realised that there could possibly be no 'theory of empowerment' which would be universally applicable for all the women of the world. I have been constantly asked in all the conferences and seminars, wherever I presented my paper within the last few months, 'what's the message then?' While concluding this work, I like to argue that quotas have worked for my participants as successful tools for creating an enabling environment for them. In addition to that, I would also like to argue that, given the opportunities, even in worst scenario, women could overcome the social and cultural barriers by including all agencies of the civil society. Clearly, the important message is that the reservation system has worked for the rural women in this location and it has empowered rural women by enabling them to bring changes to the lives of other women and girls in their communities.

Appendix- One

Biographies of the Participants

1. Aiswarya Prabina Jena

Aiswarya is currently working as the vice-Chairperson of the Cuttack Sadar Block. Though she was first elected as a nominee from Gatiroutpatna *Gram Panchayat*, later on she was elected by and from among all the nominees to this office. She has got her Bachelor of Arts degree from Jagatsinghpur College. She was active in student union politics during her college days. She is 24 years old and very confident. She is the first woman to work in this position. She has got encouragement and support from her family to continue her political career. She was my only unmarried participant. She was very hopeful to get married into a family where she would be allowed to continue her career in politics. She said that she has asked her parents to look for a groom who would be liberal about women's doing politics.

2. Anita Sahu

Anita is 40 years old. She has two school going children. She is a ward member in Bentkar *Panchayat*. She is shy and does not speak much. She lives with her in laws. Anita wants to continue her career in politics as she has her husband's support. She has studied up to sixth class.

3. Asmita Sahu

Asmita is a very young and articulate *Sarpanch*. I stayed with her for a week. She passed her Bachelor of Arts degree from Cuttack, the nearby city. She was born and brought up in a city, but since her marriage, she is living in Kalapada, with her in-law's family. Her mother-in-law is very loving and caring. Asmita's

husband is an advocate. She has two children, a three year old daughter and a two year old son. She is 30 yrs old. Asmita has a good reputation in her village as she is very punctual in attending meetings and she encourages all women members to participate in the discussions. She belongs to Scheduled Caste group and she wants to contest the next election as *Sarpanch* even if the seat goes unreserved.

4. Basanti Mallick

Basanti works as the nominee of Bentkar *Gram Panchayat*. Basanti is 42 years old and she is illiterate. She has a grown up son and a daughter. She contested the election as her husband wanted her to stand for the reserved seat of a Nominee. She was concerned that there is no training or orientation plans available from the Government or Non-Government sectors, for the nominees. She wants to contribute towards the welfare of the women of her community and she helps the women financially from the income of the Self Help Group which she runs at her home. She encourages her children to go to school as she has been deprived of education.

5. Bina Sahu

Bina is a ward member in Barada *Gram Panchayat*. She is illiterate. She attends all the meetings. She is 35 years old. She has one son. Her in laws support her in the *Panchayat* work. They depend on agriculture for their living which makes Bina's work difficult.

6. Bishnupriya Dei

Bishnupriya is 50 years old. She is married and her both sons are financially independent now. Her husband is a contractor and he has political contacts. He pushed Bishnupriya to contest as the *Sarpanch* when the seat was reserved. She does not want to continue in politics as she completely depends on her husband.

Her husband attends all the meeting on her behalf. She works as the *Sarpanch* of Gatiroutpatna.

7. Draupadi Murmu

Draupadi is a tribal woman. She is hard working and lives on daily wages. She is presently a ward member of Arilo Gram *Panchayat*. She is illiterate. She is 37 years old and she has two daughters who help her in household chores.

8. Gayatri Mohanty

Gayatri is very active in her role as a ward member. She is 30 years old, married and her husband stays in a nearby city. She lives in a village in Kalapada *Panchayat*. Her younger sister in law and mother-in-law share her responsibility within the house, which she believes makes her life easy. She attends all the meetings. She is motivated and she wants to be in politics whether or not the seat is reserved for women. She has studied up to eighth class. She is a very fun loving person. She has a best friend in her brother-in-law who helps her always.

9. Golapa Barik

Golapa is 25 years old and she is a ward member of Bentkar *Gram Panchayat*. She has studied up to eighth class. She lives with her in laws. She has a daughter who is five years old. Golapa is very active as a ward member and she gets her husband's support for her work.

10. Gouri Behera

Gouri lives on daily wages. She is a ward member in Paramahans *Gram Panchayat*. She lives at the outskirts of the village as the village is dominated by

high-caste people. She is happy that she gets to seat in a chair in the *Panchayat* office. She is 40 years old and her son is 22 years now. She is illiterate.

11. Harapriya Barik

Harapriya is 28 years old. She has a son and a daughter. Her husband does not support her much in her work, but she gets support from her mother-in-law. She comes to the meetings regularly. She has studied up to fourth class. Her mother in law and sister in law shares her household responsibilities.

12. Jyothsnarani Muduli

Jyothsnarani is 34 years old. She has studied up to seventh class. Her husband has a small grocery shop in the village. He helps her mostly in the works related to *Panchayat*. She is currently working as the *Sarpanch* of Kandarpur *Gram Panchayat*. She has a nine year old son.

13. Kadambini Pati

Kadamibini is a ward member of Nemeishapur *Gram Panchayat*. She is illiterate and she is 39 years old. She has learnt how to sign her name after being elected. She thinks women's coming to *Panchayats* is good for the welfare of the village as women work honestly. Her family is very supportive.

14. Kalapana Das

Kalpana is 35 years old and she has a daughter. Her husband helps her in her work. She is a ward member of Barada *Panchayat*. She has studied up to ninth class. She wants to contest for the post of Sarpanch in next elections. She gets support from other members of the community. Her husband stays in a far away city for his job. Her brother-in-law mostly helps her.

15. Kuni Singh

Kuni is the nominee of the Arilo *Gram Panchayat*. She is 34 years old and has two sons. She works in agriculture field mostly for her living. She is from a tribal community and she is illiterate. She does not want to be in politics after this term. I had to wait for a week to see Kuni as she works on daily wages. She works hard, so that she can provide good education for her sons. So, she thinks *Panchayat* activities sometimes become a burden for her.

16. Laxmipriya Pradhan

Laxmipriya is 41 years old and she has learnt the alphabets in the Adult Literacy Centre. She has no household responsibility as her younger sister-in-law cooks for the family and there are others who distribute other chores among them. She finds coming out regularly of her home is difficult for her as she is not used to this practice. However, she lives in an extended family and her family members are helpful to her. She has a daughter whom she sends to school regularly. She attends the *Panchayat* meetings regularly even if the *Panchayat* office is far from her village.

17. Lata Tudu

Lata has never been to a school. Even now, she puts her thumb prints. She is a ward member of Paramahansa. She is 38 years old, married and has two daughters. She admits that she sometimes skips the Panchayat meetings if it coincides with her other important works at home. Her father in law encouraged her to stand for elections.

18. Muni Tudu

Muni is very confident about her own ideas. She has studied up to fourth class. She is the most educated person in her hamlet. She is currently the *Sarpanch* of Arilo *Gram Panchayat*. They are migrant workers, living in a hamlet. She depends on the previous male *Sarpanch* for all her work. She finds it difficult to cope up with the politics of *Panchayat* as she works on daily wages for her everyday living. She is 24 years old.

19. **Malati Majhi**

Malati is a ward member of Bentkar *Gram Panchayat*. She elected as the seat was reserved. She is 29 years old. Her husband stays in a far away city for his living. He comes infrequently and so Malati has to do everything on her own. She finds it difficult to give time, particularly in transplantation season. She has a son.

20. **Manorama Bhoi**

Manorama is interested in politics. She thinks, she has learnt a lot since she attends meetings regularly and works with the *Sarpanch*. She works as an Asha karmi and help other women during the pregnancy period till the birth of the baby. She is happy that she can convince them to take help of the Health Centres as she has gone through a very traumatic time during her delivery of baby. She finds this as an opportunity to help people. She has studied up to tenth class and she is 30 years old.

21. **Padmini Behera**

Padmini is very articulate in the meetings of her *Gram Panchayat*. She is the *Sarpanch* of Bentkar *Gram Panchayat*. Her husband is very supportive to her. Her mother in law and others in family take care of her only son. She leaves him sometimes in the nearby Anganwadi Centre as well. She lives in an extended family with many members, all of whom are very helpful to her. Padmini controls the meetings and she has studied up to sixth class.

22. **Purmina Mohapatra**

Purnima is a ward member in Kalapada *Gram Panchayat*. She is married and has a daughter. She is 30 years old. She would never have come to Panchayats, but for the quota provision. She has studied up to seventh class.

23. **Pramila Nayak**

Pramila is a ward member in Kandarpur. She is 35 years old. She has a son and a daughter. She stays with her husband in a small house. Her husband works on

daily wages. So, spending long time for *Panchayat* works sometimes is not acceptable to her husband.

24. Prativa Sarangi

Prativa's husband passed away some years back. She is a high-cast widow, which means that she is supposed to be under very strict code of conduct. She finds it difficult to come out of her home regularly. She has a son and lives with her in-laws. She is 32 years old and has studied up to sixth class. She is a ward member.

25. Renubala Panda

Renubala has studied up to tenth class. She is originally from West Bengal which has a progressive environment for women. She was interested in social work from the beginning. After her marriage, she came to stay with her in-laws in Paramahansa, which was predominantly a male dominated, high caste village. However, she continued her good work and her husband was very unhappy with her. She secured the help and support from her father-in-law for some years. Now she lives with her grown up daughters who do all the household chores. She is the nominee of her *Gram Panchayat* and she is known to have many contacts in politics. She is 42 years old now and she sees politics as her future career. She has stood up against her husband to pursue a career in politics.

26. Revati Murmu

Revati belongs to tribal community and she is a ward member. She is 41 years old. She has studied up to class two in school, but cannot read the letters now. She feels lack of education is her biggest handicap. She has two children. She is from a poor family and they have to walk long distances for drinking water and fire wood.

27. Sabita Behera

Sabita is married and she is 31 years old. She has two sons. She is the Sarpanch of Nemeishapur. Her husband is very much involved in politics. When I met Sabita last, she was very passionate about the water and sanitation projects in her *Panchayat*. She has studied up to eighth class. She gets all the support from her husband and the family.

28. Sabitri Nayak

Sabitri is the elected nominee of the Barada *Panchayat*. She finds it easy to work for women as they have a woman *Sarpanch*. She is 30 years old. She is married and has two sons. She has studied up to seventh class.

29. Sabitri Jhodia

Sabitri is 32 years old. She does not get any support from her family. She has small children and has to do all the household chores. It therefore becomes hard for her to attend the meetings regularly. She has no educational qualification. She is a tribal woman.

30. Sandhya Rout

Sandhya is 28 years old. She is a ward member. She does not get any support from her husband as he lives in a different place for his job. She has two children. She has studied up to fifth class.

31. Srimati Mohapatra

Srimati is a high caste widow. She is 35 years old. She lives with her in laws who take the responsibility of her children. She has to obey her family members and she goes out when her in-laws allow her to do so. She gets some support from her husband's friends and she does not want to continue like this. She has studied up to fourth class.

32. Susama Behera

Susama is 35 years old. She works as a ward member. She is also working as an Asha karmi. She is very much involved in the activities of Self-Help Groups and she earns a good amount of money from that. She is happy that her life has changed so much after her election. She has all the support from her in-law's family and had no problems right now. She has not been to school, but learnt letters at home from her son. She has a son and a daughter.

33. Sulochana Ojha

Sulochana's husband helps her. She is 37 years old. She goes to work out of her home regularly, so going out is not a problem for her. She is a ward member. She feels happy about her new role since it has given her an opportunity to understand the issues of her *Gram Panchayat*. She lives with her family who are very encouraging.

34. Sunanda Acharya

Sunanda is 29 years old. She is from a high-caste family, so she finds going out of home regularly very difficult. Her husband does not oppose her activities, but has no time to help her. She does not want to be in politics. She has studied up to eighth class. She is a ward member.

35. Sunati Bhoi

Sunati is 28 years old. She has two sons. She was worst affected during the last flood. She works as the nominee of Kalapada *Gram Panchayat*. She is illiterate. Her husband drops her at the meetings. She has no problems of going out as she used to go out for her daily wages even when she was not an elected representative. She gets support from members of her community.

36. Swarnalata Jena

Swarnalata is currently working as the *Sarpanch* of Barada *Gram Panchayat*. She is 38 years old. She has two sons, one is 14 years and the other is one year old. She finds it difficult to go out as she has a small child. Her husband helps her, but she has to do all the household chores along with the childcare. She has studied up to fourth class.

37. Umavati Barik

Umavati has no educational qualification. She is a ward member. She is 40 years old. She has others at home who share with her household responsibilities. She

has no one to support her in her role outside of her home. She finds it difficult to give more time and she is not interested to continue.

38. Urmila Devi

Urmila is a ward member. She is 34 years old. She has two daughters. She has come to politics as her husband encouraged her. She has got the support of her family. She does not find it difficult to carry on. She has studied up to third standard. She wants to continue in politics and has plans to contest for the post of *Sarpanch* in next elections to *Gram Panchayats*.

Appendix Two: A list of 29 tasks under the *Panchayats*

73rd Amendment (Eleventh Schedule) - Tasks to be accomplished by rural local bodies (i.e. *Panchayat*) under 73rd amendments act.

1- Agriculture, including agriculture extension.
2- Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation.
3- Minor irrigation, water management watershed development.
4- Animal husbandry, dairying and poultry.
5- Fisheries.
6- Social forestry and farm forestry.
7- Minor forest productions.
8- Small scale industries, including food processing industries.
9- Khadi, village and cottage industries.
10- Rural housing.
11- Drinking water.
12- Fuel and fodder.
13- Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways, and other means of communication.
14- Rural electrification including distribution of electricity.
15- Non-conventional energy sources.
16- Poverty alleviation programme.
17- Education, including primary and secondary schools.
18- Technical training and vocational education.
19- Adult and non-formal education.
20- Libraries.
21- Cultural activities.
22- Markets and fairs.
23- Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries.

24- Family welfare.

25- Woman and child development.

26- Social welfare including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded.

27- Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the Scheduled castes and the Scheduled tribes.

28- Public distribution system.

29- Maintenance of community assets

(Source- Natural Resources Data Management System, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India), at:

http://nrdms.gov.in/73rd_ammendment.asp (Accessed 01/07/2010).

Appendix Three- Article 243 (D), after 73rd Amendment Act

Reservation of seats

(1) Seats shall be reserved for,

 a) The Scheduled Castes; and

 b) The Scheduled Tribes, in every *Panchayat* and the number of seats so reserved shall bear, as nearly as may be, the same proportion to the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in that *Panchayat* as the population of the Scheduled Castes in that *Panchayat* area or of the Scheduled Tribes in that *Panchayat* are a bears to the total population of that area and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *Panchayat*.

(2)   Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled castes or, as the case may be, the Scheduled Tribes.

 (3) Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every *Panchayat* shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *Panchayat*.

(4) The offices of the Chairpersons in the *Panchayats* at the village or any other level shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women in such manner as the

Legislature of a State may, by law, provide:

Provided that the number of offices of Chairpersons reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the *Panchayats* at each level in any State shall bear, as nearly as may be, the same proportion to the total number of such offices in the *Panchayats* at each level as the population of the Scheduled Castes in the State or of the Scheduled Tribes in the State bears to the total population of the State 'Provided further that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the *Panchayats* at each level shall be reserved for women.

Provided also that the number of offices reserved under this clause shall be allotted by rotation to different *Panchayats* at each level.

(5) The reservation of seats under clauses (1) and (2) and the reservation of offices of Chairpersons (other than the reservation for women) under clause (4) shall cease to have effect on the expiration of the period specified in Article 334.

(6) Nothing in this Part shall prevent the Legislature of a State from making any provision for reservation of seats in any *Panchayat* or offices of Chairpersons in the *Panchayats* at any level in favour of backward class of citizens.

Abbreviations

BPL	Below Poverty Line
IAY	Indira Awas Yojana
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
OBC	Other Backward Castes
OBCW	Other Backward Caste Woman
OREGS	Orissa Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institutions
RW	Reserved for Women
SC	Scheduled Castes
SCW	Scheduled Caste Woman
SHG	Self-Help Groups
ST	Scheduled Tribes
STW	Scheduled Tribe Woman

Glossary

Anganwadi Small crèche-like institutions at the villages which work as play-schools for children below 5 years of age.

Asha karmi Women volunteers working in villages for the welfare of women.

Gram Village.

Gram Panchayat Self-governing body at the local village level, the lowest level of the *Panchayati Raj*.

Gram Sabha Village council; a body consisting of persons registered on the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of the *Gram Panchayat*.

Indira Awas Yojana Housing facilities provided by the central government for poor people.

Janpad *Panchayats* at the block level in North India.

Lok Sabha Lower house of the Indian Parliament.

Member Pati Husband of a ward member.

Naib-Sarpanch Deputy-head of the *Gram Panchayat*.

Nominee The elected representative who represents the people of a *Gram Panchayat* at the *Panchayat Samiti*.

Panchayati Raj Three-tier rural local government system.

Panchayat Samiti Block level *Panchayat* which works above village level and below District level.

Rajya Sabha Upper House of the Indian Parliament.

Sarpanch	Head of the *Gram Panchayat*.
Sarpanch Pati	Husband of the head of the *Gram Panchayat*.
Swajal dhara	Purified water supply projects at the *Gram Panchayat* level.
Ward	Division within the *Gram Panchayat* consisting of several villages.
Ward Member	Elected representative of the ward in the *Gram Panchayat*.
Zilla	A District.
Zilla Parishad	District level *Panchayat* which works at the top of the rural local governance system.

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