ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

From conceptualization to the completion, this study has been a long soulful journey for me. I am thankful to many people who were with me in this journey. To begin with, I am very thankful to Dr Gurpreet Mahajan, my supervisor since without her support this thesis would never have been submitted. Indeed, her enriching inputs were a great help for the final completion of the study. I shall be always very indebted for her patience, kindness and guidance.

I also wish to thank Dr. Susheela Kaushik whom I met as a student of Political Science in University of Delhi pursuing M.A. degree, and subsequently, under her supervision, wrote my dissertation on women’s participation in 'Panchayati Raj' elections in Uttar Pradesh held in 1995. She made me think for the first time about issues related to rural women's political empowerment through Panchayati Raj. The subject of this dissertation was carried forward from my M.Phil dissertation in JNU under the supervision of my guide Prof. C.P. Bhambhri on 'Emerging leadership in Panchayati Raj', through a case study of Kanpur district in Uttar Pradesh. I am grateful to him for mentoring me and being very supportive till now. Eventually, as part of my PhD study, which commenced in 1998 first under the supervision of Prof. Neerja Jayal in JNU, I went out to meet the elected women panchayat representatives in Gujarat, since the first term of the panchayats' of five years was to get over by the year 2000, in almost all states of India. I completed my field work till 2001 and for the much needed insight and guidance during this phase, I am thankful to Dr Jayal for her support and guidance. However, with her moving to a different Centre in JNU and my moving out of India (to Trinidad and then to Canada) with marriage and work, I was de-registered and resumed my work with Dr Gurpreet Mahajan in January 2004 and worked with her till Nov 2004 for strengthening the content and arguments of the thesis.

From 1998-2001, I was able to meet several women groups in Gujarat through Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) for my field study and I am thankful to all of them. For the entire period of my field study, I was based in Gujarat, which was unfortunately struck with several natural disasters during the entire phase of my field work. Firstly, in early 1998, Gujarat was trying to cope up with the cyclone that hit Gujarat and this was followed by a severe drought for three consecutive years of 1999-2001 and the third year witnessed both drought and a worst ever earthquake in January 2001 witnessed in the history of India. However, I saw poor women bravely and judiciously managing their resources during severe water crisis situations of three
consecutive drought years and the earthquake. These disasters compounded the crisis of water again and again. My research is a product of this time from the year 1998 to 2001. I have been a witness to these disasters very closely by staying with the people, the poor women and with SEWA. Through my research I learnt that the women of Gujarat are very enterprising and highly visionary and how SEWA helps poor self employed women in becoming leaders of their own economic and social development activities making them able to lead, decide and influence projects that concern them. I am thankful to SEWA for giving me the opportunity to reach out these women. The power and tenacity of the poor women was an empowering experience for me also. Therefore, this PhD thesis means more to me than a book. I am very grateful to these women of Gujarat for demonstrating to me the power of their collective strength.

I also owe a great deal to SEWA's founder Elaben Bhatt, and also all co-ordinators, especially Renana Jhabwala and Reema Nanavaty and Namrata Bali, who helped me a great deal during my stay in Gujarat. They are indeed great human beings who are the guiding force behind the amazing women's movement that relates to the poor women of India. Through my association with SEWA, I have also been very fortunate in being part of three research studies conducted in Gujarat during this period, which though not directly related to this work have made a deep impact in developing a deeper understanding of the issues and methodology discussed in this study. I am therefore thankful firstly to the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute and Dr Sara Ahmed of IRMA (Institute of Rural Management), secondly to the International Resource Center (IRC) and its co-ordinators Christine van Wijk and Jennifer Francis, and last but not least to the Development Fund for International Development (for the study conducted with inputs from myself, Joep Vershesen and Aditi Kapoor). Finally, my sincere gratitude is to my family and friends for giving me the strength to take up the work of this magnitude. At the end, I feel contended and satisfied at finding some of the very crucial answers to the issues of poor women that I have been searching for almost ten years as a research student in M.A., M.Phil and PhD. This was a very fascinating exploration for me. My quest ends here but the journey has just begun as my experience has strengthened my faith on women as a great transforming force in social and political life of nations, which must and can never be undervalued.

Preeti Misra