Chapter V

Political Representation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions : Examining the Indian Experiment with Affirmative Action

Introduction:
The present thesis, as has already been outlined, aims to understand the discourse on political representation of women in the liberal democracies of Canada and India and attempts to explore the impact of shifts in the discourse on liberal democratic norms and institutions. The first chapter of the study has talked about the very concept of political representation and located the issue of political representation of women within this larger discourse. The second chapter of the present study has traced the evolution of women’s political representation discourse in Canada and delineated its various issues, debates and concerns.

Highlighting the importance of locating the women’s question in one of the key discourses of Canadian liberal democracy, that is, the Aboriginal self-governance discourse, the third chapter of the study has examined how with the assertions of women’s concerns have altered the parameters of self-government negotiations and processes. Shifting focus to the Indian context, the fourth chapter examined the political representation discourse in India and examined a key debate in this context, that is, the reservation debate and its various strands. It is also observed in this context that the reservation debate in India stemmed from a larger discourse on decentralization. The 73\textsuperscript{rd} Amendment Act (1992) that that constitutionally provided for a three tier village self-governing structure (Panchayati Raj) also reserved 33 percent seats in these institutions for women. This development occurred as a ‘top-down’ measure.
One may further point out here that the system of electoral quotas for women has emerged as a significant measure adopted by both established and transitional democracies across the world, as has been discussed in the first chapter of the present study, to address the issue of women's underrepresentation in politics. The advocates of the cause of introducing special measures for recruiting women in political decision-making argue that there is a need for "institutionalized counter measures" for dealing with "institutionalized inequalities" (Mazumdar 1997, 19). However, a critical question that needs to be explored in this regard is whether 'top-down' institutional measures in a liberal democratic political framework brings in qualitative changes in women's access to resources and institutions, or is it merely an instrument of increasing women's numerical strength in political decision making.

In this context, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) become an important site for studying the real implications of instituting 'top-down' mechanisms for mitigating structural inequities. The present chapter, therefore, seeks to examine whether the Indian experiment with affirmative action in village self-governing institutions have been successful in facilitating positive and real emancipation of women. Moreover, the case of affirmative action India is crucial, as the identity of a woman is layered in the various intersecting forces of caste, class, religion and ethnicity and is not manifested only in terms of 'gender.'

This social reality gets reflected in political institutions like the PRIs (Vyasulu & Vyasulu 1999). Therefore, to further explicate the question of real implications of 'top-down' institutional measures, the present chapter draws from cases of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women's participation and representation in PRIs. This offers an opportunity to explore whether institutional mechanisms set up from 'top' has been able to address the concerns of those who are perceived as marginalized even within the larger category of women.
Historical Background to the PRIs:

The idea of Panchayats or village self-governance is not a recent development in Indian democracy. The tradition of local self-government in India, in fact, is as old as the Aryan civilization. The Rig Veda mentions the role of elected bodies like Sabha, which was assigned with the task of legislating as well as reimbursing justice (Ramesh & Ali 2001, v). Panchayats, in ancient India, were usually elected councils with executive and judicial powers (Malaviya 1956, 67). With the coming of the foreign powers like the Mughals and then the British that brought with them fundamental socio-economic and structural changes, the importance of the system of Panchayats got severely undermined (Narayan 1961, 277).

It was Lord Ripon, who towards the end of the nineteenth century again brought the importance of local governance to the fore. A resolution was drafted in 1882 for the establishment of local boards which was repeated in 1909 in the report of the Royal Commission on Decentralization. As a result, rural district boards and village Panchayats were set up. However, in the first set of Panchayat Acts that came in the 1920s in the then provinces and princely states women did not figure either as representatives or even as voters (Buch 2000, 3).

The term ‘Panchayat’ traditionally implied a body of five elders in a village set-up who were responsible for resolving conflicts and meting out punishment to the offenders, and the entire village held them in reverence. In this traditional conception of a ‘Panchayat’, women and lowers castes were not allowed membership. During the Indian National Movement, Mahatma Gandhi came to champion the cause of local self-government at the village level as he considered village as the true center of knowledge. He vision was,

Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or Panchayat having full powers... In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by its bottom...the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it (Gandhi 1946, 236).
However, Dr. B. R. Amedkar, the main architect of the constitution of India was not in favour of village Panchayats (Singh 1994, 818). Voicing his reservations on the issue of village Panchayats, Ambedkar in fact went on to argue in the Constituent Assembly that villages are nothing but “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism” (cited in Mathew 1994, 4). As a result of this strong opposition, the idea of village self-administration finally got incorporated in the Part IV of the Indian constitution that is known as the Directive Principles of State Policy. However, Part IV of the Constitution is only in the nature of directives to the government and not enforceable in a court of law. Hence it was not mandatory for the state governments to implement its provision and set up Panchayati Raj Institutions.

However, by the early 1950s there was a realization that without an active agency at the village level, real implementation of development programmes would not be possible (Ibid, 8). In view of increasing complaints of wasteful expenditure and the lack of proper implementation of various community development programmes, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed in 1957 to look into the functioning of these programmes and suggest measures for economy and efficiency in their implementation. The Committee was also mandated to assess the extent to which these programmes were successful in utilizing local leadership.

Arguing that there was a huge waste of expenditure as well as non-identification of local people with the community development programmes, Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in its report submitted in 1959 recommended democratic decentralization of the administrative machinery. The Committee proposed a three-tier structure of local self-government consisting of Gram Panchayats at the village level, Taluka Panchayat Samitis at the sub-district level, and Zilla Parishads at the district level. The Committee argued that the “Panchayati Raj system establishes a linkage between local leadership enjoying the confidence of local people and government, and

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1 Article 40, Part IV, of the Constitution says, “The State should take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”.
translates the policies of the government into action” (Report of the Committee on Plan Projects 1959, 5).

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee had further recommended that at the Panchayat Samiti level there should be two women as co-opted members besides the official 20 members. However, the system of co-option or nomination was considered undemocratic. It was argued that,

Not merely is it undemocratic but also smacks of a protectionism as if women are weaker and incapable of fighting the elections. In practice, the system of co-option and nomination had meant sheer patronage of the dominant political and social group and the women who got nominated had practically no information on Panchayats nor any experience in working for women and children. They were not expected either. The women’s representation became one of tokenism and proxy and ended as a total failure (Kaushik 1993).

This rejection of special measures for facilitating women’s presence is PRIs needs to be understood in the context of the larger political climate prevalent during the first few decades after independence. As has been discussed in the last chapter, there was deep commitment on part of the women’s movement in India during this period to the principle of equality between both sexes. Any special measure for women, therefore, was seen a regressive step and was challenged vehemently.

Following the Mehta Committee report, most states established PRIs in 1959. However, this system of Panchayati Raj gradually lost momentum under conditions of one-party rule. With the Janata government coming to power in 1977, there was again an attempt to assign a meaningful role to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Ashok Mehta Committee was set up for further investigation into local self-government. The Committee in its report (1978), which is regarded as a landmark in the history of Panchayati Raj, recommended greater decision-making power to the local councils. It re-emphasized the need for involving PRIs in local development planning and perceived their role not only in terms of decentralization of power but also in terms of strengthening the planning process at micro-level.
The Committee suggested structures with a development orientation at two levels - *districts Panchayats* and *mandal Panchayats* (covering 15,000 to 20,000 people) at the grassroots level. It recommended open participation of political parties in Panchayati Raj elections and constitutional protection to further extend decentralization of power. The Committee further advocated participation of Panchayati Raj Institutions in development activities in the area of forestry, agriculture, cottage industries, and welfare activities. The G.V.K. Rao Committee, appointed by the Planning Commission in 1985 to review the existing administrative arrangements for rural development, also strongly recommended the need to transfer power to democratic bodies at the local level.

While on one hand, the idea of democratic decentralization was gaining ground, on the other hand it was also gradually being asserted that women had a very significant role to play in local governance. It came to be recognized that for the success of development planning in the grassroots, women's concerns had to be incorporated into local self-governing institutions. The *Towards Equality* report of the *Committee of the Status of Women* (CSWI) 1974, although rejecting the proposal for introducing reservation of seats for women in the national and state legislative bodies (discussed in the last chapter), advocated the establishment of Statutory Women's Panchayats at the village level that were to run parallel to the Gram Panchayats (1974, 304). The report stated that the recommendation was "as a transitional measure to break the traditional attitudes in rural society which inhibit most women from articulating their problems or participating actively in the existing local bodies" (*Ibid*, 304-05).

Karnataka was the first state in India to introduce a policy of reservation for women in PRIs in 1985. It provided for 25 percent reservation for women at the district and mandal panchayat levels. The experiences in the states of Karnataka, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh, which followed some recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee and where reservations for women in PRIs existed much before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed in 1992, indicated that issues such drinking water, schools, appointment of teachers, closing of liquor shops and others
got incorporated into the Panchayat agenda (Sharma 1998, 2). This further intensified the notion that women’s presence in the PRIs would be a crucial step towards furthering local involvement in development planning.

However, a number of states were yet to set up systems of village self-governance. The government of India in 1986 set up the L.M. Singvi Committee to prepare a concept paper on the revitalization of PRIs. The Committee recommended that PRIs should be constitutionally recognized, protected, and preserved by the inclusion of a new chapter in the constitution. It also suggested a constitutional provision to ensure regular, free and fair elections for PRIs. Following this, the *National Perspective Plan for Women* (1988-2000) recommended the reservation of at least 30 percent of the total seats for women in local government institutions.

All these recommendations and observations finally culminated into the introduction of the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Parliament 1989 that sought to add a new chapter in the constitution consisting of 14 articles and a schedule to deal exclusively with Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Bill also made provisions for reserving 30 percent of seats for women in PRIs. The legislative deliberations that followed the introduction of this Bill have been documented in the last chapter of the present study while discussing the contours of the reservation debate in context of women’s political representation in the national legislature. The final culmination of the legislative deliberations has been the passing of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts on December 22, 1992 that deals with village (Panchayati Raj) and urban local self-governance respectively. The Acts constitutionally reserved 33 percent of all seats in Panchayats and Municipalities for women.

The scope of the present chapter, however, is limited to the study of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act that deals with the local self-governing institutions. The Act led to the enshrinement of a new chapter in the constitution (Part IX) that contains provisions regarding Panchayati Raj. As per the 73rd Amendment Act, the Panchayati Raj Institutions are divided into three tiers. At the base of this structure is...
the Gram Sabha that comprises of the entire body of the citizens in a village. It constitutes all the eligible voters within a Gram Panchayat area and serves as a principle mechanism for transparency and accountability. Above the Gram Sabha is the first level elected body – the Gram Panchayat (GP). It covers a population of around five thousand people and may include more than one village. At the district level is the Zilla Panchayat (ZP) that is the link with the state government. Talking about the theoretical assumptions of the Panchayati Raj system, C.N. Bhalerao puts forth,

Theoretically, Panchayati Raj is based on the assumption that by making the local community the author of change, it will accelerate rural economic development. Secondly, it is assumed that Panchayati Raj will promote individual freedom and social and economic equality; that, in short, it will usher in a new social order in the rural society. The third major assumption of the new system is that the transfer of power to the people and their representatives would enable the people to effectively participate in politics. Finally, it assumes the adequacy and efficiency of the existing development administration which had been set up to execute the community development and the national extension service programmes (1964, 804).

What is important, however, in the context of the present chapter to highlight is that the reservation of seats for women in the PRIs emerged as a ‘top-down’ measure. There were no grassroots mobilizations that demanded reservation of seats for women in village self-governance. Two key reasons may be identified behind this development. One, as it has been observed above, there was a growing recognition that success of development planning would only be possible with devolution of power to local structures. It was realized that decentralization would further enhance the legitimacy of the democratic system. In this context, it also came to be recognized that without involving women in the processes of decentralized governance, the larger development goals will not be achieved.

Two, the idea of decentralization and making women a part of local power structures was further facilitated by the international norms of good governance that the country sought to adhere to with the liberalization of the economy in the early 1990s. It is argued that the 73\textsuperscript{rd} and 74\textsuperscript{th} Constitutional Amendment Acts came at the same time
as India was launching a major programme of economic reforms (Pradhan 2002, 185). The international discourse on development during this period was talking about bringing women into the development paradigm in a big way. This had a big impact on linking development concerns with women’s political empowerment at the grassroots. For instance, the eighth five year plan (1992-1997) came to recognize that the “strategy for women’s development will be in the formation and strengthening of grass-roots level women’s groups which will articulate local women’s needs and play an important role in decentralized planning and implementation” (Mathew 1994, 9).

**Affirmative Action and its Implications for Women’s Empowerment:**

The aim of the present chapter is to study the real implications that the policy of reservation of seats for women in the PRIs, as enumerated through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, has in empowering women in political decision making. As has been outlined and rationalized earlier in this study, for this particular purpose, the present chapter will mostly draw instances from the cases of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women’s participation in the PRIs. The 73rd Amendment Act constitutionally provides for reserving one-third of seats in PRIs for women. It further provides that of the seats that are reserved for SCs and STs under the Act, one-third shall be for women belonging to SC or ST². Seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are in proportion to their number in the population of each region. In the country as a whole, SCs constitute 16 percent and STs constitute 6 percent of the population and about 22.5 percent of the total seats reserved for women are to be allotted to women belonging to these categories.

² Article 243D of Part IX of the Constitution, as inserted through the 73rd Amendment Act, states, “(1) Seats shall be reserved for— (a) Scheduled Castes; and (b) Scheduled Tribes..............
(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....”

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The reservation of one-third seats for women in PRIs marked a critical shift in grassroots politics in India. It was estimated that with the implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act by all states, there would be approximately 7.95 lakh women in the PRIs at the village, block and the district level. The following table (Table 5.1) depicts the potential estimated for women empowerment under the Panchayati Raj act:

**Table 5.1**  
**Potential Estimated for Women Empowerment under the Panchayati Raj Act**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Panchayats</th>
<th>2.25 lakh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Members</td>
<td>22.50 lakh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3(^{rd}) Women Members</td>
<td>7.5 lakh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block level administration</td>
<td>5000 unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 persons in each unit</td>
<td>1.25 lakh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3(^{rd}) women members</td>
<td>40000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Administration</td>
<td>465 unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 persons in each unit</td>
<td>13950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3(^{rd}) women members</td>
<td>4000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of women in Panchayati Raj</td>
<td>7.95 lakh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3(^{rd}) chairwomen at all levels</td>
<td>76,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Rai 1993, 9)

However, going far beyond this projected expectation, the Annual Report (2009-2010) of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, reveals that out of the total 28 lakh elected representatives of the PRIs, around 10 lakh are estimated to be women *(Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2010, 36)*. In fact, the average of women’s representation in Panchayats across the country is 36.94 percent (Ibid). However, a few States have gone beyond the mandated 33 percent and provided for more
reservation for women. For instance, states like Kerala, Tripura, and Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have gone in for reserving 50 percent seats for women in PRIs. In fact, in a significant decision, the Union Cabinet in August 2009 approved an amendment to the Article 243D of the Constitution to enhance reservation of seats for women in all tiers of PRIs in all states to 50 percent to be filled by direct elections. A Bill to this effect is to be soon introduced in the Parliament.

A critical overview of the existing literature (mostly empirical) on the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions over the past one-decade, and the role played by women therein reveal two contrasting trends. One trend shows that women in the PRIs are mere proxies who act at the instance of their husbands or other male members of the family. In case of SC and ST women societal restrictions, due to the prevalence of the ‘purity-pollution’ concept, act as a further deterrent to political representation. However, the second trend indicates that these women are ‘first generation learners’ who have been gradually becoming more and more aware of their political rights and many have slowly started to make a difference in grassroots politics. In this context, reservation of seats for women is argued to be a “quantum leap in women’s political power” (Jaquette 1997, 34). The present chapter thus undertakes a preliminary attempt at outlining the nature of these contradictory processes.

**Women as ‘rubber stamps’/ ‘proxies’:**

One of the most vehement critiques in the context of women’s entry into the PRIs as a result of reservation is that women thus elected do not have any real decision making power. Number of obstacles may be identified that prevent women’s numerical strength in the PRIs to lead to qualitative changes in their role as decision makers. The most crucial obstacle in the way of real political empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj occurs at the stage of the filing of the nomination for candidature itself.

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3 Although ST women do not face the same challenge of purity and pollution like the SCs, they have always been perceived as backward or primitive by the so-called mainstream population in India.
Most women file their candidature for elections to PRIs not out of their own will, but due to the pressure of husbands, sons or other male member of the family or the village or due to the pressure of some political party. This phenomenon is even more apparent in case of women belonging to SC or ST. In order to fulfill the reserved quota, the political workers have to deploy various strategies to convince the women and one of the most adopted strategies is to influence the women through the family members. Zenab Banu argues that it is extremely difficult to make tribal women stand for Panchayat elections as they consider Panchayats as “bad and full of quarrels” (2001, 117).

It is further argued that Panchayat elections have come to be dominated by the prevalence of corrupt practices. A study to assess the degree and nature of exclusion and inclusion within PRIs in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh reveals that offering bribes in the form of liquor or cash have become common practices in Panchayat elections (Alsop et al. 2001, 17). This further becomes responsible for making the participation of women in the Panchayat process a mere tokenism since due to the constraints of village societal norms, indulgence in such practices fall strictly within the male domain.

One of the major causes of such corruption is argued to be the fact that the salaries paid to PRI-members are extremely low. The remuneration varies from 10 rupees (INR) per sitting to 50 rupees per sitting. The sarpanch can get upto 100 rupees. Hence in case of a woman, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, who work outside their house as wage laborers in order to contribute to the household income, if the choice is between attending a Panchayat meeting and earning their daily wage, they most certainly would opt for the latter. This impedes their participation in the decision making deliberations in the PRIs.

The prevalence of corrupt practices coupled with the perception that the public sphere is male domain, leads to a situation where only the wives or daughters of dominant male leaders get elected to PRIs. To cite an example, in one election, in Salumber
Panchayat Samiti of Udaipur district, wives of the three PRI members – Sarpanch (President), Upa-sarpanch (Deputy President), and ward Panch got elected (Banu 2001, 124). In fact, in the context of tribal women’s representation in the PRIs, it is argued that even in the case of election expenditure, the management of it is left in the hands of the husband or other male members of the family, thus leaving no power in the hands of the woman (Ibid, 123).

The prevalence of violence that has come to be associated with the PRI elections in many states also impedes the free and fair participation of women in the processes of village self-governance. For instance, Ms Leelavathy from Villapuram, Tamil Nadu, was murdered in broad daylight by armed men since she was working towards getting permanent water supply to Villapuram as part of her election campaign and it ran contrary to the interests of the mafia henchmen who sold drinking water to the people (Sivaraman 1997). Most such violence seems to have been resulting from the existence of ‘caste war’ (Panchayati Raj Update 2001) where people belonging to lower castes are tortured and murdered for daring to stand against upper caste candidates.

It must be pointed out that the problem of violence towards SC/ST women is very extensive. A measure of the degree of violence against lower caste women can be seen in the following statement of the All India Dalit Adhikar Manch (All India Dalit Rights Forum):

On an average 27,000 incidents of serious atrocities and human rights violations are registered under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities Act), annually. Despite the lack of disaggregated data on the extent of violence on Dalit women, there is no doubt that women are affected disproportionately in

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4 The caste system is a hierarchy of endogamous groups that individuals enter only by birth. A caste differs from a clan or sib in being endogamous and recognizing various ranks. It differs from a class in its strict enforcement of permanent endogamy within caste groups” (Olcott 1944, 648).

5 As per the caste system prevalent in the Hindu society in India, there are four castes – the Brahmins (priestly caste), the Kshatriyas (warrior caste), the Vaishyas (traders) and the Shudras (menial task workers). Dalits (formerly known as the untouchables) fall outside these four castes and are considered below all and polluting.

6 Dalit (the oppressed) is a term for India’s untouchables or outcastes.
these incidents. A micro study of 124 cases by the Centre for Dalit Rights of atrocities in 5 districts of Rajasthan between October 2004 and January 2006 showed that 55 of these cases were directly inflicted on Dalit women and girl children. They ranged from rape, gang rape, rape of minor girls, murder and attempt to murder, physical assault, battering and acid attacks. Another 28 women were affected along with their families through land related violence, social boycott, murder of husbands and sons. It is clear that Dalit women are the prime victims in violence against Dalit communities (2007, 2).

Thus due to the presence of this wide scale violence, the free and fair participation and performance of women belonging to lower caste in the Panchayati Raj Institutions become very difficult. There have, for instance, been reports from four districts of Madhya Pradesh – Raigarh, Chattarpur, Raisen and East Nimar – of a lady Sarpanch being stripped naked, another lady sarpanch being gang raped, an upa-sarpanch (deputy president) being tortured and a dalit panchayat member being beaten up (Mathew 2002, 12). These cases reflect that although women have entered the PRIs as elected representatives, they have, in reality, been subjected to violence manifesting from dominant caste and male influence.

In another shameful instance, a tribal woman sarpanch was stripped naked while unfurling the national flag on 15th August 1998 (Independence Day) in a district in Rajasthan. In yet another case a tribal woman sarpanch in Madhya Pradesh was stripped naked in a Gram Sabha meeting because she was not consulting the leader of the dominant caste (Ibid, 10). Thus increasing crimes against women, particularly in cases of SCs and STs, have made free and fair participation of women in PRIs extremely complex. Moreover, in places that suffer from armed conflicts, booth capturing and bloodshed is common in Panchayat elections thus marring the participation of women (ISST 2005).

Further, prevalent societal restrictions require that women do not venture into public spaces alone. The traditional patriarchal concept of women’s real place being within the four walls of the house is strongly prevalent in rural India. Due to the traditional household role assigned to women, the dominant belief is that if women go out of the four walls of the house to participate in local politics then it would mean that the men
would need to attend to the household work. There is, thus, an “unwillingness to alter the division of labour at home and apprehension that the entry of women into the public domain would mean passing on household chores to males” (Lieten 1996, 25).

PRIs are mainly regarded as political entities that are associated with power; and power is traditionally a masculine concept, women are not associated with it. In most cases, the large scale presence of women in the hitherto male dominated local politics was viewed as a challenge to the authority of men. Men discourage strong women contenders in order to retain their hold over core public space (Sharma 1998, 37). For instance, Ratanprabha Sahebrao Chive, a sarpanch of Ghera Purandar Gram Panchayat, located about 50 km from Pune, as soon as she assumed office, was physically assaulted by one of her political rival, irked at being defeated by a woman (Thakkar & Gawankar 1997, 95).

Due to the presence of strict social restrictions on the mobility of women, women who mix around openly with their male counterparts in political meetings are looked down upon as women of dubious character. Sometimes it also so happens that a number of villages come under one Gram Panchayat, in such cases representation and participation of women become difficult as women have much less mobility than men (Vyasulu & Vyasulu 1999, 12). Therefore, although women can freely attend meetings that are held inside the Panchayat office, the presence of women in Gram Sabha meetings is meager as such meetings are mostly held in open spaces and are mainly attended by males.

It is also the case in many villages that the daughter-in-laws (bahu) of the house who generally belong to a different village are hardly allowed to have social intercourse with men of her husband’s village. To quote a young ward member from Gania block, Orissa:

7 Maya (a member of Vadal Gram Panchayat, Maharashtra) along with her colleague from another village had gone to attend a women’s organization program that was held in the hall of a hotel. On being spotted there, a vulgar rumor was spread in her village that these two women went to hotel rooms and hence were of stained character. There were accused of misconduct and were treated as outcastes in their village and even the other women in the village stopped talking to them (Women’s Environment and Development Organization 2007).
I have no problem to speak with men in the [Panchayat] meetings. They do not belong to my village. I do speak to them like I do speak to the women. Outside the panchayat office I do not speak to the men. After the meeting I go home immediately and stay in the house...I do not go the gram sabha. My husband attends the gram sabha. I am a bahu (daughter-in-law) of the village” (cited in Hust 2002, 11).

Another very important factor for the election of women is also age. The elder women have a more liberated position in the village and can therefore freely intermingle socially with men. Hence they are the preferred candidates to enter PRIs. However, as instances from villages in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh show, it is the young women who are educated and hence could fare better if given a chance to enter the PRIs (Alsop et. al/2001, 17). Illustrating this argument further, one may cite here E.K. Santha’s study (1999) where political participation of women in Panchayats of three states Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu is explored and examined. In this study, Santha brings out the age of the elected women representatives of the Panchayats in the three states (Table 5.2). Based on this table, one can draw critical understandings on the way political participation and representation of women gets unfolded in the ground level.

Table 5.2
Age of Women Panchayat Members (Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Haryana</th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>Tamil Nadu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-70</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reply*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Women who did not reply were old and did not remember their age.

Source: (Santha 1999, 40).

The data in this table clearly depicts that a majority of the elected women in Haryana are 40 years and above, whereas in Kerala and Tamil Nadu it’s the other way round;
i.e., most elected women are less than 40 years of age. Santha argues that the possible reason for this occurrence could be the prevalent mind set in Haryana that believes that young women should not be exposed to politics or any kind of public life while it is alright for the older women to enter the Panchayats (1999, 40). Santha further points out that in Haryana the system of nominations to the Panchayats instead of elections is still in vogue in many of the villages, whereby the usual practice is that a meeting of the elders of the village (male members only) decide the candidature of the women to the PRIs (Ibid).

Another major impediment in women’s participation in PRIs is the ‘two-child norm’ that has been made a criterion for contesting elections in many states like Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. Rural India has a high fertility rate and children are borne early (Mathew 2002). Hence it becomes extremely difficult for women to enter the PRIs if restrictions like ‘two-child norm’ are imposed. Moreover, even when they enter the PRIs as elected representatives, they are mostly confined to household responsibilities letting the male members of her family (mostly husband) run the office for her.

In order to illustrate how women’s role in the PRIs are being perceived by the dominant male/upper caste discourse, one may cite the statement made by a prominent young male politician in Bhilwara, Rajasthan, where he claimed that, “development has been in a set back by at least a decade in villages where a female has been sarpanch for the last five years” (Alsop et. al 2001, 28). Thus due to the presence of all these various impediments, it has been observed that elected women representatives and sarpanches in many a cases would not reply to the question raised in the Panchayat meetings directly and their husbands or sons would speak on their behalf (Times of India 1996, The Telegraph 1998).

For instance, in Etah district of Central West Uttar Pradesh, it was observed that whenever a woman pradhan was called by the administration for a meeting, her husband would go on her behalf. She did not go out of her house for any single
meeting. In Azamgarh, a woman pradhan was given the impression that her husband was actually the pradhan and her job was merely to sign papers (The Telegraph 1998, 6). As a result, a new class of sarpanch patis has emerged who manage the affairs of the Panchayat on behalf of their wives (Mathew 2002; Hust 2002, Palanithurai 2001; Vyasulu & Vyasulu 1999; and Leiten 1996).

A crucial study carried out with 60 Gram Panchayat members who had undergone a free phased training in Tumkar district, Karnataka, revealed that one-third of the members were still functioning as proxy candidates while the actual control remained with either their husbands or sons. Another one-third, who did not face such constraints at home, was faced with gender subordinations within the Gram Panchayats. Only the remaining one-third was found to be effectively functioning as members and they have also gained some amount of power and respect in the family (Sinha 2001, 134). A World Bank study on exclusion and inclusion within PRIs in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh reveal that 42 percent of men are highly active as compared to only 11 percent of women, and 52 percent of women fell within the least active political category as compared to 30 percent of men (Alsop et al 2001, 15).

There have also been cases of many women members being duped or pressurized into signing papers and then charged with accounts of corruption. This, in turn, has led to a number of no confidence motions being passed against many women sarpanches (Mayaram 1999, 10). Women sarpanches also often are sidelined by the male members of the Panchayat as their opinion is not counted to be worthwhile. A classic case is that of Jiyaben, the sarpanch of Tadkuva village in Gujrat. Her male predecessor refused to hand over the charges to her and argued that her election was as per the regulations of the government and it did not, in any way, alter his position as the head of the village. The meetings of the Panchayats were called by him even after his tenure was over the new female sarpanch was expected to sign the required papers at his instance.
Thus it may be argued that even though women’s numerical presence is guaranteed in the PRIs through affirmative action, it does not necessarily get translated into qualitative participation in the decision making process. In case of a woman belonging to Scheduled Caste, such restrictions become further binding since due to the purity and pollution concept where both upper caste female and male members refuse to intermingle with them. It is argued that lower caste representatives do not get much cooperation from the higher castes and women members would not dare speak in front of the high caste representatives (Mathew 2002; Mathew and Nayak 1996). In a case from Uttar Pradesh, for instance, it has been reported that an elected woman member of the PRI belonging to the lower caste was not allowed to sit inside the Panchayat office along with the upper caste members and she had no freedom of expression. In Panchayat meetings in Rajasthan, lower caste women members sit veiled and in a corner without contributing to the proceedings (Alsop et. al 2001, 18).

While in case of ascribed status, the lower caste women get discriminated against, in case of social groups, it is the scheduled tribes who become mere ‘rubber stamps’ in the decision making process of the Panchayat. It is important to point out here that while participation of women in PRI activities is much lower than that of men, ST women’s participation levels are on an average 6.5 percent lower (Ibid 16). In her study of tribal women in PRIs in MP, Abha Chuahan revealed that nearly 63 percent did not raise any issue in the Panchayat of their own accord and the few who did mainly confined their concerns to health, women, child welfare, and drinking water.

Moreover, while 62 percent attended the meetings, 48 percent did not attend the meetings at all or did attend at times. Those who did not attend the meetings, 50 percent of them said that their husbands were managing their affairs for them (2003, 22). Tribal women in Dungarpur district in Madhya Pradesh revealed that they were satisfied working in a women’s savings group, as there were many benefits from it. They claimed, “...There is no work for the individual in the panchayat, and especially women. What will we gain from participating there? Whether we go or not, does not make a difference” (Alsop et. al 2001, 26).
Thus it may be observed that the women in the PRIs, particularly those belonging to SC and ST categories have marginal power in the decision making process. If not the husbands, they are dependent on the other male members of the family, villagers, male sarpanches, political parties or government officials (Chuahan 2003, 24). Hence it may be argued that despite taking recourse to affirmative action, there is little change in the customary patterns of exclusion in the PRIs. There are number of barriers to women’s entry to PRIs that are related to informal norms and institutional realities.

As a consequence, it leads to victimization of those women who venture into the foray of political decision-making in the grassroots. One may cite here the case of Gangamma Jayakar, a ST candidate (studied up to Class IV), who was made the Gram Panchayat President following the elections in 1993 in Haleuru Gram Panchayat, Malgudi, Karnataka, as the seat was reserved for a ST woman candidate. While the other members of the Gram Panchayat had no qualms in a ST woman becoming an ‘ordinary’ member of the Gram Panchayat, they refused to serve under a ST woman President and demanded her resignation.

When she refused to comply with their requests, the others stopped cooperating with her. She later had to approach the High Court who ruled in her favour. However, the others still did not cooperate and since the quorum for holding a meeting is the presence of 3 members, she held meeting with the help of two other SC members and had to continue like that throughout her tenure. Jayakar feels that she could have initiated a lot of developmental work if she got the cooperation of the others (Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 1999). Thus due to the strong prevalence of caste and gender based segregation, the very effectiveness of women’s political representation in PRIs through affirmative action comes into question.
Moreover, due to the prevalence and dominance of a strong upper caste male discourse\(^8\), women in Panchayats find it difficult to raise issues that would run contrary to that discourse. For instance, in Gania block in Orissa, although a young and energetic female sarpanch wanted to tackle the issue of alcoholism in the area she could do nothing about it as the elite class male of the village who would be instrumental in deciding her re-election were the liquor consumers. Antagonizing them would make her lose her political support (Hust 2002, 16). Thus although the women members of the PRIs want to take up causes that would facilitate the development of the village in ways that runs opposite to the dominant upper caste male hegemony, they are left with little choice but to abandon such projects in the fear of a backlash.

Moreover, political parties also play a crucially significant role in directing the affairs of the Panchayat. Winning an election requires political party backing. Due to this the elected candidates (men/women) remain loyal to the party line. Since political parties are mostly controlled by the non-tribal lobby, tribal women find it extremely difficult to make their voices heard or had become mere ‘rubber stamps’ to the dictates of the party. George and Krishnan (2008) give the instance that the first ever tribal woman Block Panchayat President in Attappady block in Palakkad district of Kerala could hardly do any work due to the boundaries laid by the political party which she represented.

Here we can also look at the case of an SC district Panchayat member of Vaikom, Kottayam, Kerala. She had no prior experience in politics, although her husband was an active member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). In the course of a study conducted (Chathukulam & John 2000, 80) she revealed that she did not have an independent say in the affairs of the Panchayat and was only a pawn in the political game that was being played out. She did not have a choice, for instance, in choosing

\(^8\) A discourse that toes the line of the male upper caste members of the village, thus leaving the women and specially the lower caste and tribal women out of the decision making considerations.
beneficiaries for the various welfare programmes that were being initiated through the Panchayat.

For instance, if she made any efforts at selecting beneficiaries on her own, it was considered as constituting in-disciplined conduct by the party. To cite an example, in the case of selection for a housing scheme, she wanted to select a widowed SC woman suffering from paralysis, but the party refused to consider this proposal as no one in that woman’s family was loyal to the party and instead a local committee member of the CPI (M) was identified as beneficiary (Ibid). Thus as the elected women representative she had no control over the crucial decisions that were being taken regarding the augmentation of funds through the Panchayats.

The ability to take up issue pertaining to gender sensitive discourse is also limited due to the resource restrictions, as money have to be spent as per the dictates of the government schemes and there is very little flexibility. Issues such as violence against women, female feticide and infanticide, women health, livelihoods etc are rarely taken up (ISST 2005). A study conducted on the empowerment of women Panchayat members in Vaikom, Kottayam, Kerala, revealed that most elected women members were skeptical of contesting subsequent elections on their own, the reason being the domination exercised by the political parties and put forth that they would prefer a less partisan style of politics (Chathukulam & John 2000, 95).

It is, therefore, argued that reaching a ‘critical mass’ in elected positions is not enough and “it is only when women constitute a ‘critical mass’ within the party that they will be able to influence the style and course of politics significantly” (Ibid 96). Further, if one looks at how the benefits coming out of PRIs are being shared, it is observed that female-headed households are mostly excluded from these benefits (Alsop et. al 2001, 19). Such discrimination turns out to be even more blatant towards women headed households of the lowers castes. In an interview, a widow from a SC household in Ajmer district, Rajasthan revealed,
My husband died about 15 years ago. I have two young sons and a daughter. I and my son go out for labor work early every morning and return late in the evening. I have no idea of what happens in the panchayat and how they take decisions. I have approached the ward panch several times for a loan, but nothing has happened. We have nobody to tell is the right way. Had my husband been alive he would have mixed with the other men and found out (Ibid, 19).

Thus an overview of the women’s real role as elected members of the PRIs as opposed to the rhetoric of affirmative action ensuring political empowerment of women, reveal that there is a serious gap between the mandate of affirmative action and its manifestations on ground. This also brings to question whether institutional changes that are being imposed from top are a viable mechanism to deal with deep seated structural inequities. However before answering this question in the negative, one needs to look at the other trend that emerges from the study of women’s participation and representation in PRIs, that is, these women as ‘first generation learners’ who have been working towards creating a niche for themselves despite the presence of crucial obstacles.

**Women as ‘First Generation Learners’:**

The present chapter has so far explored how the prevalence of corrupt practices, violence, societal cleavages based on caste/class considerations, clubbed with the dominant male discourse in rural Indian society have created a situation where women in political decision making have been reduced to mere ‘proxies’ thereby impeding the mission of empowering women politically through affirmative action. However, on the other hand, there are several cases of positive changes brought about by the implementation of the quota system where women, including those belonging to Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, have been observed to bring about socio-economic and political changes in village governance as elected members of the PRIs. It is argued that the women members in the PRIs today are ‘first generation learners’ who gradually are learning the workings of politics.

In this context, it is also extremely important to note that while talking about the viability of affirmative action as a top down mechanism, one has to keep it mind that
without the system of reservation women would have had no role to play in grassroots politics in India. Before adopting a policy of reservation of seats for women in the PRIs, women’s presence in village self-governance was extremely marginal. The following table (Table 5.3) that compares the representation of women in Gram Panchayats (GPs) of the Panchayati Raj Institutions before 1985 and after 1995 clearly depicts the sea change that was ushered in regarding women’s representation in PRIs following the implementation of the policy of reservation.

**Table 5.3**

**Women’s Participation in PRIs (Before 1985 and After 1995)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Overall percent in GPs 1985</th>
<th>Overall percent in GPs 1995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gujrat</td>
<td>2 women</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>1 woman</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>1-2 women</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>2 women</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>1 woman</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>2 women</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>2 women</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>2 women</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>0 women</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Panchayati Raj Development Report, 1995

The table clearly brings forth that prior to the implementation of the policy of reservation following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act; women’s representation in the PRIs was deplorable. Due to their numerical weakness, the role that women played in political decision making in the grassroots was miniscule or in most cases was in the negative. However, with the implementation of affirmative action through the reservation of 33 percent of the PRI seats for women, one may observe a sharp rise in women’s representation. In fact, today women constitute
almost 37 percent of all those elected to the PRIs and are rising to as high a level as 55 percent in some states such as Bihar (Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2009-10, 36).

As statistics show, 95 percent of elected women representatives in the PRIs have come to claim that they would never come to acquire positions in Panchayats, if there were no provision of reserving seats for them (CWDS 1999). Talking in the context of the election of a tribal woman sarpanch in Attappady Block Panchayat, Palakkad district, Kerala, George and Krishnan (2008) argue that without a system of reservation being in place this would not have been possible. In a case study of role of women in Panchayati Raj institutions in Uttar Pradesh, Priti Sharma observed that of all the elected women members of the Panchayat who were interviewed, 97 per cent had come through the reserved constituencies (2005, 247).

Highlighting the non-election of women to PRIs in the general seats in the state of Orissa, Hust (2002) suggest that there could be two explanations for this phenomenon: one, women failed to successfully compete with men in the non-reserved constituencies; or two, women did not compete at all from general non-reserves seats. Men are not willing to let women contest from a general seat and lose their own chance of being in the decision making position. Hence, reservation has at least succeeded in bringing the womenfolk in rural India into the political forum. Hust’s study shows that at least 25 percent of the elected women could now imagine standing against a man in future (2002, 7).

Further, although there are cases that have depicted that that women in PRIs have been reduced to mere ‘rubber stamps’ or ‘proxies’ as enumerated in the above section of this chapter, there are, however, many instances of women members of the Panchayat taking a keen interest and playing a significant role in the workings of grassroots politics. For instance, Jesumary, the President of the Michalepattinam Gram Panchayat in Mudukulanthoor Block of the Rammathapuram district in Tamil Nadu, was conferred with the Seva Ratna as the best performing Panchayat president by the Tamil Nadu Gram Panchayat Leaders Association (Uma Prachar 2006, 2).
Fatima Bi of Kalve village in Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh received the UNDP award for the Asia Pacific region for her work in the area of poverty alleviation. In Madhya Pradesh, there is the case of a proactive woman sarpanch who had done remarkable work in the area of maternity and infant care; another woman sarpanch was responsible for checking the high rate of school drop outs in her village and also worked for constructing more class room for girl students (Ravi et. al 2004). Women Panchayat members in Himachal have been successful in getting all marriages and births registered (Institute of Social Studies Trust 2005, 33).

A number of studies conducted in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh list the cases of various women who used their position in the PRIs to engage in developmental work in their respective localities and bring in positive changes (Ravi et. al 2004). Even tribal women are gradually getting integrated into the village organizations (Chauhan 2003; IFAD 2007). In fact, it is revealed that as against the prevalent notions, the PRIs in the tribal Madhya Pradesh comprised of young and educated women (Chauhan 2003, 18). The study further reveals that 70 percent of women in PRIs in tribal MP are below 49 years of age and 30 percent are educated (Ibid). Moreover there are nearly another 30 percent who call themselves 'literates' i.e., they can sign their names (Ibid).

All Women Panchayats have also come up in number of states. In 1995, there were 13 All Women Panchayats in Andhra Pradesh and 9 in Maharashtra (Panchayati Raj Development Report 1996, 29). In Madhya Pradesh there are nine such villages that have All Women Panchayats (Banu 2004). There are few villages in West Bengal, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Haryana and others, which have all women Panchayats. All women Panchayats in Kultikri in West Bengal took up several income augmenting schemes such as waste land development, leasing of small ponds for aqua culture, organization of loan repayment, fairs, distribution of pattas, construction of roads and tubewells, as utilized under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana. The most significant achievement of this All Women Panchayat was that it has been successful in the fulfillment of 100 per cent literacy in the area. The Panchayat held regular meetings.
and was successful in building up a strong social and economic power structure in the area. In fact, due to such achievements, the Panchayat was touted as the being one of the best Panchayats in the Midnapur area (Jain 1996).

Moreover, dismantling the argument that claimed majority of the women representatives in the PRIs to be drawn from the rural elite (barring the seats that are reserved for SCs/STs), Hust in her study brings out that since families belonging to the higher strata in the villages are not yet ready to introduce their womenfolk to the public space, it is women belonging to the lower castes or lower class who get entry to the PRIs (2002, 8). In Kotgal Gram Panchayat of Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra, for the first time 11 candidates from the lower castes won the elections in 2002 (WEDO 2007). A study conducted by Centre for Women’s Development Studies (1999) also revealed that a large number of women from the poor families and women having no political connections have found their way to the PRIs through reservation.

**Normative Implications: Affirmative Action as an ‘Enabling’ Condition:**

In a country like India, where society is “highly gender-segregated”, quotas for women have “an additional relevance” (Hust 2002, 17). It is possible for womenfolk in a village to approach the female members of the PRIs with their grievances. Women members of the Panchayats very often receive petitions from other village women on issues such as family disputes, disputes over land, employment and housing. For instance, a study in West Bengal villages reveal that women in the villages where the PRIs are headed by a female sarpanch have recorded a rise from 7 percent to 10 percent in women’s participation in Panchayat meetings (Ridge 2010).

Based on her study in the three northern Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, Nirmala Buch (2000) gives an estimation of the efforts made by women representatives in the PRIs to solve the problems that are presented to them (Table 5.4).
Table 5.4
Efforts Made to Solve the Problems Presented (Percentage of Women Representatives in PRIs in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chairpersons (CP)</th>
<th>Members (M)</th>
<th>CP+M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petitions/Problems received</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Buch 2000, 17).

The table is a crucial indicator of the fact that women representatives make significant efforts towards solving the problems that are referred to them. It is also significant to note here that prior to their foray into the realm of decision making through the PRIs, these women had almost no role to play in finding solutions to the village governance issues. Although, they may not be able to find solution all such problems, it is argued that they are now “exposed to a whole new world of public service” (Baviskar 2005, 340). Moreover, women have now come to value their newfound freedom to move out of the four walls of the house and are finding a space for themselves in the public realm.

Another “ameliorating effect” that women in the PRIs have on village governance, according to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj annual report (2007-2008), is the “preparation of gender sensitive budgets” (2008, 23). It is further argued that women in PRIs are more likely than men to invest in services and facilities that are crucial for women in the village. A study conducted in 161 villages in West Bengal found that more women (31 percent) than men (17 percent) raised issues concerning drinking water in the Panchayat meetings (Ridge 2010). Another study, conducted by Esther Duflo, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, revealed that the PRIs that were led by women were more proactive in providing publics services, from building better roads to digging wells for convenient water supply (Ibid).
Further, there is a now strong association between elected women representatives in the PRIs and Self-Help-Groups (SHGs) and it is argued that “their combined effort has considerably enhanced self-confidence and self-worth of women” (Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2008, 23). There is thus a higher visibility of women through their representation and participation in the PRI activities, and they are increasingly recognizing their self-worth and gaining respect for their work. For instance, in case of Orissa, 40 percent of female incumbents perceived that their status has been elevated in the family as well as in the village community with their election into the PRIs (Hust, 2002, 16). Shabhati of Vitner village, Maharashtra, is much more confident following her election to the Panchayat as her husband had stopped battering her and her status in the family and the village had also improved (Baviskar 2005, 340). The following statement of one of the OBC (Other Backward Classes) ward members in Balipatna (Orissa) further illustrates this argument:

Before my election I […] never went out or mixed with people. But now I am more confident and mix with others. When I met our sarpanch the first time [a very respected senior Brahmin] I was very nervous, but after the meeting I was very happy. Also the other ward members helped me to overcome my nervousness and it helped that there were also other women, not just me. I also adjusted slowly to sit together with men, and now I can also speak to men in the village. Before I could not talk to them, but now I think that they do respect me (Ibid).

Bringing forth the positive implications of affirmative action in case of tribal women, Chauhan (2003) also argues that owing to their election to the PRIs and their becoming a part of village self-governance, there is a positive change that has come about in the image and status of tribal women and the women feel that their respect in the eyes of their family and community has increased. Thus it is observed that participation in the affairs of the PRIs have enabled elected women representatives to have a better understanding of the workings of subnational politics. While reservation got the women into the PRIs as elected officials, they soon realized that “women members have to prove that they can work equally well as male members (Vidya 1997, 141).

Thus the PRIs have now become the political training ground for women, allowing them to assume leadership roles and to break the shackles that hitherto confined them
only to household responsibilities, thereby breaking the strict private/public divide existing in the society. This has also resulted in a change in the attitude of the women elected representatives of the PRIs regarding certain crucial issues that affect their lives or lives of the larger community. Women in the PRIs today display a tremendous increase in self-confidence, a change in their life-style, more awareness regarding critical issues such as education, marriage of children, dowry and others, and express an increased concern towards the overall development of the village. Illustrating this argument, in her study of the three northern Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, Buch (2000) gives an understanding and estimation of this change in attitude in women elected representatives of the PRIs (Table V).

| Table 5.5 |
| Change in Attitudes and Practices (Percentage of Women Representatives in PRIs) |
| Nature of change reported/perceived by women representatives |  |
| Positive Change |  |
| a) In attitude | 48.4 |
| b) In Practice | 58.6 |
| Change in |  |
| a) Children’s education | 27.3 |
| b) Children’s Marriage Age | 10.2 |
| c) Dowry | 8.3 |
| d) Others | 12.8 |
| Not observing Ghughat (wearing a veil) after coming to Panchayat although observing earlier | 7.4 |

Source: (Buch 2000, 21).

The above table clearly brings forth that there has been a positive change in attitude in more than 48 percent women due to their participation and representation in PRIs. Maximum change in attitude was seen in terms of children’s education. This is an indication of the fact that women who are now participating in the village governance are becoming more aware of the importance of education and want their children to
reap the benefits of good education. It is also evident from this table that women also have displayed a positive change in regards to the prevalent appalling social practices like dowry. Since women play a very significant role in rituals associated with marriage, a stance taken by women members of the PRIs against dowry practices will have deep impact in the functioning of such societal norms.

There, in fact, have also been number of instances to prove that there is a growing awareness amongst the women that they themselves have the power to change their own lives. To site an instance, forty teams of women in Sonbhadra (Uttar Pradesh) area carried out systematic campaigns covering ten villages each to explain the salient features of the 73rd Amendment and the place accorded in it to women. Women who took part in these campaigns were very clear on their priorities. Water was in the top of the priority list with nearly 90 percent women expressing the need for clean water for fields, for their cattle and for their families, and they were also strongly determined to prevent the inflow of liquor into the area (Jain 1996, 11). Compiling the success stories of various women leaders of the Panchayats, Shubhanda Chaukar states,

I salute one unique quality of these women active in rural politics. They have a mountain of adversities piled against them. They faced a number of problems in the beginning like incomplete knowledge, coping with the hearth and work, unceasing criticism by the villagers, opposition and non-cooperation by the men old at the game of politics, passive support of other women in the village, they bore it all. Their efficiency and skill taking charge of the situation with poise and turning it into a positive situation is admirable (2009, 9).

However, it needs to be emphasized here that although changes are happening in terms of attitude and practices, they are occurring gradually. It may also be observed that villages that are socio-economically more advanced are ones where women have more exposure to information and education. For instance, Hust, in her study in Orissa, observed that women belonging to more forward blocks like Baltipana gained more than their colleagues in less forward blocks like Gania (2002, 17). There, therefore, is a need to take various proactive measures if political empowerment in
subnational governance is to be translated into real empowerment and not mere lip
service is paid to the cause of women’s empowerment through affirmative action.

It needs to be acknowledged that for actualizing real political empowerment of
women, quotas cannot be disassociated from the larger structural elements of social
relations. R.C. Agarwal documents eight causes that hinder the participation of
women in PRIs: a) criminalization of politics; b) lack of safety and security; c) lack of
incentives; d) illiteracy, ignorance and lack of training; e) lack of awareness about
powers and duties; f) lack of adequate leadership quality; g) lack of adequate powers
to the Panchayati Raj Institutions; and h) Economic backwardness in rural areas
(2005, 71). To accord qualitative political representation to women along with their
quantitative presence in political decision making, these fundamental obstacles need
to be dealt with.

Of all these various obstacles that come in the free and fair participation of women in
political decision making at the Pachayati Raj Institutions, the one that requires urgent
attention and if remedied could have the most far reaching implication is education.
Lack of access to education is cited as the most crucial impediment to women’s
playing an active role in the PRIs. It is argued that elected women representatives of
the PRIs who are educated and have access to information have often been more
successful in bridging “social differences associated with gender” (Alsop et. al 2001,
28). Moreover, those women who “have access to a larger number of information
sources” take part in Panchayat functionings “to a much larger extent than other
women who derive information from fewer sources (Ibid).

To further illustrate this argument, the case of Savita Rathi, sarpanch, Gopalpura gram
panchayat, Jaipur, Rajasthan, may be cited, who is an LLB (Bachelor of Laws).
Education has helped her to get an intricate understanding of the working of the
system. She has been able to handle the administrative officers, the local press and the
MLAs. She has been successful in renovating the infrastructure of the Panchayat in
the area. A woman with a vision she has drafted and computerized a 2005-25 master
plan for the development of her area that includes phased proposals, census figures, maps and such considerations as the ideal population density for the village centre (Karnard 2007).

Here we may also cite the case of a Dalit woman sarpanch of Bhabulgaon village in Akola, who proved to be catalyst for development in her village. Documenting her role as a sarpanch it is argued that:

As soon as she took charge as Sarpanch, the first thing she did was to take up issues in those wards where the opposition members were also elected. Roads were concretized and the sewage lines were also constructed. With the resources from the MLA’s fund of Shri Tukaram Borkar, she built an auditorium. Sixty toilets were built from the Panchayat Samiti’s account. Under the Social Welfare Scheme, she provided tap water in the Boudhda locality. She built percolation tanks at suitable places under the Water Conservation Scheme to increase water table level in the area. She utilized funds from the Yeshwant Gram Samruddhi Yojana for building protective walls for the auditorium and the gymnasium. For the grampanchayat staff and also those visiting the office, she built lavatories and toilets. For the sake of animals in the village number of tanks at suitable spots were built. There are twenty borewells in the village and water scarcity is no more a problem for the residents. She observed the plight of women getting water by operating hand pumps and started contemplating about laying pipelines and providing water on tap. With the next fifteen years pain in her mind, she got the tap water system approved for Rs. 50 lakh under Jalswaraj Project. There is also electricity in Dalit locality (Chaukar 2009, 102).

As indicated in the case study mentioned above, utilization of already existing government schemes was combined with a more holistic approach to development, whereby access to adequate water resources, the welfare of livestock and gender sensitive schemes were implemented. One of the key understandings that emerge from the study is that in many instances the problem of marginal development can be overcome by the sustained utilization of existing funds by newly elected leaders combined with a high degree of awareness of the rules of procedure within the panchayat itself. This necessitates the need to impart political training to the women Panchayat members so that they are able to understand the workings of the village administration system.
There were, for instance, cases where male Pradhans were not in favour of sending the female members of the Gram Panchayats to attend training camps as they feared that once returning from such camps the female members would raise uncomfortable questions in the Panchayat meetings as they would become aware of their rights and responsibilities. It is also argued that in the current format of the training modules at the village level, most women are silent participants and they, in most cases, are segregated to one corner of the room, while the men dominate the proceedings and the discussions. The training programmes, thus, instead of training women as agents of change, are training them into structures of statism and bureaucratization (Mayaram 1999, 10).

Provisions need to be made to offer financial assistance to the female candidates so that their dependence on the male members of the family or the community or on party backing for election expenditure is considerably reduced. It is argued that the lack of knowledge of women representatives regarding budget, funds and its stipulation for utilization, maintenance of financial records and financial management are major constraints that women representatives face in initiating policies and programmes for the village (Saxena 2005, 192). Taking a proactive step in this direction, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has conceptualized a scheme titled *Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan* (PMEYSA) that is targeted at elected women and elected youth representatives. The scheme has a total allocation of Rs. 4307.47 lakhs for the Eleventh Five Year Plan period and provides 100 percent central funding for various activities. The Abhiyan that has been launched in several States across the country has been receiving very positive responses and feedback (Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2008, 23).

Further, a monitoring mechanism needs to be set up whereby the workings of the PRIs could be evaluated and necessary changes initiated. Again, it needs to be emphasized here that compared to the upper caste and non-tribal women, the lower caste and tribal women require more encouragement in terms of education, training and financial assistance due to the long history of discrimination and oppression that they suffer from. Reservation of seats has either willingly or unwillingly made the SC

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and ST women enter the political forum at the grassroots. Proper proactive measures, therefore, need to be taken up so that this phenomenon could be molded to the advantage of the cause of women’s political empowerment.

While, however, examining the political representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, it is crucial to acknowledge that although there is now a legitimization and recognition of women as a separate political category, the identity of women in a fractured democracy like India is not manifested as a homogenous category, and therefore, one needs to take into account the role played by caste, class, ethnicity, religion and such other cleavages while analyzing the phenomenon. Moreover, the elected women members continue to suffer under the “dichotomy” of their roles: “their ostensible power in the panchayat and their relative powerlessness within the home” (Buch, 2005, 361). In addition, SC/ST women face structural inequalities that cannot be captured through conventional social scientific methods. Rather, explanations must also look at culture and the mechanisms of social stratification to account for outcomes.

It is also illustrated through the discussions in the present chapter that democratization occurs at many different levels, with substantial differences between each level. In other words, as a process, democratization at the federal level is different from the processes occurring at the level of the states and at the village level. Moreover, the policy of reservation was a “top down” effort at greater democratization and was not preceded by sufficient political debate. It been observed that due to the lack of political debate that should have preceded the introduction of the policy of reservation, women in PRIs have a naive consciousness that leads them to internalize the values of men who are the dominant group in politics (Nanivadekar 1997, 73).

Thus, if we closely examine the question of ‘top-down’ institutional changes being a viable mechanism for mitigating structural inequities in the context of the realities women’s political representation through affirmative action at the village self-governing level, it may be argued that top-down institutional changes can bear result
only when they are being supported by socio-cultural support mechanisms. Reservation for women, in this context, however, acts as an "enabling condition" that facilitates the processes of bringing in real empowerment of women (Hust 2002, 5). It is to be recognized that in the presence of deep structural and institutional inequities that prevent the free and fair participation and representation of marginalized groups in political decision making, 'top-down' institutional measured for correcting these inequities may act as catalysts for facilitating the larger emancipation of disempowered groups.

As Sarkar and Mazumdar lucidly put forth,

When one applies the principle of democracy to a society characterized by tremendous inequalities, such special protections are only spear-beads to pierce through the barriers of inequality. An unattainable goal is as meaningless as a right that cannot be exercised. Equality of opportunities cannot be achieved in the face of tremendous disabilities and obstacles which the social system imposes on all those sections whom traditional Indian treated as second or even third class citizens. Our investigations have proved that the application of the theoretical principle of equality in the context of unequal situations only intensifies inequalities because equality in such situations merely means privilege for those who have them already and not for those who need them (1999, 136-37).

Summary and Conclusion:

While summing up the discussions in the present chapter, it is to be reiterated that the key question that the chapter wishes to address within the larger framework of liberal democratic discourse on political representation is whether 'top-down' institutional mechanisms such as quotas are successful in mitigating existing structural inequities and in translating women's engineered presence in political decision making into real political empowerment. In order to investigate this crucial question, the present chapter examines the Indian experiment with affirmative action for women in village self-governing institutions and its larger implications for facilitating the realization of women's political goals.

It is observed that the policy of reservation of seats for women in India emerged in the context of a larger discourse on democratic decentralization. Although the idea of
village self-governance had been present in India since as early as the Aryan civilization, it was not adopted as a part of the structure of administration in the constitution. Due to much opposition by Dr. Ambedkar and his followers in the Constituent Assembly to the idea of Panchayati Raj, the constitution of India incorporated the setting up of PRIs as a directive principle that was not enforceable in the court of law.

However, during the early decades following India’s independence, owing to the failure of community development planning and the growing linkages forged between the success of such planning and greater devolution of power to local structures, democratic decentralization emerged as a prominent discourse. A number of commissions set up during this era to evaluate the success of development planning, recommended the setting up of PRIs. Within this larger discourse on decentralization, a linkage has also come to be established between women’s participation in local governance and its contribution to development. Since the early 1990s onwards, with India going in for economic reforms, international norms of participatory and good governance further facilitated this discourse.

All these developments finally culminated into the passing of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts that laid down the structures of urban and local self-governance in India. The Acts further provided for reservation of one-third seats for women in these local self-governing institutions. Also, in the seats reserved for SCs and STs, one-third came to be reserved for women candidates. The reservation of seats for women through these acts came as ‘top-down’ measures. Therefore, it is significant to examine the real implications of these measures in a society that is marred with deep rooted cleavages of caste, class, religion, region and ethnicity. For the purpose of the present chapter, the real implications of the rise of numerical strength of women in PRIs through affirmative action are being studied. In this context, instances are also drawn from the participation and representation of SC and ST women in PRIs.
The examination of the case of affirmative action in PRIs brings forth some very critical understandings. It may be observed that on one hand, elected women representatives of the PRIs have been reduced to mere proxies through an interplay of various factors such as prevalence of corrupt practices, dominant male discourse, violence against women (mostly in cases of SC or ST women), societal practices and restrictions and such others. However, on the other hand, there are also a number of instances that indicate that elected women members of the PRIs are gradually moving forward towards realization of their political goals. Even in instances of SC and ST women’s political participation in PRIs, a gradual shift is visible not only in the perception of society towards them but also the way they have come to perceive their own role and vision in local governance. It also observed that in cases where women have played a critical role in decision making processes of the PRIs, there was greater attention paid to development issues that affected the daily realities of local life.

It is further observed that elected women members in PRIs have been successful in making a difference in political decision making at the local level where there was adequate support mechanism in terms of education, access to resources and information. Thus one of the key understandings that emerge from the study is that in many instances the problem of marginal development can be overcome by the sustained utilization of existing funds by newly elected leaders combined with a high degree of awareness of the rules of procedure within the panchayat itself.

Women in PRIs are being termed as ‘first generation learners’, who are creating the grounds for a larger socio-political change to come. It is also significant to note in this context that without a system of reservation, women’s presence in PRIs was almost negligible. Hence it is recognized that given the deep structural inequities that women are challenged with, special provisions such as reservations may play a significant role in achieving in equality of results. Thus reservation of seats for women may be viewed as an ‘enabling’ condition that has the potential to facilitate women’s political empowerment with the support of adequate structural mechanisms.
As has been clearly been spelt out on the very outset, the central theme of the present study is to examine the shifts in the discourse of political representation in the liberal democracies of Canada and India and to explore how existing norms and ideals in both the countries are being reshaped with the emergence of women as a critical constituency in this discourse. The next and the concluding chapter of the present study (Chapter VI), therefore, seeks to consolidate the major arguments and findings of the present study, and brings forth the foremost critical understandings that emerge in this context.