Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

The declaration of the International Year of Women in 1975 and the Women’s Decade (1976-85) lead to special attention for women’s issues in India. The Indian Parliament passed a resolution ‘to initiate a comprehensive programme of legislative and administrative measures aimed at removing, as far as possible, the economic and social injustices, disabilities and discriminations to which Indian women continue to be subjected’.

The evolution of ‘Developmental Approach’ from the ‘Welfare Approach’ in the policies of Indian Government can be seen from the Seventies. Department of Social Welfare, Government of India, appointed a committee to evaluate the status of women. The committee submitted its report entitled ‘Towards Equality’ in 1974. The report stressed the need for increased political participation and representation of women in political institutions. To achieve this end the committee recommended the reservation of seats in the village Panchayats for women.

The Sixth Plan (1980-85) emphasized the potential of women as an agent of development. However, it was in the Seventh Plan (1985-90) that the idea of women’s empowerment got specific attention. Women’s role was considered crucial for the development of the country. A participatory approach for development was adopted. These changes of approach lead to the necessity of women’s empowerment so that they may participate effectively in the
developmental activities of the society. Since then, a chain of Government efforts can be observed with the aim of empowering Indian women in different spheres of socio-political life to ensure their equal participation in the country’s development programmes.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1993 has reserved one-third of the total seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institution. This Act has played very significant role in the empowerment of rural women by paving a way for their participation in the development of the village, which was earlier an exclusive domain of rural men.

The effective participation of the rural women at the grass root level required the qualities and vision of a leader among rural women. The traditional profile of rural women depict them as an illiterate, ignorant, poor, politically inactive, confined to domestic affairs and accepting dictates from their male family members in different spheres of life. Education, awareness, active political participation, socio-political and economic independence are some of the prerequisites for developing leadership abilities among rural women. In view of this, various programmes have been launched by the Government at centre and state level to empower rural women socially, educationally, politically, financially and in all other spheres of life.

The present study entitled ‘Empowerment of Rural Women: A Study of Panchayati Raj Institution’ has focused to examine the impact of reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institution, in the empowerment of rural women, the emerging pattern of women’s leadership and their capability as an agent of change.

The development of any society, to a large extent depends on the profile of its leadership which is reflected by their social
background. The findings of the present empirical research reveal that women Pradhan and members of the village Panchayats constitute a group of middle aged, lowly educated, married and low income women. Their family background suggests that they have come from less educated middle class agricultural joint families. Since both the villages under study have almost predominance of scheduled castes and other backward castes, most of the members do represent these two caste group. So far as political background is concerned women do not have the membership of any political party. However, in most of the cases their male family members have party membership. Besides this, almost all the members are first time entrants in the village Panchayats. It may be inferred from the above that women leadership of both the villages are not adequately educated and experienced in political and administrative spheres. Similar observations have been made by other scholars who have studied the social profile of women leadership in Panchayats (K.Sudha:1994, K.C.Vaidhya:1997, S.N.Ambedkar:2000, Mukesh Sharma: 2002, Seema Singh: 2003). It may be concluded that rural women’s socio-political profile has still not changed much in spite of the various Government efforts ensuring their education, political participation, economic independence. A change in the rural ethos, giving equal status to women, may ensure her profile of an educated, aware, independent and active women leader with a vision.

Another controversial issue in the empowerment of women is the 73rd Constitutional Amendment act which has reserved seats for women in Panchayats. Reservation will be allotted by rotation to different villages to make sure that the women of every village get their chance to participate. The opinion on reservation for women can
be seen divided among three groups i.e. critics, supporters and supporters with conditions.

The critics of the reservation policy argue that it is undemocratic and will lead to unfair protection. Capable women will come forward on their own to participate in politics and developmental activities through Panchayats. Compulsion of reserved seats will bring unwilling and incapable women also in Panchayats.

The supporters’ main argument in favor of reservation for rural women in PRI was that they should not only remain beneficiaries of the development but more importantly act as contributors. It is contended that reservation is a means to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women. Reservation has ensured participation of rural women in the development of the villages. Since women have traditionally been excluded from the participation in politics and administration in the rural society only reservation can ensure their participation. It has been observed that women are contesting only on reserved seats. For unreserved seats only males contest and women remain excluded, although she can also contest for these seats. Contesting and winning election against a man candidate is very difficult in rural society. From this it may be perceived that women are still politically inactive in rural society and only through reservation they can be encouraged to participate.

The followers of the third group comment that reservation for women is good but there should be some restrictions regarding minimum educational qualifications. Without education and awareness women can not adequately participate in the developmental activities. Further, women should be given proper training about her role in the Panchayats.
Whatever may be the arguments for and against reservation of seats for women, some of the observable benefits of this for women in PRI are as follows. Firstly, their entry in Panchayats has been ensured which was almost impossible if not prohibited earlier. Secondly, their participation has increased in the politics of the village. Thirdly, they are now aware of the requirements in the development of the village. Fourthly, their involvement has increased in the decision-making of developmental activities. Fifthly, they have come out from the four walls of the household to the wider world. Sixthly, their awareness on various socio-political issues has increased. Seventhly, their dependence on males has reduced in various spheres of life. Lastly, the process of the empowerment of the rural women has begun.

Empowerment of women is a multidimensional process which enables women to realize power in the different spheres of life i.e. social, political, economic etc. Reservation for women in PRI has initiated this process for rural women whose traditional profile depicted them socially, politically and economically weak and dependent on males. For the development of the society equal participation of both men and women is a must. Since rural women remained abstain from rural development their empowerment is a must for ensuring and mobilizing their greater participation in developmental activities. Women’s empowerment is synonymous with the achievement of equality of men and women. In the concept of empowerment the world power entails the capacity to act independently and the ability to influence others. The concept of empowerment is egalitarian in nature as it gives stress on the equality of sexes in society. Empowerment can be perceived on both the levels i.e. individual and group. Empowerment of women means sharing of
power by women with men. Empowerment as product refers to the state of holding a powerful position. Reservation for women in PRI is a means for the empowerment of rural women. In the proposed study the concept of empowerment has been used to examine the process of increased sharing of power by rural women with men as a result of reservation in PRI in particular and other efforts of the Government through various programmes in general.

First of all the opinion of the respondents has been analyzed on various issues related with the reservation of seats for rural women in PRI. The findings of the present empirical research reveal that a majority of the women was aware of the reservation of seats for them. However, about the size of reservation majority of the women was not sure. Majority of the women perceived reservation necessary for their entry in the Panchayats. Contrary to it, a small section of rural women was not in favour of reservation due to various obstacles in their participation, viz. lack of education, overburden of household work, traditional rural ethos, dependence on men and problems pertaining to weaker sex.

Almost all the rural men knew about the reservation for women and its size. Majority of the men also considered the size of reservation as sufficient. Majority of the men respondents perceived the size of reservation sufficient. Those who opposed reservation argued that women can not work adequately due to lack of education, awareness and experience. Majority of the Government officials were also in favour of reservation for greater participation of women. The unanimous opinion of the majority of the women, men and Government officers may be observed in favour of reservation for
women in order to ensure their greater participation in the PRI and development of the village.

Increasing participation of women in Panchayats is a desirable goal in the empowerment of rural women. Traditionally, women have been excluded from politics. United Nations in the report ‘Women Challenges to the year 2000’ observed that, “Women who try to succeed in the world of politics discover that the hurdles they face, whether based on tradition, finances, ethnicity or organization, are compounded by the hurdles that is theirs by birth that of gender” (2000:52). Indian traditional rural ethos also excludes women from politics. However, with reservation in PRI rural women are getting more curious and enthusiastic for participation in the political activities. In the present study the participation of women in politics has been examined in terms of their involvement in voting, canvassing and contesting elections. The data revealed that majority of the women voted in the elections. However, it is important to note here that they do not vote independently, but follow the dictates of their husband and also do not consider anything wrong in doing so. Women in Panchayats have not been able to crystallize rural women into voters’ block and this has worked against their empowerment. Due to this reason even political parties do not consider rural women as a vote bank. In canvassing only a small section of rural women participate and they are those who are themselves contesting or their relations are candidates. Majority of the women do not participate in canvassing due to their busy house-hold schedule and rough atmosphere in village politics. In regard to the contesting of elections majority of the women do not favour it. A majority of elected women were even not in favour of contesting election. It was revealed that
women contested election on being pursued by some male family members who in most of the cases were their husbands. Therefore, during the election campaign, most of the women candidates have been projected as someone’s wife, mother or any other relative. This is very much evident from the advertisements of women contestants’ election campaign. In Panchayats’ elections, the abilities and qualifications of the contestant women are seldom a matter of concern as most of them were themselves unknown and known only through their husband, father or any other male family member. The study reveals that in spite of being members of Panchayats, women respondents are not in favour of women’s participation in politics. These responses indicate their uneasy situation in Panchayats where they find themselves unable to function independently due to many reasons. It may be observed that rural women themselves are responsible for their political isolation due to their continued surrender to men in the decision making processes. In spite of their participation in PRI for the last few years women still have not been able to develop the capability of independent decision making.

Majority of the men respondents favored participation of women only in voting and did not perceive canvassing and contesting of elections, conducive for women. Short-time engagements of women in the political activities are not objected by men. The subordination of women in family acts as a structural constraint in the way of their empowerment. Due to gender based division of labor in the family, women have to bear the burden of house-hold work more than men. Men in rural society do not share women’s family burden at home. Political participation clashes with their family roles and
burden. In view of this, it may be concluded that women are also discouraged by males for active participation in politics.

Various other reasons have been given by men and women respondents for low participation of women, viz. traditional rural ethos excluding women from village politics, roughness and violence in village politics, women’s apathy to participate, overburden of house-hold work, lack of awareness and women’s dependence on men. The women aspiring for political ambitions are labeled as irresponsible by the family members and male dominated society. She will need a great courage to condemn these views and go forward with her ambitions. She may even have to face the threats of violence to throttle her political ambition. This has resulted in apathy among women towards political participation. Moreover, women’s image in the traditional rural ethos is that of a nurturer, passive, emotional house wife.

Social taboos perpetuate rural women’s ignorance and ensure their inaction in political sphere. Socialization based on the importance of ‘respectability’ subtly indoctrinates that no respectable women ever participate in politics. Thus, rural women are effectively prevented from actively participating in political activities. If womanhood and politics are integrated there would be nothing wrong in women’s participation in politics.

Granting of equality in the fundamental rights, reservation of one third of the seats in PRI and passing of progressive laws have not given desired results in the empowerment of rural women. It was revealed by the study that most of the rural women do not have any knowledge of the rights protecting their socio-economic interests, viz. right in family property etc. Legal measures adopted for the
empowerment of women suffer from proper implementation. Even now rural women suffer inequality, domination and exploitation at home and outside.

The modern role model for women demands them to be politically active, ambitious and competitive. ‘Nari Shakti’ and ‘Nari Mukti’ are the slogans of today’s women. In such a situation women have two options i.e. firstly, women become aggressive in politics in spite of being labeled as ‘unfeminine and indecent’ in rural society, secondly, remain passive following the traditional ethos. In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century the general view is that the rural women are showing signs of political awakening. Contrary to it, the study reveals that rural women have chosen the second option due to various reasons. Women are still passive and their progress is hindered by illiteracy, male dominance and traditional ethos. Although, reservation of seats has ensured women’s entry in the Panchayats but it has failed to ensure their greater, active and independent participation and political empowerment.

The great Philosopher, Socerates in one of his dialogues had said that ‘There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance’. Education is the first pre-requisite for the empowerment of rural women who have been largely illiterate in Indian rural society. Government has made various efforts for mobilizing support for women’s education and also provided facilities for their education. In traditional rural ethos women’s education has not been encouraged. It has been feared that education may prove as a disruptive force within the family that is structured in such a way that harmony depends on the submissiveness of the women. The ethos of patriarchy pervades the rural society. Girls’ education is not encouraged and instead she is
taught the skills of domestic work at home. The custom of dowry is also deep-rooted in rural society and leads to the neglect of girls’ education. Women’s ignorance is deliberately maintained by systematic denial of education.

The present empirical research reveals that a majority of rural women agree with the need of girls’ education. Similarly, most of the male respondents have also favored girls’ education. In spite of this enrolment of girls’ in the schools is very low and the number of early drop-outs is very high. Government has made efforts through various programmes for making girls’ education popular in rural society viz; ‘Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan’. However, girls’ education still has been neglected in both the villages due to gender bias, poverty, lack of educational facilities, early marriages etc. It may be concluded that girls’ education, particularly above primary and secondary level is still rare to find. Educational empowerment which influences the empowerment in other areas is yet to be achieved.

Economic independence is very much necessary for the empowerment of women and traditionally, rural women have been to a great extent, economically dependent on men. There has been a misrepresentation in rural society that a women’s economic role in the family and society is marginal and, therefore, merely supplementary. Contrary to it, the reality of the economics of rural family suggests that women’s contribution in the fulfillment of the basic needs of the family is no less than men. Women work harder and for long hours, engaged in more tedious jobs within and outside the family. Her activities of fuel collection, storing the produce and taking care of domestic animals do not receive economic consideration.
Women’s agricultural work in the family farm remains unpaid and un-noticed, and all the produce of the farm belongs to the men. Since men go out of the village for a job or for various other reasons, women look after the agriculture. It has been observed that agriculture is increasingly becoming a female activity leading to Feminization of agriculture (Sen.D: 1990, Aiyer, Shanaz: 1990). In spite of this their contribution in agriculture has always been neglected. Her work as agricultural laborer is always more hard and of long duration but very lowly paid in comparison to men. The Equal Remuneration Act 1976 provides right for equal wages to women, but in the actual practice the discrimination continues.

Various other factors have been contributing in women’s economic dependence on men, viz. lack of education, vocational training, employment and awareness. Another important factor for their dependence is that they are not the owners of land. Because of this they can not get loans from the banks and make productive investments. Women have been virtually excluded from gainful assets and resources and this has lead to their subordinate status in the family. The cultural environment, social values and legal system are most of the times biased against women and curtail their access to key resources, viz. land, credit, education, training and employment etc. Rural women do not have such vocational training which may provide them a remunerative work. Moreover, the technological advancement in agricultural work has also negatively influenced women by excluding them from many activities which they were earlier doing. Lack of access to technology has increased their economic dependence. It may be concluded that for all economic purposes male family head is considered as the decision maker in the family. Women
are always economically dependent on men even for their basic requirements.

The data obtained from the present study revealed that majority of the women and men respondents agreed with women’s doing a job. However, there is a paucity of jobs for women in the villages. Moving out from the villages for a job is neither allowed by males and nor women are interested in doing so. It may be observed that rural women are still economically dependent on male family members and yet to be empowered.

Social empowerment of the rural women is also an important objective of the reservation of seats for women in village Panchayats. An increase in the number of women in Panchayats will mean more spokeswomen for women’s issues and interests. The position of rural women as Pradhan and members of Panchayats will contribute in their social empowerment. For social empowerment women are supposed to act individually and at group level. Women are not a homogenous group and there are many factors that separate them. In the process of empowerment individual efforts are less effective than group efforts. Women will be in a much better position in implementing social changes and solving their problems if they are able to act at group level giving moral support to one another. Group effort and support contribute in generating confidence to act with more power. However, the study reveals that women within the Panchayats and in the villages are not organized. Neither elected women in Panchayats tried to contact rural women, nor rural women contacted them for women’s issues and problems. It appears that women members of Panchayats have not shown any concern for organizing the rural women to initiate joint efforts for their upliftment. The organized efforts will strengthen
their struggle for equality. The advantages of reservation and various Government programmes can be availed only by organized efforts. In Indian rural society examples of women’s organized efforts can be seen on religious platforms in the form of Bhajan Mandalies and in recent protests against the alcohol shops which have direct repercussions on their family life. However, the present study reveals that lack of unity among rural women is also working as an obstacle in their empowerment.

Social empowerment will start from the family. In rural families the older women discourage young generation of women from the efforts of empowerment by curtailing their movement in the outside world for education, vocational training, employment and political participation. In the joint families elderly women enforce the traditional ethos of discrimination and subordination of women. In rural families women’s submissiveness is valued. Women’s subordination is justified for the welfare of the family and it is contended that too much freedom to women would result in the family to suffer. Social empowerment of women in the family will require adult education among rural women for transforming their attitude towards progressive thinking.

Self image plays an important role in the social empowerment of women. This includes faith and confidence of women in their capabilities and potentials. It is important to note that rural women have a very poor and pathetic self-image. This image is the result of women’s socialization in a traditional ethos of inequality of sexes which project women inferior to men in almost all the spheres of life. This self-image hampers her confidence in taking decisions
independently. Lack of education, ignorance and position of dependence of women plays a great role in it.

Rural women lack awareness about their contribution in the family, agriculture and society. Awareness is important in the process of empowerment. The answer to the problem of social injustice lies in rural women’s own awareness. Traditionally, male and female roles have been very distinct. In rural family men function in the public sphere while the domestic sphere is for women and this lead to her ignorance in the matters of outside world. Social literacy, which refers to the general awareness about the importance of education, cleanliness, health and nutritious food, functions of Panchayats, Government schemes for their welfare and empowerment of women, may improve their awareness and self image. The study reveals that most of the women respondents are unaware of their interests and rights. The main source of information for women respondents was radio and TV. As most of them are illiterate and poor printed media is out of their reach. Government officers also can play a significant role in providing information regarding the functioning of Panchayats and developmental programmes of the Government for rural development. However, Government officers do not show a serious concern as reported by women respondents.

Physical and mental health is also related with women’s empowerment. Gender inequality in the rural family results in the low priority to women’s health. Women often do not receive medication until their condition become alarming. They do not get fully nutritious diet. Malnutrition has a great impact on women’s health from infancy and childhood to adolescent and reproductive phase. The bias in health considerations starts from their early age, and continues for the
entire life. For this women themselves are also to be blamed as they neglect their health as long as possible. Lack of medical facilities, ignorance and poverty are the other reasons for women’s poor health. Moreover, the repeated pregnancies without respite in the physical workload of the household add to women’s poor health. The present empirical research revealed lack of medical facilities and women’s ignorance and apathy as the most important factors of women’s poor health. Empowerment of women will entail restructuring of gender relations within the family.

The empowerment of women Pradhan and members will be reflected in the nature of their participation in the functioning of Panchayats. The participation of women has been evaluated in terms of their attendance in the meetings, decision-making, raising issues of women’s interest in particular and the village in general, raising their voice in the discussions and submitting proposals for development of the villages.

The study reveals that women are not very regular in attending the meetings. Attendance register is sometimes sent to their homes for their signatures. The reasons mentioned for irregular attendance in most of the cases are busy household work schedule and lack of interest. In the traditional rural ethos household work usually takes precedence over whatever other work that they have to undertake. Under such situations the women members are forced to give stress on domestic responsibilities than those of Panchayats. It must also be noted here that male family members attend the meetings of Panchayats on behalf of women members. This also discourages women from attending the meetings. Even officials do not object to this. The rural culture does not allow the free mixing between men
and women. Such cultural ethos puts restrictions on the women while performing their roles in Panchayats, viz. supervising, making arguments, taking initiatives and independent decisions.

Women members do not take independent decisions and most of the times depend on male family members’ guidance. In the meetings of Panchayats women mostly approve those decisions which are taken by male members of Panchayat and also endorsed by their male family members.

Further, it has been found that women Pradhan and members have not shown a sincere concern for women’s issues and problems. A feeling of isolation and discrimination was also found among women in the meetings of Panchayats. The main reason behind these feelings was the fact that in the meetings of Panchayats women members were made to sit behind the male members or at one side of the room. In traditional rural ethos women are not expected to sit along with men and participate equally in the discussions. With this being the situation women do not actively participate in the discussions of Panchayats. Moreover, due to their ignorance, passive nature and dominance of the males, they have neither raised women’s issues nor mobilized rural women for generating awareness on women’s problems. Rural men do not want to give special attention to women’s issues and submit that these are covered in the general issues of the development of the village.

Development may be perceived as a participatory process. Participation is perceived as “sine qua non of development” (Arvonne Fraser: 1987). The first and most immediate objective of the reservation for women in PRI is to ensure their participation in the development of the villages. Their active and sincere participation in
the developmental activities of the village will prove their role as agents of change. The essential task of women in PRI is to recognize and identify the developmental needs of the village and to initiate efforts to fulfill these requirements. Men and women have different ways of looking at developmental issues. In view of this, the active participation of women in developmental activities would ensure that those areas of concern will also get attention which have largely been neglected by men till now for example education, employment, vocational training and health of women.

Contribution of the women was evaluated in the development of education, vocational training and employment, availability of drinking water, cleanliness, basic infrastructure and medical facilities in the villages. The data reveal that although women members consider education important for girls and the village but still they have not been able to make any improvement in the already existing educational facilities in both the villages. They have sent proposals for improving the educational facilities in the villages but have not pursued them seriously. Their contribution has been limited to canvassing for Sarve Shiksha Abhiyan, ensuring small repair in the school of the villages and distribution of free books.

Vocational training is also a part of education and helps in generating employment. Government has launched various programmes for imparting vocational training to women, viz. TRYSEM. One third of the beneficiaries of this programme have to be women. The study reveals that women Pradhan and members have failed to get benefits of such programmes. Most of the things have been done to fulfill the official requirements only. The selection of
beneficiaries was discriminatory and those selected also could not get a training which could provide them self-employment.

Employment is another requirement in the empowerment of rural women which makes them economically independent. The Seventh Plan (1985-90) emphasized women’s role in employment and the need to strengthen it was accepted. The study reveals that in spite of the crucial role of women in agriculture and allied sectors the benefits of training and other welfare programmes generating employment have not reached them adequately. The programmes of training women for social forestry, soil conservation, rain water harvesting, dairy farming, piggery, poultry etc. can benefit women in substantiating their income. But such efforts have not been initiated by women in PRI and they have even no awareness of these. Access to and use of technology will contribute in generating employment for women. However, this area has also been neglected. Women have been deliberately denied access to technology by men. The technological advancement in agriculture has adversely affected rural women and has created new imbalances by taking away many small jobs which were earlier done by women. It is also important to note that rural women are required to get her father’s or her husband’s consent before getting an employment.

Availability of drinking water and cleanliness of the village are the two other important areas of concern in the development of the villages. The study reveals that efforts have been made to provide drinking water by getting installed hand pumps and the repair of the existing water wells. However, the selections of the sites for hand pumps have been discriminatory. Their efforts for ensuring cleanliness in the villages have been limited to the construction of Kharanja and
Nali, covering the wells with tin shades. Besides this, on special occasions Panchayat Bhavan and school are cleaned.

For the development of the infrastructure in the villages their efforts are limited to the construction of Nali and Kharanja under the Jawahar Rojgar Yojna, installation of hand pumps and construction of toilets in selected houses. However, it was alleged that the sites of developmental activities were limited to the areas of Pradhan and members.

Public health services are very poor in the villages. Public health services have received the attention of the Government since First Five Year Plan (1951-56) as it got the second largest expenditure after education. However, the study reveals that due to ignorance, poverty and lack of administration’s support, women members have not been able to get any improvement in them. No awareness has been developed among rural population to maintain minimum cleanliness. Maternal mortality is still a sensitive issue in women’s health as the traditional methods continue for child delivery and aftercare.

The reservation for women in Panchayats suggests the existence of full opportunity for them to participate in the developmental activities in the village but as the data confirms this is far from reality. Women are numerically an important part of the village population but still they have no unity to bring any change in the villages. Rural women should participate as a group in identifying the priorities of development in the villages. But this is a distant dream because they are divided on various grounds of caste, class etc. A communication gap has been perceived among women members and women of the village. Therefore, organized efforts for the
development of the village are absent. Lack of group consciousness and strength hampers the solution of women’s problems.

Without co-operation of rural men, women can not be empowered. Active participation of women in Panchayats and political sphere largely depends on the attitude of men. The study revealed that rural men still do not want to share power with women. It has been the compulsion of reservation that has forced men to field women as candidates for Panchayats. For unreserved seats one will seldom find a women candidate. In the functioning of Panchayats women are most of the times dictated by men. It will not be wrong to say that in actual practice men are exercising all the powers of women in Panchayats. This phenomenon has been explained by the concept of ‘Pradhan Pati’.

The co-operation of Government officers with public representatives of Panchayats is necessary for the development of the village and the functioning of Panchayats. The study reveals that respondents face apathy of Government officers as they do not give a serious and honest attention to their problems. The officers do not bother about their complaints and requests. Officers try to dictate their views as they are accustomed to take their own decisions. They also delay the implementation of developmental programmes. It is overtly optimistic to trust the Government officials to act honestly and in co-operation with women representatives in Panchayats. The Government officers perceive that they are superior to women Pradhan and members by virtue of their education, knowledge and experience. Moreover, they consider rural women as second order citizens and prefer to maintain a distance from them. Government
officers were not receptive and responsive to Panchayats’ representatives’ needs.

From the above two paragraphs it may be submitted that the equalitarian ideology of the PRI in terms of men and women has got to be translated into reality. This is because women are still not looked upon as equal partners in the development process and administration by both males and Government officers.

The capabilities of rural women are being doubted for leadership role due to various reasons. Most of the men felt that women do not possess more capability to do better than men. They observed that women can not do their job in PRI without the assistance of male members. The respondents of all the categories were asked to state that among women and men who may be a better Pradhan or member of the Panchayats. It is important to note here that majority of all the categories of respondents observed that men are more capable as Pradhan and member of Panchayats. It must be submitted that in rural India equality of sexes is a myth.

Reservation for rural women in village Panchayats presupposes the ability of rural women as an agent of change which, however, is an unrealistic thinking. It emphasizes on rural women’s ability to perform as a role model for other rural women and, therefore, initiating the process of their empowerment. However, women in Panchayats have not been successful in getting the due attention of rural women at large. The primary reason for this is the nonperformance of women in Panchayats. The study reveals that in spite of four years experience women members have not been able to develop the capability and vision of a leader to act independently in Panchayats. Various factors which obstruct the independent participation and performance of
women in Panchayats are as follows: (1) Lack of awareness among women about their roles in Panchayats. Since they are not aware of their rights and duties in Panchayats, they have failed to perform. (2) Illiteracy of women is the main reason for most of the obstacles. Illiteracy leads to ignorance and lack of awareness. (3) Women lack confidence in decision-making on the various issues discussed in the Panchayats. (4) Women are dependent on men in the functioning of Panchayats. (5) Lack of co-ordination among women members in Panchayats makes them weak. Working together may give them strength and confidence. (6) Women’s lack of voice has been perceived in the Panchayats. Dependence on men, lack of unity and their ignorance lead to their lack of voice. (7) Women have yet to develop a capability to take self-initiatives in terms of defining the developmental requirements of the village. (8) Lack of contact with rural women curtails mobilization of group power. (9) Lack of cooperation of rural men and Government officers etc.

Despite of all the above discussed weaknesses among women members of PRI, the representation of women has contributed in the empowerment of rural women. Women’s participation in the developmental activities, due to reservation of seats in PRI, has also brought them out of the ‘Dahlij’ of their household to participate in the outer world which was earlier prohibited for them. However, empowerment of rural women requires developing the overall personality of women from her very childhood. Most of the women participating in the Panchayats have grown in the traditional rural, patriarchal ethos and therefore their adaptation to the changed requirements of their administrative role in PRI is always full of difficulties and challenges. Although on some occasions they take
these challenges positively but most of the times they surrender and fail in taking independent decisions. Besides this, a change in the rural ethos in favour of women’s equality, respectability, participation and leadership capability is required to be developed to create a favorable atmosphere for their empowerment. Empowerment of rural women entails a change in the attitudes of not only women but simultaneously in the approaches of men and society at large. It must be remembered that reservation enables but not ensures the decision making and change initiatives by the women members.

The ‘grass root’ approach adopted in implementing reservation for women in PRI has not sufficiently given positive results. It has failed in developing leadership capabilities at individual level and in mobilizing rural women at group level for their empowerment. Individual and group empowerment co-exists, mutually influencing each other. The idea of participatory development from the viewpoint of rural women is still far from reality. A grim picture is presented by the performance of women in Panchayats. Women lack voice, self-initiative, self-confidence and vision for the development of the village in general and women in particular. Illiteracy, poverty and traditional rural ethos of sexual discrimination against women are the biggest obstacles in the empowerment of rural women. The slogan of ‘equal opportunity’ remains on paper and women still face discrimination in almost all the walks of life. The present study has confirmed the paradox of rural women’s empowerment without power in the Panchayats. The phenomenon of women’s invisible presence and powerlessness in Panchayats is clearly visible in the villages under study.