CHAPTER FIVE

PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM AND WOMEN WORKER

Liberalization and globalization are the catchwords that we assume will lead our country to its pinnacle of success. This is particularly evident with respect to the working class women of India whose problems and grievances generally go unheard. And further, universalization tends to gloss over a mass of very vital differences, which are highly relevant in determining the position of women.

The negation of their position becomes apparent in the way the women worker's are treated double burden of both housework and economic activities. In fact, policy makers at the macro level do not have a realistic perception of the household, and so consequently, the true impact of policies is not identified. Their policies are simply governed by economic parameters, which assume that women make only a marginalized contribution to the economy. Only when women form part of the labour force in the market does their contribution enter statistics because a qualitatively weak human resource does not bode well for any kind of development. Hence unpaid domestic work, which forms a considerable contribution to the national product, is not accounted for. Indeed, the definition of economic activity used by both the Census and the National Sample Survey excludes a significant amount of unpaid or non-marketed labor.

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produced within the household, especially by women. Thus, there is a likely underestimation of economic activity within the household as well as of work participation rates.

The rule of the economic regime entering valuation within the household is obvious in the instance where boys are viewed as investable resources while girls are wasted investments and this is particularly evident with respect to India. Girls generally move to their husband's household after marriage and thereafter, convention rules that their entire work effort and its returns belong to the latter. Thus an important reason why parents are unwilling to spare scarce resources on educating/training a daughter: even if the returns for the labor of an educated/trained girl were expected to be high, these would not accrue to the bearers of the initial cost. Moreover, they may not accrue to the girl herself since it is the affined household which takes the decision about how and when, if ever, to send the woman to the labor market and how to utilize her income.

The entry of liberalization into this arena has not improved the fate of the workingwomen. On the contrary, liberalization has caused an increasing inequality in employment opportunities and incomes, even though the change in economy has brought about a visibility for the woman worker, which did not exist before. But the greatly benefited are those who are better endowed, with more access to skills, and markets, and with more resources or better links internationally. In other words, for women at the upper income, upper skill end, the quality as well as opportunities for employment have improved. For most
women workers, however, the quality of employment is poor, without opportunities either for skill development or for moving up the ladder limited or with very low-income returns.

Though the term "feminization of labor" is widely used in this era of liberalaralization and globalization, data prove otherwise. Even in sectors where liberalization has increased employment, women workers are getting paid less than men and, in most cases, much below the minimum wage. In fact, while gender wage disparities exist across all sectors and all occupations, the manufacturing sector appears to be the most discriminatory towards women. Coupled with gender discrimination in wage differentials is inequality in access to supreme positions and promotions.

Globalization and liberalization bring with them new technologies and fast changing markets which tend to make existing skills obsolete and demand continual up gradation. The problem here is more acute for women workers. Even in Public Sector Undertakings (PSU's), the Government is reducing the workforce by throwing out the women first. Mechanization has only aggravated this dilemma of rapid unemployment among the female workforce.

With respect to the nature of rural employment, the picture is also dismal. Agricultural wage labor is generally the least desirable form of employment taken up only by the poorest. Among such laborers, women are even poorer with the

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lowest wage levels, besides being vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations in the demand for agricultural labour.\textsuperscript{137}

The so-called feminization of employment in the urban organized sector has proved to be almost non-existent. Women are forced to take up jobs of a subsidiary nature in the informal sector, for survival. These jobs pay less and offer no social security. Moreover, that women are not prone to unionizing, are docile and accept less remuneration adds to their vulnerability.

The kind of work that women do in a particular economy and the characteristics that are usually associated with women's work in such a context, are very much a social construct which fits in with the general image of women that is sanctioned by the patriarchal ideology prevailing there. It is the households which are responsible for socializing girls in a way that ensures the latter's compliance with the roles and activities assigned to them by the socially sanctioned ideology\textsuperscript{138}. Indeed, patriarchal values that predominate in many parts of the world ensure that, by assigning woman with the responsibility for the nurture of their families, they have no choice but to play the triple role of worker, housewife and mother. The lack of capital and assets, low and marginal income, aided by frequent accidents, sickness and other contingencies, poor working and living conditions, low bargaining power and lack of outside linkages and opportunities for skill upgradation - all these interlinked factors which are exacerbated by liberalization and globalization drag these women further into

\textsuperscript{137} Almost 96\% of the female workers are in this unorganized sector. 

\textsuperscript{138} Banerjee, 1999
deprivation, trapping them in the vicious circle of poverty. Clearly, liberalization has brought forth a dystrophic vision for women workers who occupy the lower strung in our society.

Both research and activism has focused on the negative fallout of the process of globalisation and liberalisation on women. They have demanded that the investment in the social sector be increased. But a government bent on opening up the economy to foreign investment and free trade has paid no heed to these voices, although India has experienced industrial recession and a period of jobless growth in the past decade. Given the high levels of the population and a large population below age 20, the demand for employment is growing and joblessness and accompanying frustrations have contributed to violence, frequently expressed as ethnic, caste, class or communal conflicts. Women are the worst sufferers in such conflicts. Besides raising these economic issues, sections of the women's movement are questioning the oppression of Dalit women.\textsuperscript{139}

The war in Kargil has spurred activism for peace. Women were the first to lead a peace delegation to Pakistan in the post-war period, breaking the ice and initiating people-to-people dialogues. Issues of conflict and peace are important, given the tremendous suffering of women in Jammu and Kashmir and in the North East region.

\textsuperscript{139} Muslim and Christian women are strongly demanding equal rights.
Cross-border trafficking of women and girls is a major problem that remains unsolved. Lobbying by women's groups of the South Asian region forced the SAARC countries to include in their Male Declaration of 1997 a paragraph on trafficking and a commitment to sign a regional convention on trafficking. This commitment is yet to be fulfilled.

The Constitution had promised free education for all Indian children up to the age of 14. The government is contemplating passing a law to grant children ages 6-14 the right to education. Child rights and women's activists argue that this right is already enshrined in the Constitution and the Right to Education Bill has been designed to absolve the government of its responsibility towards those under six years of age.

The National Commission for Women has made a series of recommendations for legal reform and other measures that deserve consideration but have so far been ignored by the government. Few years back, the Indian government reported to a UN Committee on the status of implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women and was congratulated for bringing women into panchayats, but critiqued on other counts including denial of rights to minority women.

The government declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment or Swashakti. A policy for the Empowerment of Women was drafted in 1996 and the Cabinet passed the same in March 2001. The details have been mentioned in the subsequent chapter.
Although Indian women played a major role in the freedom movement, it did not translate into continued participation in public life in the post-independence era. On the contrary, many women withdrew into their homes, secure in the belief that they had ushered in a democratic republic in which the dreams and aspirations of the mass of people would be achieved. Representation of women in the state legislatures and in Parliament is low. Women currently comprise 5.9 per cent of Lok Sabha members. Women have persistently lobbied for the passing of the 81st Amendment Bill, drafted in 1996, that proposes the reservation of one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha. But political parties have repeatedly sabotaged attempts to have the Bill approved.

However, hope lies in India's huge experiment with grassroots democracy through the Panchayats. Nearly a million women have entered the panchayats and local bodies, thanks to one-third reservation in these bodies through the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, provides for reservation of elective posts for women. It has been provided that not less than one-third of total number of posts of Members and Chairpersons at all three tiers of

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140 In the 1999 elections a mere 6.5 per cent of candidates were female.
Panchayati Raj Institutions\textsuperscript{141} shall be reserved for women. At present, there are 6,81,258 women elected to Gram Panchayats; 37,109 women to Panchayat at intermediate level and 3153 women to Panchayat at district level.

The empowerment of Rural Women is crucial for the development of the Rural Bharat. Bringing women into the mainstream of development is a major concern for the Government of India, which is why 2001 has been declared as the "Year of Women Empowerment".\textsuperscript{142} The programmes for Poverty Alleviation have a women's component to ensure flow of adequate funds to this section. The National Maternity Benefit Scheme extends financial assistance of Rs.500 to pregnant women, who are living below the poverty line and are 19 years of age or above, up to first two live births.

Orientation training for elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions is primarily the responsibility of the State Governments/Union Territory Administrations. The Constitution has placed enormous responsibility on the Panchayats to formulate and execute various programmes of economic development and social justice, and a number of Centrally Sponsored Schemes are being implemented through Panchayats. Thus, women Members and Chairpersons of Panchayats, who are basically new entrants in Panchayats, have to acquire the required skill and be given appropriate orientation to assume their rightful roles as leaders and decision makers.

\textsuperscript{141} Gram Panchayat, Intermediate Panchayat and District Panchayat
\textsuperscript{142} Discussed in detail in previous chapters.
Accordingly, States/UTs are organising training programmes for elected representatives of Panchayats including women Members and Chairpersons of Panchayats. The Ministry of Rural Development also extends some financial assistance to the States/UTs with a view to improve the quality of training programmes and to catalyse capacity building initiatives for the PRI elected members and functionaries. NGOs are also involved in capacity building of women Members and Chairpersons of Panchayats. UNICEF has also funded similar capacity building initiatives in consultation with the Ministry of Rural Development in the States of Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Bengal. The All India Women Conference, an NGO has been provided funds by UNICEF for organising leadership training programmes for women Members of Panchayats in Manipur and Tripura.

The Constitution of India provides that State Governments/Union Territory Administrations shall devolve functional and financial powers upon the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Devolution of powers is an ongoing process. The States/UTs have devolved powers upon Panchayats in varying degrees. The Ministry of Rural Development has taken several steps towards greater devolution of functional and financial powers to the Panchayats. However, States/UTs have been requested to make all efforts to create public awareness about the role of women representatives in Panchayats.
Bringing women into the mainstream of development has been a major concern of the government since independence. Yet, despite significant steps taken by the government, the participation of women in all spheres of life varies in the context of differences in the social, economic, cultural and regional factors. It is being increasingly realized that the goal of poverty alleviation couldn't be achieved without the full and active participation of women who constitute a large section of the work force in the country. In order to empower women and bring them into the mainstream, an enabling environment with requisite policies and programmes, institutional mechanisms at various levels and adequate financial resources has been created. The Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment has special components for women in all its programmes and a certain amount of funds is earmarked as 'women's component' to ensure a flow of adequate resources for women.

By virtue of the provisions of the Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act 1992, substantial number of women have been enabled to take direct part in the process of self-governance through the panchayats. Women now play an active role in the decision-making process relating to programmes, which have direct relevance to the rural poor such as Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA). Women are members of watershed committees, which plan and implement watershed development projects. Women are active participants in the self-help groups and user groups. They also take on the responsibility of operation and maintenance of the assets created. The Ministry
also accords importance to awareness generation and dissemination of information among women. Considering the important role envisaged for women in the new Panchayati Raj set up, the Ministry has decided to provide financial assistance through CAPART to non-governmental organisations with a proven track record for conducting training and awareness generation programmes on Panchayati Rai.

The Ministry has several schemes for providing better opportunities to women in rural India. The programme of DWCPA was started in 1982-83 on a pilot basis in 50 districts, as a sub-scheme of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), which has now been extended to all districts of the country. It is an exclusive programme of its kind, which aims at empowering poor rural women through economic means. It seeks to encourage collective action in the form of group activities. Through such social and economic empowerment, the programme seeks to improve the access of rural women to health, education, safe drinking water, sanitation, nutrition etc., and to bring about an enhancement in the quality of life and general well being of women and children. Further, by encouraging the habit of thrift and credit, it aims at making poor women self-reliant. Through assistance from the Government in the form of Revolving Fund, it seeks to integrate women in the economy by providing additional opportunities for self-employment. Under DWCRA, 10-15 women form groups, for taking up economic activities suited to their skill, aptitude and local conditions. About 2,49,000 groups of women have been formed with membership of about 39 lakh

143 A Revolving Fund amounting to Rs. 25,000 is given to each group to meet its working capital requirements etc.
women since Inception of the programme in 1982-83. During the year 1998-99 about 22,921 groups have been formed so far benefiting about 3 lakhs women. Recently, there has been greater emphasis on empowering women by imparting knowledge, information and training. The Community Based Convergent Services Programme and the Information, Education and Communication component under DWCRA seek to sensitize women regarding their needs, and to help them prioritize and articulate these effectively and fulfill them by utilizing existing facilities and provisions under various Government programmes in a better way. DWCRA Programme is linked to IRDP for credit and **Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM)** for training.

Under IRDP, assistance is given to the rural poor through Government subsidy and bank credit to help them take up income generating activities. 40% of total assistance under IRDP is reserved for women. Coverage of women has been rising under the programme from a mere 10% of total beneficiaries in 1985-86 to 34.4% in 1998-99. Under the Scheme for TRYSEM, it has been laid down that 40% of the trainees must be women. About 46,400 women have been covered under TRYSEM during April to November 1998.

(B) Different Yojana and Programmes Launched by the Government

(i) **The Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY)** has been launched with effect from April 01, 1999, is a holistic programme covering various aspects
of self-employment, such as organisation of the poor into self-help groups, training, credit, technology, infrastructure and marketing.\textsuperscript{144} Under this Scheme, women are encouraged in the practice of thrift and credit, which enables them to become self-reliant. Through assistance in the form of Revolving Fund, Bank Credit and Subsidy, the Yojana seeks to integrate women in the economy by providing increasing opportunities of self-employment.

(ii) The Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY) has been launched with effect from April 1, 1999, with the twin objectives of creation of demand-driven community village infrastructure and the generation of supplementary employment (for the unemployed poor) in the rural areas. Wage-employment under the JGSY is extended to below poverty line families. It is stipulated that 30 percent of the employment opportunities should be reserved for women.

(iii) The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) aims at providing assistance for the construction of houses for people 'Below the Poverty Line' in rural areas. Under the Scheme, priority is extended to widows Women Self-help Group engaged in income generation activity and unmarried women. It has been laid down that IAY houses are to be allotted in the name of women members of the household or, alternatively, in the joint names of husband and wife.

\textsuperscript{144} It is envisaged that 50 percent of the Groups formed in each Block should be exclusively for women who will account for at least 40 percent of the Swarozgaris.
The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) came into effect five years back represents a significant step towards introducing a National Policy for Social Assistance benefits to households 'Below the Poverty Line', with a major focus on women. The NSAP has three components, namely, the National Old Age Pension Scheme, the National Family Benefit Scheme and the National Maternity Benefit Scheme. The National Maternity Benefit Scheme is exclusively aimed at assisting expectant mothers by providing them Rs.500 each for the first two live births. Under the National Old Age Pension Scheme, Central Assistance of Rs.75 per month is provided to women and men who are 65 years of age and above and have little or no regular means of subsistence from their own sources of income or through financial support from the family members. Under the National Family Benefit Scheme, Central Assistance of Rs.10,000 is extended to the bereaved family in the case of death of the primary breadwinner due to natural or accidental causes. Women are also beneficiaries under this Scheme.

The Restructured Centrally Sponsored Rural Sanitation Programme (RCRSP) was launched with effect from 1st April, 1999 provides for the construction of sanitary latrines for rural households. Where individual household latrines are not feasible, provision exists for construction of village the sanitary complexes exclusively for women, to ensure privacy/dignity.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{145} Upto 10 percent of the allocated fund can be utilised for construction and maintenance of public latrines for women.
(vi) **The Rural Water Supply Programme (RWSP):** Under the RWSP, training is being afforded to women to enable them to play an active role in using and maintaining handpumps for the supply of drinking water. Women are also represented in Village Level Committees and are actively involved in the selection of sites for handpumps and other sources.

(vii) **Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY)** aims at providing additional gainful employment for the rural unemployed and under employed. Thirty per cent of the employment opportunities are reserved for women. Of the total employment generated under JRY, the share of women has been 533.84 lakh till November 1998. Under Employment Assurance Scheme 639.46 lakh of employment have been generated during April to November 1998.

(viii) **CAPART** provides funds to voluntary agencies working for rural women's welfare. CAPART also works to promote rural technology that makes work easier and quicker for women in their households and outdoor activities.

Quality Control through grading and marking of agricultural products is of great benefit to women consumers. The quality certification scheme 'Agmark' has resulted in increased quality awareness among the consumers. Consumer organisations with women representatives have been empowered to inspect Agmark products and draw samples for testing.
The States have been asked to issue joint pattas where ceiling surplus land is distributed, to landless poor families. This will significantly women's access to land.

The Ministry recognises the need to have an institutional mechanism for reviewing the content and scope of the on-going programmes meant for enhancing the level and quality of participation by women. A Committee has been constituted in the Ministry under the chairmanship of the Additional Secretary and Financial Advisor to advise on matters pertaining to women in Rural Development. This Committee would help in monitoring the implementation of the women's component and also identify areas/schemes for special intervention to increase the flow of benefits to women in Rural Development. There has been a proposal to create a Women's cell in each District Rural Development Agency to look after women's components under various schemes.

Steps are being taken for convergence of various programmes for women at the grassroots. The Ministry is working towards intra-departmental convergence of services available under various programmes. At the same time, it is exploring mechanisms to synergies with other ministries and departments, specially the Department of Women and Child Development, which implements programmes like Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Integrated Child Development Scheme etc. down that IAY houses shall be allotted in the name of the women members of the household or in the joint names of husband and wife.
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This project is a joint venture between the Institute for Social Sciences (New Delhi) and the Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi).
Its objectives are (i) to observe women's political representation, over the first term of the civic bodies elected under the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, in four Indian metropolitan cities; (ii) to assess the impact of the reservation of 33% of seats for women, both on the functioning of civic bodies, and on women's political participation; (iii) to identify those factors that give substance to women's representation in the civic bodies, and those factors which, on the contrary, deprive reservations of significance, in order to help devise future accompanying policies, and to mobilize the relevant actors. This project, of a two-year duration (2001-2003) has been jointly financed by the Ford Foundation and by the Swedish International Development Agency. It is now reaching its final stage. The main findings of the survey were presented at an international seminar entitled Women's Quotas in Urban Local Government: A Cross-national Comparison (New Delhi, 6-7/02/2003). A leaflet presenting the main results of the research was realized in five languages (English, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Bengali) and sent to all councillors of the studies cities, to a number of Municipal Corporation cadres and to training institutes, as part of the dissemination strategy of the project.

(D) India's nurseries of politics - political rise of women in India

Over a million women hold the reins of power at the village level but a law to boost their presence in parliament has been deadlocked for several years
Nothing short of a small revolution occurred during President Bill Clinton's visit to India. 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.

Some might like to dismiss this meeting as a clever act of 'feel-good' politics on the part of the President or as a showcased stunt on the part of the Indian government. But the meeting was really about women entering politics and staying on. Along with some million others across the country, these women are the daughters of the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian
Constitution. Passed in 1993, these two amendments oblige all states to reserve one third of seats in the three-tiered system of local government (village, block and district levels)--known as panchayati raj--to women. Elected directly by and from among the villagers, the panchayats can make decisions concerning a wide range of fields, from agriculture to health, employment and primary education.

In a short time, women have shown their potential to wield power effectively at the village level and challenge feudal traditions. According to some observers, this is one of the reasons why the passage of the Women's Reservations Bill, which seeks to reserve 33 per cent of all seats in the national parliament and state assemblies to women, has been repeatedly blocked in the parliament. First put forward in 1996, the bill was reintroduced in 1998 but lapsed following the government's fall the same year. It was resurrected in December 1999 but has continued to create havoc in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the parliament. There are only 43 women MPs in the current Lok Sabha, out of a total figure of 543, and the majority are from the elite.

Opponents of the bill, claim that the bill should include a sub-quota for Other Backward Classes and Muslim women. Otherwise they argue, the quotas will only promote the interests of the elite. The debate has been characterized by an ugly display of male muscle and lung power: in one instance, the Speaker had to adjourn the House, in another, opposing lawmakers grabbed the bill off his desk.
A number of organizations are intent on highlighting the success of women in the panchayats. They are also working hard to build up leadership among the most marginalized groups, namely Dalit and Tribal communities, and to give women a better understanding of their powers and rights at the local level. The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) for example, helps to groom women candidates for elections through education and training and gives panchayat representatives the opportunity to meet with their counterparts from other states. At another level, these organizations are seeking to mobilise women to vote, and if need be, stand up against election malpractices, such as giving bribes or distributing liquor to win votes.

A recent study prepared by the Multiple Action Research Group (MARG), a Delhi-based NGO, concluded that the constitutional amendments have indeed acted as a catalyst for greater participation by women in governance, but the legislation now needs to be fine-tuned: women should be given more than a single term in a reserved constituency to make a real difference, and every effort should be made to provide them with literacy training. A separate study conducted in three states on the government's behalf by the Centre for Women's Development Studies also highlighted the fact that the reservations had benefited women from the Other Backward Classes.

Despite this, the barriers to participation remain sizeable. Rural areas are plagued by illiteracy and poverty, and patriarchy remains deeply entrenched. Practices such as wife beating and dowry deaths are still
prevalent. Furthermore, as Ela Bhatt, the founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) points out, rural women do not represent a unified group. Caste, clan and family considerations still overshadow political and gender-based priorities for large numbers of women in rural areas. As such she says, women panchayat members are easily manipulated, coerced and coopted by their male counterparts. Also, dress, election campaign meetings and strategies for women are still often decided by male members of the family.

The political empowerment through affirmative action is essential for women to 'break this hard-rock of patriarchy.' There has been much debate in the country about whether illiterate rural women have the skills to stand for elections and take office. The late Gita Mukherjee, a Communist Party of India member and six-time MP from West Bengal, who headed the special parliamentary committee on the Reservations Bill, repeatedly asserted that the first step was to allow women to break into politics; their awareness would automatically rise. The panchayati raj institutions, she said, are to be valued as the real nurseries of political leadership for women. Poverty and violence, she stressed, can only be fought against effectively if women form a critical mass in all decision-making bodies, from village panchayats to the parliament.

Still, despite entrenched patriarchy, there are obvious signs of change, even if they seem anecdotal.