IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Since the commencement of the planning era in India in 1951, growth with social justice has been set forth as the cardinal principle of Indian planned economic development. Indian economy is rural economy. India is a land of villages and it consists of 5,75,936 villages. The Panchayat Raj Institution is subject to the authority of the state governments. They enjoy only delegated powers and functions.

The participation and co-operation of people are matters of vital importance in the Panchayatraj development programme. Democratic decentralization would mean free popular management of local affairs by a process by a logical deduction. The essential ingredients would be as follows:

- Existence of authorities at various levels.
- Allocation of sphere of activities to these authorities.
- Democratic composition of these authorities.
- Democratic working of these authorities and in their allocated sphere limited only by the supervision of democratic authorities at a higher level.
- Autonomy to these authorities.

There is a great demand in the developing countries for the provision of basic services like, public health and medical services. The welfare policy of the state also demands provision of national minimum needs. In India, the national minimum needs are
sought to be achieved through Panchayat Raj Institutions by supplying good of drinking water, provision of house sites for the homeless, access to villages by roads, elementary education, provision of rural health service and rural electrification. The main objective of Panchayat Raj is to contribute for the welfare and development and development programme.

Participation is generally understood as a process and as some kind of static and product of development. The concept of time terms of a pattern of participation is, of course, related to the task to be undertaken. However, participation of women in the Panchayat has been considered as essential for enabling them to participate effectively in democratic process. Panchayat Raj is an ancient institution as antique as India. In fact, it has been the backbone of Indian villages since the beginning of recorded history.

In modern era, democracy is considered as one of the best forms of government because it ensures liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity, fraternity as well as the right to participate in political decision making. Participation and control of governance is the essence of participatory democracy. Such participation is possible only when the powers of the state are decentralized to the district, block and village levels where people from all sections of society can sit together, discuss their problems and suggest solutions and execute as well as monitor the implementation of the programmes.

Decentralization has been accepted as one of the pillars of democracy. The term ‘decentralization’ refers to a process of gradual devolution or transfer of decision making
powers, functions and resources to the lower level of democratically elected bodies. To the liberal democrats, *decentralization is a ‘way to make government more responsive to local needs and preferences’*. In the present decade, the transfer of political, administrative and financial power to local government bodies has received singular attention all over the world. Decentralization is considered as one of the most important elements as far as goal of development is concerned and has been accepted as one of the pillars of democracy. It has got global recognition and most countries have attempted to implement it as a tool for development, as a political philosophy and as a mechanism for sharing responsibility at different levels of administrative and political structure. In brief, decentralization is regarded as a mechanism to share power required for redistribution of benefits of development among the masses and making an impact on the people at all level.

The term ‘democratic decentralization’ has thus been understood as a mechanism to transfer authority and responsibility from a higher political and administrative entity to the lower level political and administrative entities to ensure wider participation of people in the process of decision making, planning and implementation of programmes. It provides opportunity to people to participate directly in decision making processes. However, decentralization is not an end in itself, but it depends on the circumstances under which democratization occurs.

Local self government is regarded as an integral part of democracy. The institution of local self government was thought of as an instrument to bring decentralization.
Participation at grass root level also translates the dream of Gandhiji into reality. *The idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent from many others in which dependence is necessary. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual judgment.* According to Lord James Bryce the practice of local self government is the best guarantee for the success of democracy. No democratic foundation will have sound footing without grass root involvement. Local self government is not only a form of administration but also a democratic way of life. Administratively it is accountable for efficient performance both upward and downward and politically it is responsible downward, with the recognition of the right of the local people to have government of their own choice. To John Stuart Mill, that form of government was the best which develop the best citizens. John Stuart felt the need of local self government on three grounds: Division of Labour, Political Education and Common Interest. Lord Bryce concurred with Mill when held that local self governments “train local people not only to work for others but also to work effectively with others. It develops common sense, reasonableness, judgment and sociability among people.” Panchayati Raj Institutions were conceived by the Constitution of India as the bedrock of self governance. The Part IV of the Indian Constitution underlines the idea of self governance. Article 243G of the Constitution of India provides that the States/Union Territories may by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institution of self-government and to prepare plans for economic development and social justice and their implementation including those in relation to the matters listed in the 11th schedule.
The Indian system of local self government comprises of two sub-systems. They are rural local bodies (Panchayati Raj) and urban local bodies (municipal corporations, municipalities, town area committees and cantonment boards). Both these sub-systems are run by the popularly elected representatives of the inhabitants of the villages, towns and districts respectively. The rural people are governed by Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is a three tier organic structure, comprising Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block (taluka) level and Zilla parishad at the district (zilla) level.

Thus one sees that the institution of Panchayati Raj (PR) is essentially meant for enriching the processes of democratic decentralization. It does it so, in many ways. First, it expands the scope of social and political participation, which in turn makes the system more accessible to the people. Second, it makes the system more accountable, responsive and transparent. This happens largely by virtue of its location, as it is closest to the people. Third, it enables people to articulate their needs and demand so that they are addressed, at the local level. Fourth, it gives an opportunity to ordinary citizens to learn how to operate in the public domain and practice the art of collective decision making without resorting to intimidation and violence. Finally, it functions as a nursery for upcoming leadership, which eventually nurtures and prepares leaders for higher level of institutions.

It is being recognized by both the developed and the developing countries that local self government is desirable not only for the service it renders to the community, but also for the opportunities it offers to men and women to enjoy an active participation in the governance and, in the process to develop responsibilities at the grass root level.
HISTORICAL FOUNDATION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDIA

The village is an important unit in the organization of Indian social life. The institutions of Village Panchayats have been in existence in India, in one form or the other from a long period of time. Literatures indicate that in India, there existed a well established system of local self government which was run on a set pattern of age-old traditions and customs. Though the present Panchayat system has no direct connection with the system of rural local self government which existed in ancient and medieval times, much of its inspiration and faith people have in it today, are derived from the Panchayat system in the past.

In ancient time, the village communities were more or less self sufficient, self reliant and independent. According to Sir Charles Metcalf, “The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution, but the village communities remain the same”. According to Metcalf the village republics were the most democratic, genuine, highly organized and successful village system in ancient India. Indian village systems are also referred to in the Vedas, the Epics, the Manusmrities, the Budhist and the Jain Literature and in the Arthasastra of Kautilya. In the Vedic period, the headman of the village was known as the ‘gramini’ or the ‘grampal’. According to Ramayana and Mahabharata, there existed two types of villages - ‘ghose’ and ‘gram’. The former was bigger in size and the latter smaller. Villages were used to be administered by an official called the gramini. Gramini was generally appointed by the king and enjoyed a very high
status not only in the public life but also at the ‘court of the king’. Although gramini was a nominee of the king, he had to work strictly on the advice of the village elders who were variously called the ‘gram bridhas’, the samiti, the sabha, the panchayat. The number of these bodies also varied from place to place and from time to time. Manu and Gautama are of the opinion that it ranged between three and ten. Dr. Satyaketu Vidyalankar stated that “the sabha was the centre of the multifarious activities of the village. It discussed religious and social matters. It arranged numerous types of entertainment for the village inhabitants”. Besides, it also played a very important role in the judicial and legislative fields.

During the Budhist and the Jain periods, the village headman was known as the ‘bhojak’ who was elected by villagers, but in practice his post was usually hereditary. The duty of the ‘bhojak’ was revenue collection on behalf of the state and to undertake construction works. Under the Chanakya’s system, villages were classified according to their population and the duties were clearly distributed, leading to the creation of various posts for village administration. During the Maurya and the post-Maurya periods too, the headman assisted by the council of elders continued to play a prominent role in the village life. This system continued through the Gupta period, but there were certain changes in the nomenclature, as the district official was known as the vishyapati and the village headman was known as the grampati.

From the foregoing analysis it is clear that in ancient India, there flourished a more or less developed system of local self government. Popularly elected ‘sabhas’ and
‘samitis’ functioned in the innumerable villages, dotting the length and breadth of the country. The state functioned separately never encroaching into the functioning of the village Panchayats. The central government had granted perfect autonomy to the village Panchayats.

However, with the passage of time the much cherished independence of the village began to diminish. As Jadunath Sarkar has described, the Mughal rulers who succeeded the Hindu Rajas, were essentially urban people. Their feudalistic bent of mind and their quest for larger finances for the state made them centralize their administration. They worked out a new land policy where under all lands, situated in the length and breadth of their domain, were integrated into one central revenue system. The Mughal rulers introduced new administrative arrangement to replace the existing system of village governance. Under this new arrangement the provinces, districts, and villages were put under the charge of centrally appointed subedars, amalguzars, muqaddams and patwaris. Gradually the ancient village self governance system began to decline and lost its glory.

When the East India Company came to India, Panchayats in most places were almost dead as units of administration as Maheswari described. The British policy of economic exploitation of India ultimately shattered the self sufficient character of the village system. As an imperialist power, the main concern of the British was to maximize land revenues and maintain law and order in the newly established colony. The Panchayats during the British rule were firmly told not to interfere in the administrative and judicial functions of the state. To destroy the inherent strength of the village life in
India, the British adopted several measures. For instance firstly, the Zamindari system was introduced to damage the collective village life. The Ryotwari and Mahalwari system were the two other systems introduced in different regions for collecting land revenues. In the place of the traditional ‘sabhas’ and ‘samities’ the government nominees, such as the village headmen, ‘patwaris’ and ‘lambardars’ started administering the villages. This is because of the officially acquired powers, they faced no opposition or criticism from villagers. The authority of the panchas, and the sarpanchas, to deliver justice was jealously taken away and was vested in the centrally created courts. Thus by the dawn of the nineteenth century, the traditional Village Panchayat more or less vanished from the land of its origin. If a few ‘Panchayat’ still existed in certain remote villages; they had practically no say in the administration of the locality.

**REVIVAL OF PANCHAYATI RAJ**

It is pertinent to note that in India, the British were in favour of highly centralized imperial structure which provided little scope for decentralized administration. However, among the British officers in India, also there were liberal democrats who were interested in the creation of decentralized institutions based on local self government. In the later period of the British rule, more particularly after the takeover of administration by the British Empire from the East India Company in 1858, Lord Rippon introduced the local self government in India for gaining co-operation of Indians and for decentralizing financial management.

In 1870, the policy of financial management was declared by Lord Mayo, which
emphasized on the need for associating Indians in municipal administration, decentralization of resources to provinces, and strengthening of municipal governments. In 1882, Lord Rippon, the then Viceroy introduced reforms in local government through a resolution known as the ‘Lord Rippon’s Resolution’. The resolution emphasized the need for associating Indians in administration, endowing local bodies both in towns and villages with source of revenue and identifying ways and means to make these bodies work more efficiently. In 1907, Viceroy Viscount Morley appointed a Royal Commission on Decentralization headed by Charles Hobhouse. It is notable that the first ever reference in a document of constitutional significance to village Panchayats as local self government was made in the report of the Royal Commission on Decentralization in 1909. In 1917, Mr. Montague, the then secretary of state for India, enunciating the future policy of the British Government promised the gradual development of self governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India. To give a practical shape to this promise, the government of India issued a resolution in May, 1918. In 1919 under the government of India Act the subject of local self government was transferred to Indian Ministers so as to make the system more effective. As a result, a number of Panchayat Acts were passed between 1921 and 1926, which aimed at making these bodies more genuine and loosening official control on them.

The birth of Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 had brought a new era to the concept of Panchayati Raj in India. Boycotting of the British Court and the introduction of Panchayats as self legal system based on people's participation had given a new turn to
the concept of Panchayat Raj. The hard work and sustained efforts of the congress workers, who had spread themselves in the villages, resulted into the springing up of innumerable Panchayats in various parts of the country.

The coming of Mahatma Gandhi on the national scene marked a new beginning for Panchayats. Gandhiji claimed that India lived in its villages and pleaded for the distribution of power among the rural masses in India. Mahatma believed in the supremacy of people and insisted on people’s democracy at the grassroots which he called the Panchayati Raj. Gandhi fully realized the importance of local self government and wanted to raise a democratic government in the country with village as a base. Gandhi said, true Democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from below by the people of every unit. Gandhi’s vision was that democracy through people’s participation could be ensured only by way of ‘gram swarajya’. Gandhiji wanted Gram Swarajya in villages where there will be a village republic and management of the affairs of the village would be done by the people themselves. They would elect their presidents and common decisions would be taken unanimously by the gram sabha of the village.

In 1935, the Government of India Act was passed. A new era of hope was ushered in. The Panchayats were recast. Efforts were made not only to constitution and the functioning of village Panchayats but also to physically expand their network.
In 1947, the country became free and the constituent assembly undertook the exercise of framing up of a new Constitution. In independent India, the role of the local self government acquired a new significance. Gandhi sought to recapture the ideal in the revitalization of village life. Gandhiji wanted that Panchayats should be made responsible for the total development of the villages. But the constituent assembly did not accept Gandhi’s proposal and stressed that stability unity and economic progress demanded more centralized government. In the first draft of the constitution no mention was made of the village Panchayats. B.R.Ambedkar, the president of the drafting committee contended that the village communities were nothing but a den of ignorance, sink of localism, narrow minded people and communalism. He was glad that the draft constitution had discarded the village and adopted the individual as unit. Gandhi insisted on inclusion of Panchayats in the revised draft of the constitution because Panchayati Raj was an important component of his vision of future India. Nehru also commented that Local self government is and must be the base of any true system of democracy. People have got the habit of thinking democracy at the top and not so much below. Democracy at the top may not be a success unless you build on the foundation from below. Jai Prakash Narayan favoured power to the people of the village along with the government at the centre. He said, “to me the gram sabha (council) signifies village democracy. The relationship between Panchayat and gram sabha should be that of the Cabinet and the Assembly”. Lal Bahadur Shastri was also of the opinion that “only the Panchayats know the needs of the villages and hence development of the villages be done only by the Panchayats. Prosperous people in villages should ensure that powers given to the
Panchayats are used in the interest of the poor. The Panchayats are the foundation of democracy and if the foundation is based on correct leadership and social justice, there can be no danger to democracy in this country.”

After a good deal of thought and discussions, K.Sanathan Committee moved a resolution for the incorporation of the ‘Panchayats’ in the constitution. It was accepted by an overwhelming majority. Finally, the Panchayats got its place in the Constitution of India in Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 40 of Indian Constitution says, “The state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government”.

The inclusion of the Panchayats in the constitution gave a new impetus to the growth of these institutions. Most of the states enacted Panchayat Acts with a view to democratizing the structure of village Panchayat and also to vest more and more powers of rural development in it. The government of Punjab, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh set up separate directorates for them. There was a rapid expansion in this sphere. Special departments were also established to organize the Panchayats and to look after their workings.

In 1952, the Community Development Programme was launched in India. It was conceived as a programme ‘of the people by the people and for the people’ with a reasonable amount of technical and financial assistance from the central government. The programme had a reasonably good start. But unfortunately the well thought out Community Development Programme failed to encourage people’s participation in its
Incidentally, there was also growing impression that democracy, though working well, has not developed its roots firmly in the soil. The institutions of local-self government held out a promise of effective cure against the twin ailment of stagnation in the Community Development Programme and the dangers to democracy. It was increasingly felt that, if these local government institutions were properly developed and strengthened, they could not only provide a firm base to the Indian democracy but would also accelerate the process of development. In 1957, the National Development Council constituted the Balawanta Rai Mehta Committee (BMC) to study and report on the working of Community Development Programmes. The BMC observed that the main factor that caused the failure of Community Development Programme was the absence of people’s participation. This committee found in the local government institutions the necessary institutional device which would make the Community Development Programme a self-generating process. This committee recommended for the creation of the three-tier Panchayati Raj System namely Gram Panchayats (GPs) at the village level, Panchayat Samities (PSs) at the block level and Zilla Parishads (ZPs) at the district level to make people’s participation meaningful and effective. In January 1958, the recommendations of BMC were approved by the parliament and the new Panchayati Raj System (PRS) started with renewed enthusiasm and high hopes. The recommendations were considered by the National Developmental Council and later on by the Central Council of Local Self Government. Both these bodies liked the scheme and
recommended it to the State Government. Rajasthan was the first state to implement the new system in 2nd October, 1959. By the 1960s, the PRIs as suggested by the BMC had taken deep roots all over the country. People were satisfied with the new PRS. They felt that they had sufficient powers to enable them to mould their future.

Gradually, by 1969 the PRS started losing its popularity. Irregularity in Panchayat elections in various states started getting reported. Things further worsened with the national emergency and Panchayats in many states were literally breathing their last. To take care of the system at the national level, the newly formed Janata government set up a high level committee on the PRIs in 1977 under the chairmanship of Ashok Mehta. The Ashok Mehta committee observed certain pertinent characteristics existing in the PRS which had adversely affected the objectives of PRIs. Some of these were dominance by rich and high caste people, influence of caste consideration, corruption, inefficiency and political interference. This committee recommended for two-tier system of Panchayati Raj in place of the existing three-tier system with one body at the district level and one body at the block level (2 tier system). During the period of 1980s and 90s many other committees and commissions were formed at the centre to study and suggest ways of making Panchayati Raj more effective. Some of these committees included the Hanumantha Rao Committee appointed by the Planning commission in 1983, The G.V.K.Rao committee appointed by the planning Commission in 1985, the Singhvi Committee in 1987 and the Sarkaria Commission on the centre-state relations in 1988 also stressed the importance of Panchayat Raj.

The Rajiv Gandhi Government introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill
in 1989 seeking to strengthen the PRIs. It faced stiff resistance from the opposition and was criticized on various grounds. The bill was reintroduced and finally passed in the Parliament as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment on December 23, 1992 and came into force from April 24, 1993.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act aimed at transforming the structure and pattern to Panchayati Raj system by inserting a new part (Part XI) in the Constitution. The new system has been given a constitutional status and by which it has got permanence in the Indian political system as a third government. It has a three tier structural arrangement namely, district panchayat, middle level panchayat and gram panchayat. This new system has been vested with the power of taking decisions on twenty nine subjects listed in the 11th schedule. One of the important aspects of the 73rd Amendment, which is relevant to this study, is reservation of seats for women. The 73rd Amendment declared that not less than one third of total seats (33%) in every Panchayat institution shall be reserved for women and such seats have to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies (wards) of the Panchayat. The 33% reservation of seats for women has led a sudden surge in the number of women in the decision-making positions at the local level. The reservation of 33% seats for women in all tiers of Panchayats on a rotational basis has facilitated representation of about 75,000 women in the elections conducted soon after the conformity laws were passed by the states.

**PATTERN OF ORGANIZATION**

There are three important organs of Panchayat Raj. They are:
i) Gram Panchayat

ii) Panchayat Samiti

iii) Zilla Parishad

Gram Panchayat

A Gram as defined under the Act (meaning a village or a cluster of villages) is divided into a minimum of five constituencies (again depending on the number of voters the Gram is having). From each of these constituencies one member is elected. Body of these elected members is called the Gram Panchayat. Size of the GPs varies widely from state to state. In states like West Bengal, Kerala and the like a GP has about 20000 people on an average, while in many other states it is around 3000 only.

Panchayat Samiti

The Panchayat Samiti is constituted by indirect election from the village Panchayats. A certain number of seats equal to 10 percent of the number of elected seats are to be filled by the representatives of the directors of co-operative societies of that area. It should have a life span of 5 years.

The functions of the Panchayat Samiti should cover the development of agriculture in all its aspects such as i) improvement of the health of cattle, ii) promotion of local industries, iii) public health, iv) welfare work and v) administration of primary schools and collection and maintenance of statistics.
Zilla Parishad

The third and the highest tier of PRIs is Zilla Panchayat. In the Zilla Panchayat, there is an administrative wing and elected wing. The elected president is the executive head of the zilla panchayat and the chief officer is the administrative head and is responsible to the Zilla Parishad and to the Government. The district collector is the member of the Zilla Parishad in all the states. Special representation to the scheduled caste and tribes is also provided in all states except West Bengal. The MPs and MLAs of the area are also attached as the members of the zilla parishad. Following are the functions of Zilla Parishad.

- It examines and approves the budget of Taluka Parishad (TP).
- It issues directions to the TPs for efficient performance for their functions.
- It co-ordinates development plans prepared by the TPs besides, it co-ordinates the inter block activities.
- It advises the State Government on all matters relating to development activities in the district.
- It distributes funds allocated by the State Government to the TPs in the district.
- It informs the district collector and the divisional commissioner about irregularities, if any committed by the Panchayats and Taluka Panchayat in the District.
- It advises the State Government on allocation of work to be made among Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis in the district and also on co-ordination of work between the samitis and among various Panchayats themselves. It exercises such
powers and performs such functions as may be conferred by the State Government.

Niyaya Panchayats

Niyaya Panchayats dispense Justice at the local rural level. At present these bodies are functioning in Bihar, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Rajasthan, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. In Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, village Panchayats have also been rested with judicial functions. Kerala and Tamil Nadu do not provide for the Niyaya Panchayats. The Government of India is to find out as to what functions should be entrusted to the Panchayat in the new Panchayat Raj set up also endorsed, the views of the planning commission. It remarked that the group panchayats should have full responsibility for all round development of the village community and area. The most important basic village institution responsible for the total development of the village are the Panchayat three classes of function administrative, judicial and development.

Panchayat Union

For each development block, Panchayat is formed. Each Panchayat Union has a chairperson and a vice-chairperson elected directly by the members of the Panchayat Council-Union council members are elected directly by the people. For every 5000
population, one union council member will be elected by the people. Members of parliament and legislative assembly from that area are ex-officio members of the Panchayat Union council. Panchayat Union has the following Duties and Responsibilities.

- Construction, repair and maintenance of the public roads.
- Establishment and maintenance of dispensaries.
- Construction and maintenance of elementary schools.
- Conduct of fairs and festivals.
- Veterinary relief.
- Opening and maintenance of sites and regulation of buildings.
- Extension of village sites and regulation of buildings.
- Maintenance of statistics related to births and deaths.
- Improvement of agriculture and agriculture stock.
- Promotion and encouragement of cottage industries.

**Structure of Panchayat Raj Departments – Center**

- Secretary Rural Development
- Director Rural Development
- District Collector Chairman DRDA
Administrative Structure of Panchayat Raj System (Unit - District)

- Membership (Organic linkage)
- Linkage for the purpose of supervision, review, co-ordination of development works.

Vertical Line of Authority of Control - Center
Mandal Panchayat (Group of Villages)

Gram Sabha (All Adults in the Villages)

TAMIL NADU PANCHAYAT ACT, 1994

Sections 110 and 111 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 prescribe the duties and functions of Village Panchayats. Some of the important functions of a Village Panchayat are:

- Construction, repair and maintenance of all village roads.
- Extension of village sites and the regulation of buildings.
- Lighting of public roads and public places in built-up areas.
- Construction of drains.
- Cleaning of streets and improvement of the sanitary condition of the village.
- Construction and maintenance of public latrines.
- Sinking and repairing of wells, the excavation, repair and maintenance of ponds or tanks and the construction and maintenance of water-works for the supply of water.
- Maintenance of burial and burning grounds.
- Maintenance of parks and reading rooms.
➢ Implementation of schemes such as the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

➢ Such other duties as the Government may, by notification, impose.

Resources

The important sources of revenues for the Village Panchayat are:

Tax Revenue

Among the three tiers, the Village Panchayat alone has the power to levy taxes. House tax, Profession tax and Advertisement tax are the commonly levied taxes.

Non-Tax Revenue

Licensing fees for building plan and layout approval, fees and charges on dangerous and offensive trades, water charges, fees on cart-stands, fishery rentals, 2C patta fees, income from markets and fairs, ferries, fines and penalties and the like.

Assigned and Shared Revenues

These revenues include the items pooled at the State level (Local Cess, Local Cess Surcharge, and Surcharge on Stamp duty and Entertainment Tax) which are released by the Director of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj to all the three tiers of the Panchayats including the Village Panchayats. Other items of Assigned and shared
revenues for the Village Panchayats include the senior age fees (100%) and lease amount (50% share) on minor minerals and social forestry auctions amount.

**Grants**

Central Finance Commission Grant, State Finance Commission Grant, development grants under Centrally-sponsored and State schemes.

**Administrative Powers**

The Village Panchayat President has been designated as the Executive Authority. Cheques for payment have to be signed jointly by the President and Vice-President where the relationship between the two is not cordial, the Collector, in the capacity as Inspector of Panchayats, can designate any other member of the Village Panchayat as joint cheque signing authority along with the President.

The Government has brought out Tamil Nadu Panchayats (Preparation of Plan and Estimates for Works and Mode and Conditions of Works) Rules, 2007 vide G.O.Ms.No.203 R.D. & P.R. (PR.1) Department, dated 20.12.2007, wherein the Village Panchayats have been empowered to give administrative sanction and execute individual works up to Rs.2 lakhs from their General Funds. Previously the Village Panchayats were empowered to give administrative sanction for works up to Rs.1 lakh only. For all works costing more than Rs.2 lakhs but not more than Rs.50 lakhs, the District Collector is the competent authority to give the administrative sanction and for works costing more than Rs.50 lakhs, the Director of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj will be competent to
accord administrative sanction. However, the Collector’s prior administrative sanction is necessary in respect of all the Centrally sponsored and the State funded schemes. Village Panchayats have also been given freedom to execute urgent works up to Rs. 2,000 at a time and up to Rs. 5,000 for a year without any technical approval. The President can draw self cheque up to Rs. 500 to meet contingent expenditures.

The Village Panchayats have been given necessary delegation of powers to enable them to attend to repairs and maintenance of hand pumps, power pumps and street lights promptly. Village panchayats can spend Rs.600 per hand pump per year and up to Rs.7,500/per power pump per year without reference to engineers for preparation of estimates or passing of bills. Village panchayats can buy street light materials meeting the prescribed quality norms on their own.

The Constitution Act of 1993 was brought with force from April 24, 1993 established India's Panchayati Raj Institutions on a sound footing. The amendment gave the much needed impetus to the concept of local self-government which till then suffered from lack of constitutional protection. It envisages a polity where more powers are decentralized to the third level of governance.

The Panchayati Raj has provided a common form for social, economic, political and legal advancement of rural women. Now, women are more than nominal in the political bodies and this is an epoch making step in the women's empowerment political participation. The Panchayati Raj Institutions have not only provided space for women to articulate and influence decision making but also in involving in the planning,
implementing of development as a natural corollary to the decentralized planning. Besides this, these institutions have an important role in ensuring community participation and awareness generation which are very vital for the successful implementation of development programmes.

**Funds Allocated to PRIs for Developmental Activities**

The department of Rural Development has stated that funds are released to Panchayati Raj Institutions through the District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs)/District Panchayats only under existing Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY) and the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS). This will continue to be released to the Panchayats under the new Scheme, namely, Swapoorana Gramin Rozgar Yojana. Under the new Scheme of Swapoorana Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), each village Panchayat will be given resources (cash + food grain) worth at least of Rs. 50,000 a year.

The Committee has been informed that the following steps have been taken by the Central Government to monitor proper utilization of funds:

- Detailed instructions have been issued for the conduct of Social Audit by the Gram Sabha.
- Constitution of the Vigilance and Monitoring Committees at the Block, District and State levels.
- Insistence on Certificate of Non-diversion of funds from the District Authority before release of Second instalment of the Central share of funds.
➢ Field visits by the officials of the Ministry under the Area Officers Scheme.

On the spot, physical verification of the assets created by the District and State authorities

**ROLE OF THE GRAM SABHA IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS**

For efficient functioning of Panchayats, there is a need for greater transparency and accountability. The Constitution of India envisages the creation of the Gram Sabha at the village level to ensure that the decisions made by the Village Panchayats are transparent and its elected representatives are accountable to the electorate.

As regards the composition, powers and functions of the Gram Sabha, the Department of Rural Development have explained that according to Article 243 (b) of the Constitution of India, Gram Sabha “means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of the Panchayat at the village level”. The basic concept is that all the adult persons of the village as a collective body discuss issues and problems, needs and aspirations of the whole village and also special groups. Under Article 243-A the Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide.

The Department of Rural Development has stated that the Government of India has made Social Audit mandatory. Many State Legislatures have legally empowered the Gram Sabha for Social Audit. The State Governments have been requested to lay down
necessary rules and detailed processes for the conduct of Social Audit so that its processes conform to the principles of natural justice, and there are binding legal outcomes of the Social Audit process.

As the Gram Sabha is potentially the most significant institution for participatory and decentralised democracy, the Committee desired to know the measures taken by the Department of Rural Development to energise Gram Sabhas. Responding to this, the Department has stated that the Government of India decided to observe the year 1999-2000 as the ‘Year of Gram Sabha’. On 17th March, 1999, all the Chief Ministers/Administrators were requested to initiate measures to energise Gram Sabhas in tune with the seven point minimal package during the “Year of Gram-Sabha”, and ensure that all sections of the population participate in their meetings.

**Empowerment of Gram Sabha**

Schedule XI of the Constitution provides for the devolution of powers to Gram Panchayats and Panchayati Raj Institutions with regard to subjects that have a bearing on economic development and social justice in rural areas. A joint programme of action was chalked at the seven Round Tables held during July to December, 2004, between the Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj and State Ministers of Panchayati Raj to ensure that on the basis of Activity Mapping, Panchayats at various levels are devolved with funds, functions and functionaries to enable them to emerge as institutions of self-government. Efforts are also being made to institutionalise social audit measures through Gram Sabhas so that Gram Panchayats are made responsible to the Village Community as a whole.
The Gram Sabha is the most powerful foundation of decentralized governance by ensuring that the elected representatives are directly and regularly accountable to the people. The aim of the government has been to strengthen the Gram Sabha by introducing favourable policy changes. However, the Gram Sabhas are yet to become operational entities and to do justice to their potential for making the Panchayat system truly self-governed and a bottom-up structure. Some of the key features in relation to Gram Sabhas are as follows:

- The quorum for a Gram Sabha meeting remains one tenth & it is essential to have one-third of the quorum as women members.

- The Gram Sabha will work as a supervisory body and audit and regulate the functioning of Gram Panchayats.

- Recommendations of the Gram Sabha will be binding on the Gram Panchayat.

- The Gram Sabha can approve as well as audit expenditure up to three lakhs.

- The Panchayat Karmi (Panchayat Secretary appointed by the Panchayats but drawing salary from the state government) can be removed from his/her post only if the Gram Sabha approves it.

- All the villages within a Gram Panchayat can have separate Gram Sabhas.

- The Gram Sabha will have the right to recall the Pradhan after two and a half years of commencement of his/her tenure.

The key roles entrusted to the Gram Sabha are micro-planning, social audit of Panchayat functioning, ratification of Panchayat accounts, balance sheets, identification
and approval of beneficiaries, and supervisory and regulatory functions. The following indicators were chosen for assessing the prevailing situation in the field:

- Participation and level of awareness of the Gram Sabha.
- Issues of discussion and the process of decision-making.
- Pattern of leadership.
- Capacity of Gram Sabhas.
- Transparency and accountability of the three tiers (GP, PS & ZP) to the Gram Sabha.

In India, women have been deprived of availing various kinds of opportunities and advantages for the past several centuries. Discrimination against women are commonly observed in providing the opportunities of socio – economic development, participation in different activities, and development programmes and availing the opportunities of various facilities, which are directly or indirectly linked with bringing improvements in the life style and the quality of life. Besides these, women are also denied the rights in the decision making process of their family affairs on account of several social and cultural constraints imposed by their family and the continuation of traditional system of the society. Restrictions are also on cultural programmes and even moving outside the households for certain purposes. Due to these problems imposed by traditional form of society against women in their participation in the different economic activities, education, employment, Political system, and the like so they have remained very poor even after over a half century of independence. The socio – economic conditions of
women in rural areas have been found worst even after a half century of independence. The conditions of women in rural areas have also been found even more serious and dissatisfactory than in the urban areas on account of the prevalence of backward traditional social and cultural system of the society. The traditional form of society has a distinct male bias while the women are seriously exploited by men for certain purposes although most household related activities are only performed by women in the rural areas.

Similarly, disadvantages in employment and other activities linked with the betterment of life are commonly observed in the case of women on account of the socio-cultural constraints imposed by their family and discrimination imposed on women in utilizing their rights independently and social compulsions to make movements even for certain distances. Further imposing limitations in availing the opportunities of gainful employment of women in employment which is largely practiced as a result of social values, tend to place women in a secondary position and under the subjugation of men. Therefore, inspite of performing different economic activities it is observed that the employers practice a discriminatory behaviour against women and prefer men for employment.

**Status of Women in Vedic and Post Vedic Period**

Women had a very respectable position and were awarded an honored place in the prevailing social system during the Vedic period, which directly helped them in improving their social status and to maintain their overall social dignity in India. It was
not possible to perform or initiate any kind of social and cultural function and ceremony without the active involvement of women along with their male counterparts. They enjoyed considerable freedom in choosing their mates, participating in different castes and religious communities. Thus the wife was the husband’s companion in weal and woe, mistress of the households and an active partner in all activities – temporal or spiritual (Shastry, 1960). They had the full freedom to attend and make visit in Social gatherings and public places. Even they were provided the freedom of undertaking inter – caste marriages, though the concerned practice was well prevalent among the Brahmins, Shyatriya and Vaishya communities (Pandey, 1990). The men and women family members had equal responsibilities and duties in successfully performing various social and economic activities, and matters related to household affairs which had provided sample opportunity to women in bringing significant improvements in their social status within and outside their households (Maxmumullar, 1940).

However, with the sudden changes in the political, social and economic pattern of the country, the position and status of women started gradually deteriorating mainly during the post Vedic period. The concessional and religious parity was denied to women and the re-marriage of windows was forbidden to those of high strata families. Gradually changing social system also deprived them of availing the opportunities of education, participation in outdoor social and cultural activities. Discrimination against women also started in the distribution of parental property and wealth, though they had equal rights in the property and wealth, though they had equal rights in the property of their father in the
absence of any son in the family. Again, with the emergence of some hard core clergymen on the scene of social and cultural matters the women had not only started receiving bad treatment but they were equally denied the rights on the property of their father and husband (Sahai, 1992). Rights of property to a widow were also not accepted. However, the women had the sole rights on the property, which they receive at the time of marriage from their parents, but they were not given any rights over the spending of this wealth and property. Ortner (1974) pointed out that the women were devaluated everywhere in relation to men and such devaluation was linked to any contrast to the association of women with inferior nature in contrast to the association of men with superior culture.

**Status of Women During Medieval Period**

Women were deprived of different social and economic rights and were brought out under the overall control of their male family members. They became the victims of various social evils such as sati partha, child marriage, pardhah partha, prostitution, girls killings, and the like. Discrimination against the participation, of women, particularly among higher castes, in social functions and economic activities had reached an alarming stage. Therefore, the economic dependency of women on their father and brother increased largely. This further strengthened the economic and survival dependency of women over the men.

**Status of Women During the British Rule**
During this period, the women were denied the benefits of education, and were brought out under the authorization of atmosphere having no opportunities to develop their natural capabilities, became helpless, illiterate narrow minded and peevish (Altekar, 1953). Similarly, Shastry (1959) pointed out that during this period the women were still forced to child marriage and to follow the Sati Rule. Even the poorly developed social and cultural elements were restricting the high caste women to participate in their family business and agricultural activities in the rural areas. They were limited to perform only household related indoor activities such as cooking food, washing clothes and to look after their children, old family members and animals. The condition of widows was rather poor. Since the society had restricted them to participate in social functions and ceremonies. Restricted in a situation of non-availability of any earning male member in the family, they were lacking the opportunity to engage with any economic activity and to earn for their livings. The widows were still deprived of property rights throughout the British Rule. In fact, the British Government had introduced an important Act in 1937 providing the property rights to widows over the property of their husbands. But the overall prevailing social system and conservative religious outlook of people during the British rule has always been biased against women and favoured men in availing certain facilities and opportunities. As a result, to certain extent the men population had also been responsible in deteriorating the socio-economic status of women. All social evils and cultural backwardness developed deteriorated during the British rule in India which had further deteriorated the socio-economic status and original position of women (Sengupta, 1960).
However, during the late nineteenth century various social organizations emerged focusing towards reforms of women. The Indian National Congress also attempted to focus on bringing favourable changes in the socio–economic status of women beginning from its formation in 1885. The participation of women was well visualized and related to the suffering and deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

As a result of increasing association of women with the national movements and the activities of various social organizations they started realizing and became conscious about their strength, work, true place at home and in the society. Consequently, the voices of women came forward with the demand to ensure their equal sharing with men in both private and public spheres of life. Thus, the women’s movement was the expression of the instinctive desire to rise to full liberty of sour, to the fullest development as human being. The direct implication of movements initiated in this period was witnessed in terms of increased enrolments and literacy among women during early periods of independence. The gap between male – female literacy declined from 20.5 percent to 17.0 percent between 1941 and 1951.

**STATUS OF WOMEN IN POLITICS**

In India, participation of women in political process has a long history. In the early Vedic period Women actively participated in public affairs. They had full freedom for spiritual progress and intellectual development. They were free to attend and visit public assemblies and social gatherings. According to Sumana Pandey, during the early Vedic period, women enjoyed relatively high position in Indian society. In the later Vedic
period the status of women was declined considerably.

With the advent of Muslim Turks, social rules and norms towards women became more rigid. Social evil practices such as the system of early marriages, Purdah system, Sati system, the practice of polygamy, dowry system and female infanticide slowly and gradually started taking roots and women lost most of the rights and privileges and got confined to the four walls of their family lives. During the Mughal period, seclusion of women was looked upon as a symbol of respectability among the higher classes.

They were denied the benefits of education and occupied a subjugated and inferior position in society. However, with the coming of British in India, things started changing. In the later part of the British period, the status of women started changing with the introduction of education for women and some legal and administrative changes.

The Christian Missionaries, Voluntary Organizations, the British and Indian social reformers took initiatives to provide education to women and to promote their standing in the society. The activities of the Christian Missionaries in the field of female education gave rise to an enlightened public opinion and in spite of the hostile opposition from the orthodox section; realization of the necessity and importance of female education grew apace in the country. Social reformers raised their voices for restoration of women’s lost prestige, glory and rightful place in society. In this regard, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswarchandra Bandyopadhyay (Vidyasagar) contributed a lot. From 1811 to 1828 Raja Ram Mohan Roy carried on a ‘one man campaign’ against Sati. It was due to the long struggle of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other reformers that Lord William Bentinck passed
the ‘Regulation No.XVII’ on 4th December 1829 which declared *Sati* illegal and punishable by criminal courts. In Bengal, Vidyasagar opened up many schools for girls. He started vigorous campaign in favor of widow remarriage. It was for his constant effort that, Widow Remarriage Act was passed by the Government in 1856. The efforts of Keshab Chandra Sen against early marriages facilitated the enactment of Civil Marriage Act of 1872. For the introduction of female education, remarriage of Hindu widows, prevention of child marriage, Debendranath Tagore established an organization called ‘Samajonnati Bidhayini Suhrid samiti’ which attracted prominent public figure to work for emancipation of women. He submitted a memorandum to the legislative council for removal of legal disabilities of remarry of widows. He donated a large sum, for the propagation of female education. Rabindra Nath Tagore visualized women as great moral forces who add strength and stability to social order. Other social reformers like Hujur Maharaj Rai Saligram Bahadur, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Behramji Malbari, Swami Vivekananda, Gopal Krishna Gokhle all fought hard for upliftment of women by disseminating knowledge with the help of educational institutions.

Although men were the first to take up the cause of women, women too did not lag behind. Some outstanding women of the nineteenth century struggled against the prevalent condition and pursued with all sincerity the object of women’s emancipation. Pandita Ranabai, Ramabai Ranade, Anandibai Joshi, Francina Sorabjee, Kadambini Ganguli, Malanika Karlekar, Begum Rokea Sekhawat Hussain, Begum Sufia Kamal were constantly engaged in their efforts to raise the social position of women. They gave
guidance and direction to a movement which at that time was only in an embryonic stage. Their dauntless struggle against orthodox society became a source of inspiration for many women.

The Independence Movement provided further impetus towards uplifting the position of women in Indian society. The Indian national Congress (INC) which was established in 1885 became a cornerstone in encouraging women to enter into political arena. A large number of women became members of the INC. They came forward to participate in the freedom struggle defying all social taboos, sacrificing physical comfort and denying the validity of all restrictions which has been enforced against them. Mahatma Gandhi emerged on the Indian political scene in 1918 and adopted the technique of passive resistance or ‘Satyagraha’. In his opinion, women were most suited to fight with the new weapons of non-violence and truth. Gandhi commented that in the Non-Cooperation Movement women’s participation was more important than that of the men, because women were the symbol of strength. His message encouraged the womenfolk of India to come out of the four walls of their homes and participate in social and political activities. They became active Satyagrahis and even courted arrest. They held meetings at different places and declared their firm decision to participate fearlessly in the Independence Movement. Women freedom fighters like Sarojini Bose, Sushila Devi, Purani Devi, Radha Devi, Sister Nivedita, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Sarla Devi, Kasturba Gandhi, Swarooprani Nehru, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, Uma Nehru, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Margaret Cousins, Nelli Sengupta,
Kanaklata Baruah, Bhogaswari Phukanani, Anupriya Baruah, Sudhalata Dutta, Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Waddeder all played memorable role in the freedom struggle of India.

Initiatives were also taken by many organizations like The Ladies Association (1886), Sarda sadan (1892), Gujrati Hindu Stree Mandal (1908), Seva Sadan (1909), Chimnabai Maternity and child Welfare league (1914), Bhagini Samaj (1916) to mobilize and organize women and to provide them a platform to enter into public life. In 1910 the Bharat Stree Mahamandal was inaugurated, in 1917 Women’s Indian Association was established again in 1925 the National Council of Women was established and in 1927 the first All India Women’s Conference took place. All these organizations took various effective steps for bringing women on an equal footing with men.

In 1921 women got the right to vote in the election of Madras Legislative Council. Gradually, Indian legislatures; one after another started enfranchising women of their respective provinces on the same term as men. In April 1926, women got the right to sit in the legislative councils of Madras, Bombay, Punjab and Central provinces. Kamladevi Chattopadhyay and Haunan Angelo became the first women to contest the elections to legislative councils. In 1927, the Governor of Madras nominated Muthulakshmi Ammal to be a member of Madras legislative council, who was known to be the first Indian women member in Legislative Council.

After independence, various initiatives have been undertaken for bringing improvements in the socio-economic status and empowerment of women. For example, the constitution of India has laid down the foundation of participatory democracy and has
guaranteed the ‘Right to Equality’ to all its citizens. The Indian Constitution guarantees political equality through adult franchise. Article 14 provides for equality-substantive as well as procedural. Article 16(2) forbids discrimination in respect of any employment of office under the state on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them. This normatively ensures a significant position and status to Indian women. The Articles which concern women directly and have a special bearing on their status include Article 39(a) - right to an adequate means of livelihood for men and women equally; Article 39 (d) - equal pay for equal work for both men and women; Article 39 (e) - protection of the health and strength of workers- men, women and children; Article 42 - just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. These provisions and the chapters on the Fundamental Rights envision a new socio-political order based on the principles of equality and equity.

In view of providing a concrete and actual shape to the initiatives and measures underlined in the constitutional provisions for social and economic uplifment of women, the economic development planning was introduced in 1951. The government had also formed various social legislations and passed several acts for raising the legal and social status of women. However, these constitutional provisions and measures had not helped much of the Indian women to play a direct and dominant role in political life. Traditional mindset of Indian people also goes for exclusion of women from political life. The traditional attitude of Indian people towards women work assumes that the place of women is mainly concentrated to the household activities and upbringing of their
children. They have been considered inferior to men in different spheres of knowledge and life. Thus though women constitute half of the total population of the country, they are not visible in political and economic sphere. Women’s representation in state assemblies and in the parliament also reflects low level of women’s political participation. Women members occupy only 44 seats in the present Lok Sabha (14th Lok Sabha, 2009 - 2014) out of total 539 seats (i.e., 8.16%) and only 23 seats in the present Rajya Sabha (2009-2010) out of total 243 seats (i.e., 9.47%). The statistics shows that the political strength of women till today has never crossed 10 percent of the total members of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. Women who want to enter politics find that the political, cultural and social environment often becomes unfriendly or even hostile to them. Though it is remarkable that after independence Indians have seen women as Prime Minister, President, as Members of the constituent assembly, Ministers at central and state level, Governors and other administrative posts, yet this does not translate into active participation of women in political processes as true sense of the term.

The attitudes of society which is openly disfavouring women for availing certain opportunities have deeply distorted their social and political status both in urban and rural areas. The socio-economic condition of women in rural areas have been found more serious and dissatisfactory than in urban areas on account of the prevalence of backward traditional, social and cultural system of the society. Keeping into consideration the unsatisfactory progress of women it has increasingly felt desirable that involving rural women with any political institutions including in the affairs of decision making process,
would be an important instrumental measure for improving the socio-economic status of women and thereby empowering them. In view of these assumptions the policy of providing ‘reservation’ for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has been thought as an important governmental intervention for maximizing the participation of women in local level political institutions in the decision making process.

Many thinkers are totally opposed to reservation for women. According to them the system of reservation is unfair and undemocratic therefore it should not be followed. However, some other thinkers opine that despite the existence of the constitutional and legislative provisions, women remain invisible in political and administrative posts. According to them, it is only through reservation that the presence of women in political institutions can be ensured which in turn may encourage many other women to come out of the age-old barriers imposed on them and to share political power on equal footing with men.

Though Panchayati Raj system is age old, yet women did not figure in it. Different research works have indicated that no woman was found as a ‘gramini’ or a member of village assembly in ancient Indian village system. In the traditional village Panchayats and in the British scheme of local governments women remained entirely excluded. The Franchise Committee set up by the British Government that discussed the constitution of statutory villages panchayats, did not also consider the question of women’s representation in Panchayats. After independence the political leaders took care to see women in the realm of decision making process.
Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru envisaged the inclusion of women in the PRIs. When Swaraj was declared, Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘as long as women of India do not take part in public life there can be no salvation for the country; the dream of decentralization could never be fulfilled. I would have no use for the kind of Swaraj to which such women have not made their full contribution’. Nehru said, ‘in political life everyone has a vote, in economic matters everyone has equal opportunities, and in our Panchayats also everyone should be considered equal. There should be no distinction between man and woman, high and low. We have to march ahead in a spirit of unity and brotherhood and with faith in our work and ourselves’.

Initiatives towards providing an opportunity to women in the form of associating them with the village Panchayats were first mooted by the Balawanta Rai Mehta Committee in 1957. The Committee recommended that at least two women should be included in the Panchayats as co-opted members. The Committee also specified that the selection of the two women would be based on the interest they took in activities relating to welfare of women and children. This indeed was the first occasion when women were able to have a role in the Panchayati Raj System, though not as elected members. In establishing Panchayats most state governments appended the provision of co-option of two women in case no women could come through direct elections. In 1978, the Ashok Mehta Committee provided the same co-option opportunity for women in the PRIs. The fourth meeting of the Central Council of Local Self Government in 1958 also suggested for reservation of two seats for women in the PRIs.
Maharashtra was the first state which introduced the provision for the nomination of one or two women to each of the three tier PRIs under its Zilla Parishad and Panchayati Act of 1961. Later Karnataka in 1983 and Andhra Pradesh in 1986 introduced the policy of reservation of 25 seats for women in Gram Panchayats and Zilla Parishads. The state like West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Orissa had also made the provision to reserve 20 percent to 30 percent of the total seats for women candidates in different tiers of local bodies in their respective states.

However the provision of co-option could not bring a large number of women members to the PRIs. The method of co-option was not made compulsory and therefore the women members could not get the benefit of it. The requirement of co-option was not followed uniformly for all PR bodies and in every state. Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir for instance did not follow the scheme. Co-option was primarily used as patronage. Most of the women were from the politically connected families. The co-opted women hardly attended Panchayat meetings. They were called in only when quorum was the problem, otherwise their signatures were obtained from houses after the meetings. According to Pam Rajput most of the women members were neither aware of their role, rights or duties nor did they know much about the functioning of the Panchayats. They were just satisfied with the prestige and status symbol of being a member. They did not feel confident enough to discuss various issues relating to rural development or women’s development. Women members consequently could not play an important role in the Panchayati Raj Process.
The realization that women always have been disadvantaged and marginalized from various development processes had led to a conscious effort among the development planners to provide equal space to women to participate in development process. Development planners had learned that without women’s full and informed participation, development projects are unlikely to succeed and women’s empowerment cannot be achieved. Attempts had been made at national level to bring equality and to provide equal opportunity to both men and women to participate in development programmes. The Government started many development projects especially for women to help them overcome their inequalities. But unfortunately, the developments since independence have not produced the desired results in actual practice due to social inhibitions and organizational deficiencies. An enormous disparity still exists between formal political equality of women and their meaningful exercise of political power. Despite all the legislation, policies and programmes of the government, it has been realized that women still continue to be one of the most oppressed sections of society. Government sponsored development activities seem to have benefitted only a small section of women, mainly of the urban middle class. A large majority of women have not benefitted from development.

Its reflection is found in a report titled ‘Towards Equality’ published by the Committee on the Status of women in India (CSWI) in 1974. The Committee very strongly recommended that women should be provided with special opportunities for participation in the representative structure of Local Government. This committee also
suggested for establishment of women’s gram Panchayats to involve more women in the activities of Panchayats.

The National Perspective Plan (NPP) for women (1988) also highlighted that co-option of women in the PRIs did not bring about any perceptible impact on women’s participation in Panchayats. The NPP also asserted that special intervention was necessary to give more thrust and responsiveness to the policies and programmes related to empowerment of women in the participatory democracy. The final report of the NPP therefore recommended for women the following policy perspectives. They are (a) 30 percent reservation of total seats in local governments—both panchayats and municipalities, (b) 30 percent reservation of executive heads in all PR bodies, (c) reservation of certain percentage of constituencies in lower PR tiers as exclusively women constituencies, and (d) 50 percent of all grass-root functionaries would be women.

Consequent upon the recommendations of the NPP regarding reservation of seat and post for women in local governments, the 64th Amendment Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 15th May 1989. The special feature of this Bill was 30 percent reservation of seats for women in the three tier PRIs. Despite of putting so much effort on the Bill it was not passed. The bill was defeated in the upper house. Another Bill was introduced in September 1990 but it could not be taken up because of the fall of the then government.

After the general elections of 1991, new government came to power and
introduced the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill. The Bill was referred to the Joint Committee of the Parliament and after incorporating suggestions of the joint committee the Bill was finally passed in Parliament on 23rd December, 1992 and came into force from 24th April, 1993. The 73rd Amendment Act opened up a new vista in Indian politics as far as women’s political participation is concerned. It reserved constitutionally 33% of seats for women in PRIs. This Amendment aimed at making rural women not only beneficiaries of development but more importantly contributors to it.

Following this Amendment, States and Union Territories have modified their Panchayat Acts to conform to the new dispensation within the stipulated date of April 24, 1994. Panchayats Acts of the States and Union Territories have reserved not less than one third seats and posts for women, Till the end of 2000, elections were held in 20 states and 4 union territories reserving panchayat seats and posts for women.

Some states have gone further to incorporate in the Panchayati Raj Acts the provision to enable women to assume the post of vice chairperson if the post of chairperson does not befall to them. In Maharashtra every chairperson is to hold office for one year instead of usual five years. In Karnataka, the tenure of chairperson is to rotate after 20 months so that majority of member including women, will get the chance to head the PR body.

The reservation provision for women provided by the 73rd Amendment Act has been hailed as a bold, revolutionary and a right step. The reservation provided to women in the PRIs created the ‘necessary enabling conditions for women empowerment’ their
sustained interest and involvement in public affairs. It is presumed that gradually an environment would evolve which will deepen the concept of participatory democracy by providing gender equality, justice and equity in India.

In the post 1993 phase women’s participation seems to have improved in relative terms but still women members are to overcome a number of hindrances. The Act itself is considered as a significant step to make inroads to democratization process. It is a beginning which needs to be substantiated by changes in many other fields related to socio-economic, political and attitudinal values of our society. Various social restrictions still prevail in our society to lend support to the policy perspective provided by the 73rd Amendment Act. The changes in the PRIs structures over the years have certainly ensured higher visibility of women in grass root level democracy but whether that translates to real empowerment of women is subjected to corresponding changes in many others fields.

**REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

Today women are more and more getting the space in public life, on the one hand through enhanced awareness on female education and literacy and on the other hand through their participation and representation in policies and governance. Particularly women’s role in the local governance process is enormous in terms of their participation in elections, economic development programmes through self-help groups, social audit, gram sabha, and the like. the contemporary Indian women have become not only the exclusive subjects of representation, but also the active participants in the various
processes of socio-cultural and political changes. Though slow, the empowerment process takes a gradual leap towards improvement in the living and working conditions of women and their part in decision making becomes an unavoidable phenomenon. This also results in women being the role models for good governance and be the front line in all the struggles of demands for rights and entitlements of the citizens and communities towards the state.

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

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 had been declared as the "Year of Women Empowerment". 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. 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. The NGOs are also involved in capacity building of women Members and Chairpersons of Panchayats. Similar capacity building initiatives have also been funded by the UNICEF in consultation with the Ministry of Rural Development in the States of Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Bengal. 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 also taken several steps towards greater devolution of functional and financial powers to the Panchayats. However, States/UTs have been requested to make all out efforts to create public awareness about the role of women representatives in Panchayats.

Women’s empowerment is critical to the process of the development of the mainstream of development 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 cannot be achieved without the full and active participation of women and bring them into the mainstream an enabling environment with requisite policies and programmes. An institutional mechanism 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 for women 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, a
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. Women are active participants
in the self-help groups and user groups. 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 organizations with proven track record for
conducting training and awareness generation programmes on panchayati raj.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND PARTICIPATION

Women constitute almost half of the total population, without whose participation
it is impossible to bring about successful participatory democracy. Hence, women's
empowerment and participation is being studied separately in this section. Democratic
decentralization would be rendered meaningless unless gender equality is ensured. The
pace of development in the society would be slow if women constituting half of the
population are not facilitated to participate in the development process. The Panchayat
cannot stand the test of success without adequate participation of women.
The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 may be considered as a watershed in the history of the state's initiatives in regard to political empowerment of rural women. The Amendment Act is a landmark since its objectives are to empower women by creating 33 percent reservation of seats. For the first time in the history of Indian polity, it has provided a minimum number of seats and political offices in the Panchayats for women. The Clause (3) of Article 243 D inserted in the Indian Constitution by the 73rd Amendment Act provides that "not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the Panchayat". Similarly the Clause (2) of the article provides that "not less than one-third of the total numbers of seats reserved (for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Moreover, the provision under the clause (4) of the said Article which deals with reservation of offices of the Chairpersons in the Panchayats for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Women stipulates that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of the chairperson in the Panchayats of each level shall be reserved for women.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN ON THE GROUND-EXPERIENCE FROM TAMIL NADU

It is almost nearing 20 years since the passage 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment guaranteeing representation of women in local governance. And in most of
the seats, at least a decade of experience, women have gained from local governance. Many successful elected women representatives have received State, National and the UN awards for their best performance in the field of total sanitation, Health Awareness, Rain Water Harvesting, Clean Village, and the like. It is almost a first generation of women entering the political participation at village level through local governance. These experiences are increasingly shared for public debate through conferences and conventions organized by various civil society organizations across the country. There are specific state experiences of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, etc where elected women panchayat presidents conventions have highlighted the current oppressive nature of local governance and call for protective as well as promotional mechanism for women to exercise their duties independently.

There are some civil society intervention in forming and facilitating associations of elected women representatives to demand for greater devolution of power, finance and functionaries for local government bodies to ensure basic human rights of all. For instance, civil society organizations who are NGOs, Academicians, Educationists, Legal experts, and the like, have gathered and initiated the Tamil Nadu women panchayat presidents’ federation. The elected women leaders of this federation have constantly raising issues of women in local governance and demand for state intervention every year through their state conference and various processes of advocacy and lobbying. Similarly Bihar panchayat women have evolved their own charter of demands in which issues and demands for empowering the women in local governance emphasised and action plan for
pressuring the state is evolved through various deliberations. Keeping these in mind, the present research has been proposed to study the past, present and future condition of elected women representatives in Panchayat Raj Institutions in Madurai district.

REFERENCES: