Chapter VII

Conclusion

This concluding chapter is, indeed, a quintessence of the empirical and in-depth study on different dimensions of women political participation and their involvement at the grassroots level democratic institutions and political processes with special reference to the Kerala situation, particularly after the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. It includes the observations and findings that have crystallized from the study. It also contains certain recommendations and suggestions for ensuring women involvement in the political process, participation in the meetings of Gramasabha and empowerment at all levels of the political system.

As the study progressed several inferences concerning the subject developed and the deeper the research delved into the field, the vaster its scope and sweep seemed to evolve and various conclusions were arrived at, although all the minute details are not explicated here as they have been dealt with at length in the previous chapters. This chapter epitomises only the central themes of the study.

The study has led to the inference that women’s participation in local self-government institutions and the consequent political advancement are important milestones in the march towards the goal of women empowerment. Therefore, an enquiry into the origin, historical evolution and modus operandi of local self-government institutions in India constitute an integral part of this academic enquiry.

Democratic institutions at the rural level have a noteworthy importance in the Indian situation simply because of the fact that majority of its population live in rural areas. They can have a feel of the noble ideals of democracy only when the political system proves itself capable of realising those ideals through local self-government institutions. India is a very vast country and chunk of its people
live in remote villages, which remain normally far from the central place of the government.

Decentralised system of democratic governance is, in the final analysis, an ideal based on the belief that sovereign power is vested with the people at large. It reaches its full swing only when people are ready to participate actively and directly in all its processes and capable of judging political issues on their own.

Democratic decentralisation, therefore, anticipates healthy and vibrant rural government institutions. By participating in such institutions they can be part of the democratic process of decision-making which is likely to involve their own interests. This participation should start from the very bottom of the system. At the bottom levels of governmental systems people deal with direct and immediate issues affecting their daily life.

It is a generally accepted fact that rural or local governmental institutions are the most suitable form to provide and nurture democratic ideals among the people, especially those who languish in socio-economic backwardness. Thus it becomes imperative on the part of the political system to establish democratic institutions at the remotest rural levels and inspire people to participate in such forums so that they may get politically empowered and enlightened.

Local administrative bodies are common in almost all democracies at present. But they differ in their structure, powers and functions from nation to nation and also perhaps from province to province within a nation. Generally such bodies have a proclivity for taking people into confidence in the process of administration. What is required is to provide maximum opportunities to all sections of the people in decision making process of the system.

Though democracy, whether at national, state or local levels, aims at the empowerment of all sections of the society, the fact remains that women who constitute half the population have been virtually excluded from its thrust areas of
performance. It is crystal clear that until and unless women are treated at par with men in the processes of political system, democracy becomes meaningless. Here also one comes to the correct understanding that the rural democratic institutions shall be the starting point in offering chances of empowerment to the womenfolk.

The concept of local government, which existed in India from time immemorial in one form or the other, is part of the Indian heritage. Considering India's tradition of local government, it is against facts to imagine that the idea was borrowed from elsewhere even though there might have been certain alien influences. The pertinent question is how such local government institutions which have had a decisive say in the administration of the villages over the centuries have been democratised and become an instrumentality of vox-populi.

In India we have democratic government not only at the central and the state levels but at the local levels as well. Local self-government is democratic rule in the immediate neighbourhood. It is called local self-government because it is an arrangement under which people can govern themselves. After all, the district headquarters is often at some distance from the villages and the people of a village or town know their problems best. So there is a system under which a village or town also has its own small government, run by the local people.

If one looks at the institution of local self-government from a broader perspective it can be observed that it has innumerable dimensions and valid reasons for its very existence and functioning especially when the larger interests of personality development and democratic aspirations of the people in general are concerned. Of all the reasons which can be cited in support of this institution which is the smallest unit of democratic functioning, two reasons which may strike one who has an interest in the subject deserves to be highlighted. First and foremost, local self-government institutions ensure the active participation of all the inhabitants of the area in the process of administration and hence make them democratic in the true sense of the term. Each person has the longing to be in the
limelight some way or the other but the opportunity to play a dominant role at the higher levels of political activities is unavailable to the large majority of people. Local self-government provides this much sought after ambience to develop and nourish man’s inborn desire for social approbation by playing pivotal roles in the small areas of panchayat. What makes democracy the most acceptable form of government is that it creates opportunities for the comprehensive development of all and sundry. Everyone can express his views and hear the views of others without being slighted in the small fora of panchayat. Democracy as it is practiced at the state and national levels is inaccessible to the general public as far as the expression of their views and dreams are concerned. Most often the views and dreams of the higher-ups are imposed on the general public without seeking their opinion or consulting them. It is a pity that such modus operandi produces only superficial sense of democracy and participation among the people at the lower levels. Local self-government, on the other hand, drags the general public from the shell of private life into the vortex of political activism. Hence, local self-government is discharging an invaluable service to the cause of democracy by ensuring the participation and involvement of people at large.

The second reason, which deserves elaboration and in-depth study, is that local self-government provides the coveted boons of transparency and good governance. Most often bureaucracy rules the roost when it comes to the formulation and implementation of various welfare schemes aimed at the upliftment of the rural people. Local self-government has dispensed with this lacuna by ensuring transparency in the administration of panchayats. People and their elected representatives conceive and churn out various projects and implement them with the full knowledge and active participation of the general public. People can decide on the projects and schemes, which will benefit them in the Gramasabha, and only technical sanction is accorded to them by the panchayat authorities. The untied funds allotted to the local self-government institutions
enable the representatives of the people and the general public to device various schemes as per the needs of each and every area.

In the past, planning was done in the state and central capitals by bureaucrats who had little knowledge of the requirements and aspirations of the village people. Now the people can examine the documents, projects and progress of various works in the locality. The panchayat office bristles with dynamic locals who are eager to examine whether any malpractice occurs in the implementation of various schemes. Various works are auctioned at the panchayat office in the presence of the general public, which helps to eliminate chances of corruption. Moreover the elected representatives of the people in the local self-government institutions are duty bound to answer the questions raised by the people of their wards which consist of less than one thousand voters.

Now it becomes clear that a country which values democratic ideals, particularly in the sense of ensuring maximum people's participation and transparency and good governance, has to provide proper training and orientation in that direction from the very fundamental and basic levels. India adopted democracy as a form of government and therefore, it cannot proceed, not without local government but without local self-government institutions. Thus from local government, the practice of local self-government emerged in India as a result of a slow and gradual process and it is just to remember that this transformation is the culmination of an evolutionary process spanning over centuries. That the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is the latest link in this age-old process is incontrovertible.

It is part of history that local government had existed in India even before the Vedic period. Over the centuries it took different names and structures and continued as the basic layer of administration. Even during the colonial regime local government continued to exist with considerable advancements. With the
spread of democratic principles and ideals those institutions became self-governing bodies capable of playing a significant role in the body politic.

Here it is especially noticed that the people of India had to wait more than four decades to establish a Panchayati Raj system with a uniform structure for the whole country. What is remarkable about the Panchayati Raj system is that when it succeeds it makes satisfactory provisions for women's empowerment through reservation seats and posts.

A critical analysis of the historical evolution of Panchayati Raj system in the post independent India brings out the fact that the political leadership both at the centre and in the states repeated over decades the mistake, which the framers of the constitution committed by not according due importance to the Gandhian dream of Panchayati Raj. They failed to rise to the expectations of the people and were reluctant to devolve substantive powers down to the lower levels.

The present study concentrates on the political participation of women in rural democratic institutions and their empowerment. Women empowerment is a concept with various possible implications. It has been decisively influenced by women's participation in the democratic institutions at the grassroots level and the resultant empowerment. It heralds their active involvement in state and national politics.

To ensure active involvement and participation of womenfolk in all processes of the political system is to be considered as an indispensable prerequisite to make democracy effective and meaningful. Rural democratic institutions provide ample opportunities for both the sexes to involve themselves in different aspects of the system. Actually they are the ideal structures especially for women to embark on their political participation and career.

The active participation and involvement of women in the political field is lagging due to various reasons. It has been generally believed that politics is a
field, which is in no way suitable to the womenfolk. Unfortunately what is seen is that this theory has been propagated by the menfolk over the ages just to serve their own vested interests. They are eager to explain that politics is a challenging career, which demands masculine qualities.

Even in Kerala noted for its high rate of literacy and standard of living women participation in the political field is minimal. It is a fact that the menfolk in general are not at all interested in providing space for women in electoral politics especially when their electoral chances are threatened. What is commonly seen is nothing other than lip services to causes of women including their access to political dispensation.

At the outset it is to be especially noted that almost all the hypotheses which have been subjected to detailed enquiry and research are corroborated by the findings. The major findings and conclusions derived from the research can be viewed from three different perspectives represented by three different levels of women empowerment – ‘Reservational Empowerment’, implying the effectiveness of women empowerment at the initiative of the state; ‘Participant Empowerment’, implying the possibility of women’s empowerment at the initiative of women themselves; and ‘Gramasabha Empowerment’, implying the practicability of women empowerment as a joint endeavour of both the state and women through the institution of Gramasabha. These three views actually represent the gist of the thrust areas wherein lies the soul of the enquiry of the thesis.

1. **Reservational Empowerment**

The idea of ‘Reservational Empowerment’, which provides a royal road to women’s enlightenment and enhanced political participation comes first. The significance of this level of empowerment is that it is initiated from the part of the state. State wants to uphold the status of women and empower them by offering reservation of seats in representative bodies of administration.
This aspect of empowerment has to be assessed only by taking into account the ideal of democracy in the sense of ensuring empowerment and enlightenment to all sections of society especially women who, inspite of their numerical strength have had traditionally little say in the running of the political and administrative establishments of the country. Effective and progressive governments have been in the forefront of all the measures which took steps in the empowerment not only of women but also other weaker sections of society. In the caste-ridden and conservative society of India, women have been sidelined from the central stage of political and social life for ages. The history of 50 years of independence has brought home the glaring truth that women cannot occupy their rightful place in the life of the nation without the support of reservation. Thus political parties and the central government cogitated on the question and came out with the proposal for reservation of seats for women in the local self-government institutions as a first step towards the same at the higher levels. Experience has taught that social changes, though sponsored by social and political organisations should have the stamp of governmental sanction to be effective. Weaker sections always need crutches like the handicapped in their march to equality and an egalitarian society. The experience in the Panchayati Raj institutions has given an impetus to the cause of reservation at all levels for women. The effective and ingenious methods of administration adopted by elected women panchayat members at various levels have proved beyond doubt the correctness of governmental decision to reserve seats for women in local self-government institutions.

The study as to the different aspects of women’s political participation brings to light the fact that democracy which should be built on the three pillars of liberty, equality and fraternity has proved ineffective and unsuccessful in realising its supreme goals of establishing an ideal society and empowering all sections in the Indian situation.
The main reason for this unsatisfactory performance of democracy in India may be attributed to the non-emergence of active and powerful NGOs, which could have produced a really enlightened society. The emergence of effective democratic institutions in western countries has been made possible by the sustained efforts and active involvement of NGOs.

It is a pity that despite fifty years of democracy, nowhere in the country have powerful NGOs come up to liberate the caste ridden Indian society from the clutches of superstitions, sectarianism and linguistic chauvinism. On the contrary, majority of NGOs emerged to have explicit and unholy relationship to caste and communal forces which turned the situation from bad to worse. If the NGOs had been active and the civil society strong and vibrant, the general welfare of the society and the goals like women empowerment would have been achieved without governmental intervention. Here lies the importance of state sponsored empowerment of women. In other words until and unless the existing social system is transformed into an enlightened one, it is the responsibility of the state to step in and make necessary arrangements in the system with a view to ensuring the participation of women at all levels including the reservation of seats and offices of chairperson for them in the Panchayati Raj and Nagarapalika institutions which are considered as a major state-sponsored attempt in the direction of women empowerment.

The study conducted on the performance of women panchayat members who are beneficiaries of reservation has revealed that being the elected representatives of the people they were provided with immense opportunities for their internal awakening, which buttresses the arguments listed in the hypotheses.

The study on the general profile of the elected panchayat members brings to light the fact that young women, who are largely attracted to public life, try their level best to exploit the possibilities of reservation. The emergence of young and energetic women in the political field is a notable step in the direction of political
awakening of women. It also indicates that the women who emerge as local leaders possess a satisfactory level of education. Majority of those women who are elected as panchayat members are having not less than pre-degree education. Here the fact is that the educational and age factors of the elected representatives, whether in general or in particular, have direct impact, to a great extent, in determining the quality of their performance. These two factors can make positive changes in the functioning of the political system.

The study further reveals the fact that the opportunities available to the elected women panchayat members have enabled them to be awakened internally or psychologically. As a result of the conscious exploitation of the opportunities open to the elected women representatives they may be able to make themselves psychologically, politically as well as socially empowered. Participation in the meeting of the panchayat committees, conducting of Gramasabha meetings, spearheading of people's plan campaign and taking part in public functions definitely provide sufficient possibilities for the women representatives to interact with others which, in turn, results in their own self-empowerment.

The study reveals that as part of their internal awakening women panchayat members have acquired greater levels of personality development, leadership qualities, administrative acumen and sociability. The notable point of this understanding is that women proved themselves capable of acquiring the qualities of a good representative.

Every elected representative needs basic traits of personality. It is understood that the proper personality traits have been developed only if they are in a position to interact with others. Interactions with other members of the panchayat committee, conduct of Gramasabha meetings and participation in its debates and discussions, supervision of various schemes and projects relating to people's plan campaigns, and through the involvement in different types of public functions proved highly effective in sharpening the personality traits of women
panchayat members. These helped them to acquire greater self-confidence, political awareness and assessment qualities.

The study also proves that the functioning of Gramasabha contributes much to the process of personality development of women panchayat members. The elected members of panchayat wards are ex-officio conveners of Gramasabha and are bound to convene its meetings, inspire its members to participate, organise its activities etc. The Gramasabha in which the elected members play a crucial role have the power to discuss all the issues related to the ward and take proper decisions. As a result of their innumerable activities in the Gramasabha women panchayat members have attained a considerable level of internal awakening. They will have to convene its meetings, inspire its members to participate, organise its activities etc.

A major aspect of internal awakening has been the attainment of higher levels of leadership qualities. The study revealed that the women panchayat members gained the capacity to co-ordinate and plan different programmes, to mobilise resources and to supervise various activities through their involvement in panchayat committees, Gramasabha meetings, people’s plan campaign and public functions. A comparative study indicates that of the various agencies which impart leadership qualities to women panchayat members, the involvement at different levels of people’s plan campaign stands first.

The acquisition of administrative skills is definitely an integral part of internal awakening of a public person. On the basis of the findings of the present study it becomes clear that majority of women panchayat members have acquired administrative skills from the effective utilisation of the opportunities available to them as elected representatives of the people. It is a fact that the interactions within the panchayat committees contributed much to the acquisition of administrative skills among the women panchayat members.
The internal awakening of an elected representative becomes complete only when the person acquires the quality of sociability. A major finding resulted from the study is that a good majority of women panchayat members who were suffering from the lack of sociability have succeeded in developing the same from their experiences as people's representatives. From the position of ordinary housewives, most of them emerged as leaders of people within a short span and developed greater level of sociability by acquiring the ability to interact with others without inhibitions, expressing ideas lucidly and cultivating positive thinking, all of which have helped them in the process of their internal awakening. A major result of this study is the identification of the sea change in the behavioural pattern of women representatives. The involvement in different kinds of public functions helped the women representatives to develop sociability as an integral part of their behaviour and performance in public life. It may be noted that the majority of women panchayat members have developed greater judiciousness, efficiency, practical wisdom and prudence.

The internal awakening of the panchayat members acts as a pre-condition for their external effectiveness. In fact both are the two sides of the same coin. The qualities acquired from internal awakening fructify only when they are in a position to transfer them to ordinary women through their external effectiveness.

A critical evaluation of the activities of women panchayat members has brought out the fact that to a great extent ordinary women have been empowered at political and social levels. Here it is to be specially noted that majority of women representatives takes it as their moral responsibility to look after the interests of ordinary women and get them empowered. The role played by women panchayat members in organising training programmes and creating opportunities for employment for ordinary women is certainly commendable. It is also creditable on the part of women panchayat members that they have played a pivotal role in
sensitising ordinary women on the importance of gender-equality and in fighting atrocities against them.

The study brings out the truth that the involvement and participation of women panchayat members in the political field provided a positive impetus to ordinary women to be active participants in the political realm. It seems reliable from the study that as far as ordinary women are concerned, a representative belonging to their own sex is more likely to boost their morale and motivate them to take part at different levels of the political processes.

Thus the provision of reservation of one-third of seats and posts for women in local self-governing institutions is a sublime manifestation of the acceptance of the ideal of women’s empowerment. The real merit of this provision is that it heralds the birth of a new era for women by making their participation and involvement mandatory in the local self-government institutions of the system. Moreover, it is observed that women’s entry into public life has played a substantive role in bringing down corruption in politics, which has been eating into the vitals of body politic especially in a country like India. It is also found out as a general rule that as far as women are concerned the chances of corruption fewer than that of men. So in a way it is true that the greater the percentage of women in politics, the fewer the chances of corruption. Thus the study has revealed the fact that the provision of reservation has gone a long way in achieving the final goal of women empowerment.

However, the irony is that despite having been elected panchayat members on the strength of reservation and become instruments of women empowerment, they evince little inclination to continue in public life when their tenure comes to an end. The fact is that although they proved successful and got empowered, they do not seem persistent enough to continue in the field. They fight shy of contesting general seats without inhibitions. The fact is that whenever reservation ceases, most women tend to withdraw from the scene. It implies that a higher level
of awareness is required to make women really empowered. Herein lies the theoretical glory and practical utility of reservational or state sponsored process of empowerment of women.

2. Participatory Empowerment

The second perspective is 'Participatory Empowerment' which deals with the level of empowerment that the womenfolk is likely to attain by their own initiative and interest in involving themselves in the major areas of political processes. The significance of this aspect of empowerment is that it requires a positive mentality and sincere effort on the part of women themselves to be enlightened and empowered.

It is envisaged that despite governmental intervention and encouragement, no section can attain empowerment without conscious effort and willingness on their part too. Empowerment in the true sense should come more from within than from without. Until and unless women are sensitised and made equal partners in the political process, empowerment and gender-equality will remain a far cry. Participation at different levels of political processes sharpens the intellect and enlightens the views and attitudes of women. It awakens the latent powers in them and offers scope for their full expression which will naturally contribute to the upliftment and reformation of the entire society of which women constitute half the strength. When women participate in public life on their own, their thoughts and language get polished and sharpened which will improve the quality of their political and social behaviour. It is a generally accepted fact that only by participation and involvement in the political institutions that one can obtain first hand information regarding the nature, functioning and utility of such bodies. Civic virtues like tolerance, patience, broadmindedness etc. are born of participation in political life.
The study made a detailed enquiry in this regard by identifying four hundred women voters as respondents and assessing their attitude to and involvement in major areas of political processes like voting, campaigning, organisational and agitational activities at the rural levels with the help of a detailed questionnaire.

The study made an attempt to assess the political participation of women at the grassroots level by analysing their attitude towards the exercise of franchise, the process of election campaign, political and non-political organisations, as well as agitational politics. The rationale behind this enquiry is the notion that women's participation in such political organs, particularly, at the local level paves the way for their active involvement at higher echelons.

An assessment of women's attitude and participation in the political processes has revealed the fact that women show greater interest in voting than in other areas of political activities. Most women believe that to exercise franchise is a sacred duty to be performed. In the matter of exercising franchise, the study reveals the fact that majority of women belong to the category of regular voters. But at this juncture, one thing to be noticed is that, though negligible in terms of number, a very small minority consciously want to remain as non-voters due to their aversion to politics. It has also been observed that women's voting pattern has been considerably influenced by such factors as education, occupation, marital status, religion, caste as well as age. A comparative study of women's attitude to parliament, assembly and panchayat elections reveals the fact that their involvement in the panchayat level elections is the highest. It is observed that the factor of personal intimacy may be the reason behind higher percentage of voting in panchayat elections than in assembly and Parliament elections.

A major inference derived from the study is that a sizeable number of women exercise their franchise on their own accord instead of being influenced by others. This finding is to be treated as a positive sign of the advanced position that
the ordinary women are enjoying in the present family set up. A similar notable finding in this regard is that women view panchayat, assembly and parliament elections differently. In panchayat elections women give priority to the personality and charisma of the candidate but party considerations and political interests determine their stand in Assembly and Parliament elections. It is a striking point that the very difference of attitude of women towards different levels of elections itself is a clear indication of their political maturity and awareness.

The study on women's participation in election campaigns brings out the fact that they can be grouped into three categories—active participants, passive participants and non-participants. The active participants are those who are ready to take part in activities like squad work, distributing pamphlets, notices or slips. They are willing to serve as booth and polling agents in elections. They take part in public meetings during elections and participate in demonstrations and processions conducted as part of election campaigns. The next category is termed as passive participants in the sense they are not willing to come out in the open and indulge in direct means of campaigning but are eager to influence the outcome of elections. Naturally they resort to some indirect devices to influence their relatives, friends and if possible others through family circles and ceremonies, telecontacts and their involvement in non-political organisations such as self-help or neighbourhood groups. Here what is to be noticed is the interest shown by women in making use of telephone as a device to influence their relatives and friends. It offers them an opportunity to involve themselves in the election campaigns simply by staying indoors. Therefore an obvious conclusion derived from the analysis is that although majority of women are interested in influencing the outcome of elections, they are not ready to come to the forefront.

The study also brings to light the influence of factors like age, religion, caste, education, marital status and occupation in determining the attitude and level of participation of women in campaign activities. Among those factors, the
influence of education shows an interesting point. It is true that campaign activities in elections have been influenced by the academic status of persons especially women. The study reveals the fact that the higher the educational qualifications, the lower the interest of women in taking part in active campaigning.

Political and non-political organisations play a predominant role in determining the level of political participation of people. The present study conducted an enquiry as to the attitude of ordinary women towards such organisations. It is found out from the study that most women prefer non-political organisations to those with political colours. They seem to believe that non-political organisations offer a better channel for maintaining informal personal relationship than political forums. The study of women's attitude towards political and non-political organisations has been analysed on the basis of their involvement in such organisations both in terms of membership and holding of offices. This analysis brings to light the fact that majority of women are interested in associating themselves with non-political organisations and that too as mere members. The study further reveals that factors like age, religion, caste, education and marital status have a decisive impact in shaping the attitude of women towards organisational activities. The age-wise analysis of women's interest in organisational activities indicates that women belonging to the category of 46-55 age group evince greater leadership qualities than those of the other age groups. The religion-wise analysis shows that Hindu women take greater interest in organisational activities than those of the other religious sections. The study also reveals that women belonging to the O.B.C category show greater participatory involvement in various organisations.

A notable factor revealed from the study is that the percentage level participation of women in political and non-political organisations is higher among the less educated ones than those of other classes whereas the percentage level
involvement of women as office-bearers of political and non-political organisations is higher among the more educated classes.

It shows the fact that educational qualifications play a decisive role in women's political participation and organisational positions. The women who evince less interest in organisational activities are the educated ones but at the same time the educated women who join such organisations emerge as office-bearers. The uneducated ones who show greater interest in organisational work are seldom catapulted to positions of responsibility.

Thus a cursory glance at women's organisational participation highlights the fact that most women refuse to involve themselves in political parties. It seems that women generally tend to think that political organisations are instruments to capture power and in this struggle for power they have little confidence in fighting with men. Barring a few, women as a whole are indifferent to their rightful place on the political and administrative fronts.

Women's participation in the political process is closely related to their political and general awareness. Therefore, an enquiry into their general awareness and the factors that inculcate it in them is an important part of the study. The fact is that the media compete with one another to influence women's general political awareness and the concomitant political involvement.

The study made an attempt to assess the level of general awareness of women by analysing their reading habits, attitude to audiovisual media and social interactions which are considered as the major sources that are likely to generate political and general awareness among the people. The study brings out the point that majority of women have the habit of reading newspapers especially the title news. The fact is that it is the press that has been the most consistent conventional medium that has had a defining role in moulding the political attitudes of women.
It is also understood that it is the title news that influences the readers most. Its impact is more subliminal than intentional. Articles and editorials are seldom read.

On the basis of an analysis of the co-relation between the educational level of women and their reading habits, it is found that the more educated, women are expected to have greater political awareness as they show greater interest in acquiring knowledge from different sources than the less educated ones. The study as to the relationship between the marital status of women and their reading habits brings out the truth that unmarried women are more inclined to acquire political awareness through their habit of reading different news items that appear in the press than those of other categories. Coming to the co-relation between occupational status of women and their reading habits, it is found out that apart from reading the headlines, women belonging to the service sector depend upon articles and editorials as sources of information to shape their political and general views and attitudes.

The influence of the audiovisual media, particularly television in defining the perceptions and opinions of the people, especially women, is quite clear in the present times. Women's political and general awareness have been influenced to a very large extent by their attitudes, preferences and priorities as to the various dishes which appear in such media.

From the analysis of women's attitude to and interest in different programmes on television, it is found that there is no gainsaying the fact that television, with all the multifarious programmes it ladles out, influences every T.V. addict. In spite of all the tall claims about the strength of its impact the fact of the matter is that for a plurality of women it is only an entertainer.

On the basis of the analysis of the co-relation between the educational status of women and their attitude to audiovisual media, it becomes clear that as education increases the percentage level interest of women to listen to the news
and other political programmes goes up and therefore, the higher the academic qualification, the higher the political awareness of women. Irrespective of the differences in the marital status and occupational positions, the enquiry reveals the fact that the attitude of women is more or less the same in the case of entertainment programmes on the audiovisual media especially television.

The political sense and behavioural attitudes of individuals, especially women, have been, to a great extent, the result of the interpersonal relationship that they are able to develop and maintain. The study brings to light the fact that discussions within the family and intellectual interactions among peer groups and neighbours do have an influence on the orientations and attitudes of women in general. An analysis of the co-relation between the educational qualifications of women and their interpersonal attitudes brings out the fact that highly qualified women tend to give much importance to political interactions within the four walls of the family setup as a source of attaining political and general awareness. The relationship between the marital status of women and their attitude to interpersonal relationship reveals the fact that married women give priority to family discussions as a means to be in touch with political matters. Unmarried women are more interested in making use of discussions at peer groups as a major source of attaining political awareness while widows give equal importance to peer group and neighbourhood discussions but give less attention to discussions within the family. The study further reveals that the housewives show greater interest in maintaining regular interpersonal interactions in the family circles.

Involvement on the part of women in agitational activities for the promotion of any cause may be treated, as a covert manifestation of their political interest and participation as it requires a higher level of political awareness. Thus the nature and extent of political participation of women can also be assessed in terms of their involvement in agitational activities. It was noteworthy that notwithstanding their
limits and limitations when it comes to agitational activities, a miniscule of women do not shy away from them.

It is also understood from the study that factors like age, religion, caste, education, marital status and occupational positions have their own impact in prompting women to involve themselves in agitational politics which requires physical, psychological, moral and intellectual fortitude.

From the analysis of the influence of age factor in determining the level of agitational involvement of women, it is understood that women belonging to 36-45 age group show greater interest in such activities. The study also brings out the fact that women belonging to the Hindu community on religion-wise, and the O.B.C. on caste-wise, evince greater interest in agitational activities.

The study has attempted to assess how educational qualification of women influences their attitude towards participating in agitations. It is understood that as education increases, involvement in agitational participation on the part of women tends to decrease. It is observed that the very educational status prevents women from involving themselves in such activities, as they seem to consider it beneath their dignity to appear in public agitations along with ordinary mortals. The study further reveals the truth that comparatively married women are more active in agitational politics than widows and the unmarried.

3. Gramasabha Empowerment

The third aspect relates to 'Gramasabha Empowerment' implying the practicability of women empowerment through their participatory roles in Gramasabha. The significance of this aspect is that it blends the governmental effort on the one side and women's willingness on the other side. The government on its part provides a structural and legal framework and if the womenfolk on their part are willing enough to make use of this mechanism, their empowerment is a foregone conclusion. Here the structural framework represents the institution of
Gramasabha which is the legitimised body meant for ensuring the direct participation of the people in the process of decision-making at their own doorstep. Here it is argued that women, if interested and willing, can exploit the Gramasabha, which acts as a forum for people to meet together, discuss matters and decide issues. They can develop parliamentary skills, social awareness and personality traits through their participation in the meetings of Gramasabha. Exposure to criticism and the world at large tests the strength of one’s character and provides scope for development and enlightenment. By the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the government elevated the institution of Gramasabha into a constitutional body that provides the entire citizenry vast opportunities for political participation.

In India the concept and practice of Gramasabha are neither unknown nor uncommon as it has long been recognised as the lowest unit of democracy in one form or the other. It is expected to transform Gramasabha into an institution that will provide ample opportunities for the people to get acquainted with the functioning of the panchayat administration, to watch its performance and air their grievances at the local level. This dream comes to fruition only when contribution on the part of the people, in terms of active, direct and creative participation and involvement is extended in full measure.

The institution of Gramasabha includes certain good aspects of the age-old system of direct or pure democracy. It acts as the touchstone of participatory democracy and plays a decisive and constructive role in providing political education and empowerment to women.

The typical socio-political and demographic peculiarities prevailing in Kerala have had its impact on the decision of the government to make provisions for ward-wise Gramasabha in the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act, 1994. Any study on the political participation and involvement of women in Kerala shall be closely linked to their attitude to the basic and fundamental political institutions like
Gramasabha as it provides ample opportunities for their political enlightenment and empowerment at the grassroots level. It has been observed that the very presence of women as elected representatives has emboldened ordinary women who are ready to participate in the functioning of Gramasabha. At the same time the study reveals the undeniable fact that majority of women remain non-participants as far as the meetings of Gramasabha are concerned.

The study brings to light the truth that women’s level and extent of Gramasabha participation have been influenced by such factors as age, religion, caste, education, marital status, occupational position etc. The enquiry as to the influence of age on women’s Gramasabha participation reveals that women belonging to 36-45 age group show greater interest in participating in the meetings of Gramasabha than those of the other age categories. The study regarding the correlation between religion and women’s Gramasabha participation shows that women belonging to the Hindu community exhibit greater interest and involvement in the meetings of Gramasabha.

Among women belonging to different caste categories, those of the O.B.C. category show higher percentage level participation in the Gramasabha meetings. An interesting thing revealed from the study is that it negates the hypothesis that those who are equipped with political awareness take active part in the meetings of Gramasabha. It is an irony that those who are aware of the significance of Gramasabha have little inclination to participate in it. It has been observed that fear of losing social status and personal pride often keeps women having educational and social status and those belonging to upper and middle class families away from Gramasabha meetings which are largely attended by women belonging to socially, economically and educationally backward families. It seems that women belonging to the lower strata are hopeful of getting some sort of benefits from their presence and participation in them.
An analysis of the general awareness of women on democratic decentralisation in India brings to light the fact that majority of women are not aware of the basic aspects of the Panchayati Raj system in India. Even among those who participate in the meetings of Gramasabha, the number of women who are aware of the basic aspects of this institution is limited. A clear finding of the analysis is that in political institutions like Gramasabha, awareness of the people alone may not induce them to be active participants. The study further brings home the shocking fact that women of Kerala noted for their high literacy and enlightenment have only a limited and shallow knowledge regarding the fundamentals of Panchayati Raj institutions in India, which are intended to ensure, inter-alia, women's empowerment through participation in such bodies.

It has been found from the study that despite the general awareness of the provision of women's reservation which is a major component of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, majority of the women of Kerala have little knowledge about its details. Moreover most women are ignorant of the role of the ward member in the meetings of the Gramasabha and as to who all should preside over such meetings.

On the basis of the observations from the field study, it is found that the factors that inspire women to participate in the meetings of Gramasabha can be classified into three – participation by self-decision, participation by external influence and participation for material benefits. The study underscores the fact that what prompts most women to participate in the Gramasabha meetings is the material benefits accruing therefrom. A striking point is that though a considerable number of women attend Gramasabha meetings due to external influence, it cannot be overlooked that around 15% of women participate in such meetings not for any material benefits but on their own, often owing their awareness and commitment.
From the analysis of the level of participation of women in Gramasabha meetings, it is found that though women evince keen interest in all the functions of Gramasabha, majority of women take greater interest in its developmental activities. The participation of women in such meetings has contributed greatly to the development of their self-confidence, initiative and leadership.

The study further reveals that the institution of Gramasabha has been playing a predominant role in promoting political awareness among women. It gives a message to the rural women that it is better to participate in institutions like Gramasabha for having direct or first hand political knowledge and information.

It is evident that unless women develop in them a sense of civic duty, institutions like Gramasabha will remain meaningless. What is required is nothing but the development of a culture wherein women consider it as their bounden duty to participate in such meetings. The elected women panchayat members can do a lot in this regard. They have to take it as their moral responsibility to orient, educate and motivate ordinary women to be active participants in the meetings of Gramasabha.

The imperative of transforming Gramasabha from a political to a social structure, which will help address, the economic, political and social crises confronting the society cannot be underestimated. All human actions are conditioned by religious, sectarian and political factors, which often have a negative impact upon the society. Hence the institution of Gramasabha needs to be transformed into a humanising socio-political structure which instills a sense of equality, a feeling of oneness and social justice as envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi. Gramasabha, which is functioning at present as a political institution where party and sectarian interests reign supreme, should be upgraded into a social forum in which people irrespective of their political, economic and social barriers can participate, share ideas, submit proposals and interact with various people on an equal footing which is in no way possible in any other organisation.
Recommendations and Suggestions

On the basis of the in-depth study and analysis of different aspects of women's political participation in different areas of political processes, the practical implementation of the provision regarding the reservation of one-third of seats and offices of chairperson for women in local self-governing institutions, the different dimensions of women's Gramasabha participation as well as the observations and experiences obtained from the field study, it seems proper to present some recommendations that would help to increase the level and extent of women's political participation and empowerment. The following points constitute the recommendations and suggestions resulted from the present study.

1. An in-depth and threadbare analysis of the effectiveness of women's reservation in local self-governing institutions and the resultant empowerment which in fact surpassed the wildest dreams of the most optimistic champions of women's empowerment and gender-equality, it is suggested that reservation of seats for women be extended to the levels of Assembly and Parliament which, in itself, will raise not only the dignity, effectiveness and decorum of such august bodies but also lead to the reduction of corrupt practices at the top echelons of government. It is the well-considered opinion resulted from the study that taking into account all the aspects of reservation which, to a great extent, has done justice to women who comprise half the population of the country can bring about qualitative changes in all realms of administration. Until and unless women are not properly represented in the higher legislative bodies, the administration will be unbalanced and heavily discriminatory and lopsided against women whose burning problems and pressing issues will be unaddressed and pushed under the carpet of male chauvinism.
2. It is of paramount importance that the provisions enshrined in the constitution as to the importance of evaluating and if necessary, of reconsidering all types of reservation policies every ten years under the light of experiences and practices be extended to women's reservation of seats and offices of chairperson in local self-governing institutions. Women's reservation as per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, which like all other reservations are intended to do justice to hitherto neglected and unrepresented classes and sections should be reviewed and subjected to periodic scrutiny and evaluation by the central government in order to examine the advantages along with the strides and drawbacks which occurred in the implementation of the policy and to take corrective steps to achieve the desired goals. It is certain that such a step will definitely provide the government a much-needed feedback.

3. The study, though confined to local politics, has put forward the well-considered recommendation that the government should stipulate minimum educational qualifications for those who aspire to hold elected posts at all levels of government. Experience has made it amply clear that owing to the incompetency and poor qualifications of administrators, the country has been denied good governance, the dream of the entire citizenry. It is a plain truth that, to a great extent, elected representatives from the panchayats to the parliament are ill-equipped and unqualified to discharge their constitutional responsibilities for want of proper educational qualification and orientation. It is also suggested that political parties which are the pillars of democracy should rise to the hopes and expectations of the people by fielding morally upright and educationally competent candidates in the election fray starting with panchayat levels.

4. Over and above the provision of women's reservation in PRIs, the government should adopt a multi-pronged approach for women's
empowerment by providing necessary avenues of instilling awareness and orientation in women and engendering enlightenment in them. It is suggested that the government can employ the services of NGOs of different hues to realise the goal of women empowerment. It is also suggested that women who benefited from the provision of reservation should shoulder and undertake the moral responsibility of providing empowerment and enlightenment to ordinary women.

5. Another suggestion thrown up by the study is that the government should instigate political parties to make necessary changes in their constitutions with a view to ensuring reasonable percentage of offices for women with immediate effect. Such a step will have salutary effects on their involvement in fundamental and basic areas of political processes like voting and election campaigns.

6. It is suggested that in order to increase the level and extent of political participation, not only of women but also of the entire citizenry, exercise of franchise shall be made a mandatory civic duty, the abstention from which without reasonable grounds, shall invite prosecution and exemplary punishment.

7. It is a matter of supreme importance that the government should take active interest in giving full support to NGOs which can play a pivotal role in the creation of a civil society capable of ensuring empowerment to all sections especially women by exerting moral pressure on political parties and menfolk to provide women their rightful place in the political, social and administrative dispensation of the country. It is worth considering that the responsibility of the government should not cease with reservation of seats for women in the PRIs but should also treat the very idea of reservation as a means for the establishment of a civil society for which NGOs can contribute substantially.
8. Education which civilises and enlightens people should be designed by the government in such a manner that from school to university levels civic duties and democratic processes which are inalienable aspects of democracy should be made part and parcel of curricula irrespective of disciplines with a view to generating an ideal political culture in which everyone plays an active part in public life, the absence of which has unfortunately kept off the chunk of intelligentsia from the active participation and involvement in policies.

9. A detailed study on the different aspects of the functioning of the institution of Gramasabha has brought out the undeniable fact that it possesses almost all the salient features of the age-old system of direct democracy. Therefore, it is the paramount responsibility of the government to strengthen this institution by ensuring maximum and active participation of the people in it, especially women. In the light of the study certain suggestions are put forward for making this institution more representative, effective and productive. Steps should be taken to enhance the prestige and status of Gramasabha to ensure the effective participation of all. It is suggested that the institution of family shall be treated as the basic unit of Gramasabha as far its meetings are concerned and that the attendance of at least one member from each family in its meetings shall be made mandatory and that the failure of which shall result in the forfeiture of governmental grants and concessions. It is also suggested that the government should take immediate steps to ensure that all Gramasabha meetings shall be held only on public holidays to facilitate the participation of all sections of society.

10. It is suggested that the government should take immediate and effective steps to liberate completely the local self-government institutions from the strangle-hold of bureaucracy which is bereft of humane face while
formulating and implementing policies and programmes, projects and schemes.

11. In the light of the satisfactory functioning of the institution of Gramasabha across the country, it is suggested that Gramasabha should be provided with additional powers and status with a view to converting this august body from a political forum into an instrument meant for social reconstruction and empowerment.

12. Last but not least, it is recommended that the government should take immediate initiative to strengthen the institution of Gramasabha as the basic unit of decentralised planning by rectifying the defects, if any, instead of neglecting it because the concept of decentralised planning as such is highly effective and contributive as it gives ample scope for people at the lower strata to participate in the process of nation’s planning.

Should women’s empowerment become a reality, there must be coordinated efforts from the part of governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations. Religious institutions, too, can contribute in no mean measure to the actualisation of this sublime ideal. Feminist movements have been instrumental in raising the status of woman around the world.

In India the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act is a quantum leap for women’s empowerment, yet there are miles to traverse. Bringing State Assemblies and the Federal Parliament within the ambit of the ideals enshrined in the Act is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Here is a subject with an enormous scope for vast and deep research. Nonetheless this study has been sought to be made as exhaustive as possible but also with all the possible limitations it involved. The humble hope is that this will provoke further academic enquiries in the field.