Chapter-III

Panchayati Raj in India
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The institution of Panchayati Raj is as old as civilisation itself. Gram panchayats have always been a part of the Indian social fabric in one form or another. Previously the terms used were ‘village panchayat’, ‘district board’, or ‘sub-district board’ which were the self-governing bodies at the village or regional levels. The experiment of Panchayati Raj has been made to provide firm and deep roots to democracy and a broad base to the democratic structure so as to make the common man a real partner in the conduct of his own civic and political affairs. The PRIs have been considered an important aspect of socio-economic structures. PRIs are expected to serve the interests and meet the aspirations of various sections of the Indian rural society. Democratic decentralization is not merely a devolution of powers. It must also comprise a devolution of responsibility.¹

As this thesis primarily looks at panchayats from the perspective of dalits, at the onset it is imperative to discuss about the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate for the incorporation of PRI in Indian Constitution. Therefore, the debate in the constituent assembly instituted for the framing of the Constitution was much more fundamental. There were two view points in contestation that of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Village swaraj was the centerpiece of Gandhi’s vision of an independent India. This was due to his fundamental opposition to parliamentary democracy which he saw as perpetuating domination and his belief in an economy of limited

wants and based upon local production, resources, consumption and technologies.\(^2\)

Very eloquently he outlined this vision of the village republic, in the issue of *Harijan* of 26 July 1942:

My idea of village *swaraj* is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants, and yet inter-dependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus the village's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children... The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring a clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on a cooperative basis. There will be no caste, such as we have with their graded untouchability. Non-violence with its technique of *satyagraha* and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community... The government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no punishments in the accepted sense, this panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary, and executive combined to the operative for its year in office. Any village can become such a republic without much interference\(^3\).

Dr. B.R Ambedkar opposed this suggestion, viewing village India differently and believing that the path of the future lay in a constitutional parliamentary democracy. To him the village represented regressive India, a source of oppression. The modern state hence had to build safeguards against such social oppression and the only way it could be effected was through the adoption of a parliamentary model of politics\(^4\).

A compromised was reached and establishment of panchayats at the village level as one of the goals was incorporated in the Indian Constitution. The constitutional provision states: the State shall take steps to organise village...
Panchayati Raj in India

panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of local self government (Article 40, in Part-IV- Directive Principles of State Policy). So efforts were made to set up panchayats at village level through various legislations in all States and Union Territories in the early years of independence.

The formal beginning of Panchayati Raj in the post-independence era can be traced back to the launching of the nationwide community development programme, when the need was felt for an effective institutional mechanism to involve the local communities in the process of development. The policy on panchayati Raj emerged from the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta study Team which stated that admittedly one of the least successful aspects of Community Development Programme (CDP) and National Extension Service (NES) work is its attempt to evoke people's initiative. This view of the Committee provides a broad perspective of contextual antecedents around which the concept of democratic decentralization is developed to strengthen the rural local administration.

Community Development is a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and on the initiative of the community. The United Nations has defined the term as "a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and the fullest possible reliance upon the community's initiative". The programme of Community Development started on October 2, 1952, with the launching of 55 community projects comprising 27,388 villages

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and a population of 16.4 million. Each of the 55 projects covered about 300 villages with an area of about 450 to 500 square miles, a population of about 2 lakhs and a cultivated area of about 1,50,000 acres. The project area was divided into three development blocks. It was meant to be pilot scheme in order to see how the people reacted to the programme and what were the pitfalls that one can apt to encounter in the propagation of the movement. Within a few months of the launching of these pilot projects, it was prominently experienced that people were ready, even keen, for the programme.6

The NES Programme, a somewhat less intensive programme in character was formulated and put into operation on October 2, 1953. This was a great plan for the upliftment of the rural masses of India. It was contemplated to cover the entire country with about 5,000 blocks comprising about 100 villages and a population of about 70,000. The number of blocks went on increasing from the year to year till by October 1967, the entire rural are in the country was covered with community development blocks, their total number being 5,265 (1638.5 in stage I, 2263 in stage II and 1359.5 in the post stage II). The number of villages covered was 5,66,900 and the population covered was 4066 lakhs. This programme was initiated with a view to removing the mental lethargy of the rural people, i.e., to develop both an urge and the initiative for better living conditions. It is a human movement that seeks to “instill in the people a will for better life, create in them a passionate desire for improving their standard of living through their own efforts and in full cooperation with the neighbours7.” However, these programmes failed to enthuse the local people to participate actively.

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6 Ibid., p. 5.
7 Ibid.
Therefore, the concern for economic development was emphasized in the recommendations of the Mehta Committee to entrust the administration of rural development programmes to the elected representatives at the local levels. The political and economic objectives behind the introduction of these institutions may become clear from the statements of political leaders, which were used at the time of inauguration of the scheme. Jawaharlal Nehru, when he lunched Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan on Gandhi Jayanti in 1959 said, “To uplift lakhs of village is not an ordinary task...The reason for the slow progress is our dependence on official machinery. An officer is probably necessary because he is an expert. But this work can be done only if the people take up the responsibility in their own hands. The people are not merely to be consulted. Effective power has to be entrusted to them.”

Jayaprakash Narayan, one of the well known leaders of Indian democracy, observed that “it is a matter of great satisfaction that in our country a beginning has already been made in laying the foundation of participatory democracy in the shape of Panchayati Raj or what was called at first, democratic decentralization.”

Panchayati Raj was considered a political and administrative innovation of far reaching importance when it was introduced in 1959. It was depicted as a mechanism of popular participation. The Panchayati Raj bodies were expected to awake political consciousness on the countryside and to engender the democratic process in rural India. However, the Panchayati Raj has experienced several ups and downs since its inception. Subsequent to 1965, the panchayats underwent a period of stagnation and decline till the late 1970s. Therefore, a few states took

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9 Ibid.
active steps to rejuvenate and strengthen the institutions based on their own political ideologies. But, in most others, a condition of degeneration continued to prevail. The bane of the problem, lay in the fact that regular elections were not held in most states for decades. States like Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh (where the last elections in the pre-ratification period were held in 1978, 1986, 1987, and 1988 respectively) are glaring examples of this inconsistency. The absence of elections was not the only anomaly. The proper functioning of the Panchayati Raj has depended more on the whims of the state governments and less on the mandate of the people. The Panchayati Raj bodies have further crippled by either lack of finances and resources, greater centralisation, limited rights and jurisdiction, or by the creation of parallel structures of authority at the local level. In such a context, far from emerging as instruments of self-governance and decentralised democracy, the panchayats could not even effectively undertake the wider developmental role prescribed for those bodies in a number of areas like agriculture, forestry, cottage industries, and welfare, etc. This was so because they were denied any meaningful integration with development programmes and administrative structures. Thus the past experience of many states shows that these institutions have not played their envisaged role and have not been associated with the planning and implementation process at the lower levels.

It is also an undisputed fact that the PRIs have not been beneficial to the poor and the unorganised weaker sections of the rural society. Power has remained in the hands of the rural elite and the poor and weaker sections have largely been marginalized. These sections have not been associated with the decision-making process in the panchayats even in states where the system has
been working well- states like Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. The system has mainly been working to the advantage of the dominant groups.

The seventh Five-Year plan document corroborated to this sad state of affairs of the panchayats and admitted that the PRIs have been reduced to an extremely peripheral status mainly due to the untimely elections in the states and inadequate technical and financial resources. Thus, the PRIs have not been able to acquire the status and dignity of viable and responsible people’s bodies due to number of reasons including the absence of regular elections, prolonged supersessions, insufficient representation to the weaker sections and women, inadequate devolution of powers and lack of financial resources. The main reason for this state of affairs is stated to be the absence of constitutional obligation for the state governments towards Panchayati Raj bodies. The PRIs had no existence of their own and they formed part of the State List. Hence, there was a demand for constitutional status of PRIs.10

It was in this context that the foundation for the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was laid by the then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. He suggested introducing an amendment in the constitution to accord a constitutional status to the third level of governance. Although the amendment could not come about during his lifetime, the successor Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, drew up a fresh constitutional amendment for the PRIs. This has emerged as the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992, and came into force from April 1993.

10 Ibid., p.104.
Panchayati Raj in India

The constitution 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, is a significant step in the political history of independent India. The Act, which provides the much required constitutional recognition to the long-standing need of developing power of people at the grassroots level, promises not only decentralising administration and local self government, but also participation of those groups of persons hitherto considered as weaker sections, namely, SCs, STs and women. Article 243 (D) makes provision for reservation of SCs, STs in every panchayat in proportion to the population in that area. Such seats will be filled by direct election and shall be allotted by rotation to different constituencies. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats so reserved shall be reserved for women belonging to SC/ST. Besides, not less than one-third of the total number of seats (including the seats reserved for SC/ST women) to be filled by direct election shall also be reserved for women and allotted by rotation. The office of the chairpersons in the panchayats at the village level or any other level shall be reserved for the SC, ST categories and women in such manner as the legislature of state by law may provide\textsuperscript{11}.

Political Participation of the Weaker Sections

Generally the power structure in Gram Panchayats is in favour of the upper castes and locally dominant castes in the society. The emergence of such type of power structure not only defeats the basic implications of democratic decentralization but also the aim of rural development with social justice. In this context, reservation provides a scope for women and for the members of SC and ST community to have participation in panchayats. Before the 73\textsuperscript{rd} Constitutional Amendment Act

came into operation there was no effective participation for the weaker sections. In earlier State Acts there was a reservation of seats for SCs and STs. In states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, reservation was based on their population. In Uttar Pradesh, there was a provision in the Act to specify the minimum of SC and ST members in the panchayats. The Acts of Goa and West Bengal did not provide for reservation of seats for SC/ST candidates. Most of the states did not provide reservations for the post of chairpersons at any level. Very few states had provided such reservations. Madhya Pradesh, for instance, provided reservation for the post of chairpersons at the block level. Andhra Pradesh provided reservation for SCs, STs and BCs for the post of chairpersons at all levels including district level. There is now significant reservation on the panchayats at all levels. The Constitution Amendment Act has a clear provision for providing reservation for SCs and STs for not only the seats but also for positions/chairpersons [243D (4)]. The local depressed groups have a better chance of organising themselves and of resisting the elite in Panchayati Raj elections because of increasing reservations. As the panchayat elections are being regulated by the State Election Commission, booth capturing and similar strong-arm tactics would be minimised. This would enable the weaker sections to mobilise freely during elections and exercise their franchise without hindrances.

So far as the representation of dalit women in various bodies is almost negligible. The data of representation of dalit women in parliament is an indicator of this. A special mechanism has to be developed to ensure that these women have

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12 E. A. Narayana, op.cit., pp.105-06.
their share of participation by resorting to quota. Leaving it to the political parties to give the dalit women their share is not the answer.

Past records show that political parties have given no space to dalit women in proportion to their population share. In 1971, of the total SC MP, only 1.56 percent were women, whereas they constitute half the SC population. Between 1977 and 1991 it remained between 4.94%-6.41%. Their numbers increased to 13 percent in 1996 and remained static till the last general election. In other words, by 2004, their share remained at 13 percent only\(^{13}\).

The alternative suggested is that there should be quotas within the political parties itself. However, from the above data it is obvious that none of the political parties will give space to the dalit women due to inherent gender bias. The alternative suggestion of fixing the quotas in the political parties will also not work in favour of dalit women. The reason is that most of the political parties, which are supposed to work for dalits, are generally under represented in the parliament. As a result, even if some share is given to dalit women they will remain unrepresented.

Women in Panchayats: A Historical Perspective

The participation of the Indian women in the political arena today presents a very gloomy picture. Although, women occupy a very predominant position in our social life and constitute 50 percent of the total population, their political participation is very much limited in proportion to their size in a male-dominated society at all levels. Quite a few studies on the role of women in politics have

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concluded that while women participated actively in the freedom struggle and social movements in the pre-independence days, the extent and quality of their participation steadily declined in the subsequent period.

There is denying of the fact that women who enjoy an equal status with men in the constitution of India have not been able to exercise their equality in letter and spirit in the first four decades of the history of the Indian Republic. They have become ‘objects of oppression’ or ‘subject of welfare’, partly because of the invisibility of women’s issues and partly because of the state’s of patriarchal attitudes and priorities. They have been relegated to the back rows behind the Indian male, getting listed as a weaker section of the Indian society.

As far as the participation of the Indian women in the political arena is concerned, a number of constraints have tended to severely limit their participation capacity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the main constraints stems from their depressed economic status, poverty, economic dependence on men, exclusion from ownership of property and modern occupation, and lack of access to resources like land, credit, skills, technology and development assistance have rendered women powerless. For most of them struggle for livelihood assumes an overwhelming importance, and the possibility of their taking an active part in politics seems quite unthinkable. A second constraint arises out of their inferior socio-religious position. The socio-religious institutions impose several restrictions on women, especially on their participation in spheres outside their homes. Women are expected to be submissive and the fear of losing their honour and of likely character assassination in the “dirty” violence ridden politics tends to keep them away from it. Thirdly, a vast majority of
women, especially the rural women, are illiterate and are not aware of their rights and responsibilities under the laws of the land. This makes them ill equipped to become active participants in the political process. Fourthly, the organisational handicaps from which women suffer add to the process of polarisation in favour of men. Organisational mobilisation is especially important for the vulnerable sections like women. It provides them with much needed strength to protect themselves against abuse and deprivation of rights. And last, but not the least, the all-pervasive "male hegemony" acts as an insurmountable barrier to bring women's participation. It is men who discourage women from participating in the political process. They do not show tolerance to their women folk becoming greater than themselves and tend to treat politics as an exclusive male domain. Apart from these inherent constraints, efforts to bring about effective participation of women in the political and developmental process have largely failed due to lack of official support and inadequate formulation and implementation of women-oriented policies and schemes.

The CSWI had also reported in 1971-74 that the provisions for women's participation in panchayats had degenerated to a mere tokenism in most states. First time in 1974, the Committee on the Status of Women in India recommended the establishment of statutory women's panchayats at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children as a transitional measure to break through the traditional attitude that inhibits most women from

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articulating their problems and participation actively in existing local bodies. They could be directly elected by the women of the village and should have the right to send representatives to the PS and ZP.

Although this recommendation had not any statutory status anywhere, in some places, for example, in Andhra Pradesh such women Panchayats have been formed. The reason for not implementing this provision was that instead of integrating women with the society, it would segregate them from the society.

At the grassroots level also, in the beginning when Panchayati Raj was introduced in India in 1959, very few women have contested, or have got elected to the Panchayati Raj bodies from the very initial phase itself. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) had recommended co-option of two female members "who are interested in working among women and children" at the PS and village Panchayat levels. Maharashtra in 1961 did make some provisions for women's representation by providing for the nomination of one or two women to its PSs and ZPs, in case no woman was elected. Some others states resorted to cooption when women did not come forward through elections. In fact, cooption became the normal practice in these states, as women were not normally encouraged to come forward and contest elections. Some forward thinking states like Andhra Pradesh in 1986 and Karnataka in 1985 adopted reservation as the way of bringing about women's representation. But even this reservation principle was not satisfactory. This was partly because the number of such seats was small and partly because the system did not enable the active and capable women to come forward. It was usually the women relatives of the Panchayat members or other influential members of the village who usurped these seats. These women
members were merely proxy candidates with the male member actually wielding the real power\textsuperscript{15}.

The Ashok Mehta Committee Report (1978) recommended that two women who get the highest number of votes in ZP election should be the members of ZP. In case no women come forward for election, two women might be co-opted. Similar provision and procedure were recommended for the Mandal Panchayat. After a decade, the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988), among others, recommended 30 per cent reservation of seats for women from Gram Panchayat to ZP levels. Besides, it was also recommended that 30 per cent posts of chairpersons of all Panchayats should also be reserved for women. In addition to this, certain percentage of chief executives of Panchayat Raj bodies at lower, middle and apex levels must be reserved for women.

The efforts of all these committees and commissions fructified when not less than one third seats for women in Panchayats has been guaranteed by the 73rd Constitution Amendment at the different tiers of local government. It may be mentioned here that the subject of women in Panchayats have been debated all along since 1957. The debate has been centred around how to enable women to participate effectively in decentralised governance and development\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{15} ibid., p.447.

Women’s Representation in Panchayat before 73rd Amendment Act

Andhra Pradesh Mandal Praja Parishad, Zilla Praja Parishad and Zilla Abhivruddhi Sameeksha Mandal Act, 1986 had a provision of reservation of maximum of four seats for women in Gram Panchayat and some percentage in Mandal Praja Parishad and Zilla Praja Parishad. Some percentage of the posts of chairperson of the ZP were also reserved for women. Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Act also had a provision of 25 per cent reservation for women. The Karnataka Zilla Parishad Taluka Panchayat Samiti, Mandal Panchayat Act 1983 had a provision of reservation of 25 per cent of seats for women at ZP and Mandal Panchayat levels. One seat each in Mandal Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat was also reserved for SC/ST women. Kerala Panchayat Act had provided 30 per cent reservation to women in Panchayats. Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Adhiniyam 1990 provided 30 per cent reservation for women at village level. 10 percent each in Janpad Panchayat and ZP levels. Among them at least one seat was reserved for SC/ST women. The Maharashtra Panchayat Act had made a provision of 30 per cent reservation for women. Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act 1991 reserved not less than one-third seats for women including SC/ST women. Besides, either chairperson or vice chairperson will be women. West Bengal Panchayat Act also has a provision of not less than one-third seats for women at different tiers of the Panchayat. The Panchayat Acts of the rest of the states had provided berth for women either through co-option or nomination.17

The above discussion about women in Panchayat gives an idea of women’s representation in different tiers of the PRIs across the country.

17 Ibid., p.31.
Panchayati Raj in India

Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa are the states, which had given comparatively more berths to women in different tiers of Panchayat than the other states. Orissa is the only state which introduced not less than one third reservation for women in Panchayat even before the idea of giving this much of reservation for women at national level was merely been debated.

**Women’s Representation in Panchayats after the 73rd Amendment Act**

According to Article 243 D of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution not less than one-third seats are reserved as members and chairpersons for women at all tiers of Panchayats. Among the SCs and STs of the total seats reserved for them, one third from them are also mandatorily reserved for women belonging to these groups. As a result of this provision more than a million women belonging to different castes and communities have been elected as members and chairpersons in the PRIs all over India.

In some states their representation, as members has been more than one third. For example, in Andhra Pradesh representation of women has been 33.84% at Gram Panchayat level, 37.01% at Mandal level and 33.21% at Zilla Panchayat level. In Karnataka where reservation for women was in practice before this Amendment, representation of women at Gram Panchayat level was 43.79%, 40.21% at Mandal Panchayat level and 36.45% at Zilla Panchayat level. Similarly, in states like Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and Tripura share of women was more than the minimum prescribed in the Central Act.

The representation of women chairpersons does not resemble with their share as members in the Panchayats as in most of the states, they do not have their
Panchayati Raj in India

share more than prescribed. It is interesting to mention here that one each in Tripura and West Bengal, 7 in Madhya Pradesh and 13 in Maharashtra have emerged as All Women Panchayats. It is heartening to note that Kulthikari Panchayat (West Bengal), which was an all women Panchayat in previous term, retained its status as all women Panchayat this time also in the recently held election.18

In the context of the prevailing situation, the demand for reservations for women in adequate proportions in various representative bodies as a method of ensuring their entry and participation had been quite pertinent. It was increasingly being felt that in view of the powerless and vulnerability of the Indian women, especially the rural women, reservation and quota may provide the only way of ensuring their presence in the local self-government.

Those who oppose reservation of seats for women in panchayats brandish four main reasons in support of their stand. First, women who become members of panchayats and local bodies will disturb the harmony of homes and of family life. Even those men who tolerate women working in offices for fixed hours do not take kindly to them when their roles change to one of community leadership. This is because then the women have to attend to people's problems and leaders. This means irregular hours of work and a twenty-four hour demand on their time. Therefore, who will look after the children and household chores, the men folk ask? Second, women will become targets of attacks by anti-social elements when they move out of their homes or go outside their villages for work, meetings, and so on. A case cited of one state where a few local women leaders, obliged to spend

18 Ibid., pp.31-32.
nights away from homes during their travel, were attacked by goons and even raped. Will any male family member allow his wife, daughter or sister to take part in a public role, which has such potential dangers, they ask? Third, they mention that whenever women hold elected offices, the male officers are the ones who "dictate" what is or is not to be done. They take control of the entire situation and women elected representatives become the hapless victims of officialdom. Finally, these opponents contend, even if women are elected in large numbers, the power equation will never change. "Instead of Ram Singh, Ram Singh's wife will be there," these villagers quip. Evidently, these and many other problems are the product of a particular mindset and culture of male dominance. A social transformation aimed at the women's changing role could be achieved by PRIs. But, of course, the task is beset with enormous difficulties for women in its initial phases.  

Nevertheless, there seems to be a general sympathy and reconciliation to the idea of reservation for SC/ST in general and one-third reservation for women in PRIs. The protagonists of reservation for women argue that the male dominated political system refuses to provide space for women and this will help creating imbalanced political system and will lead to social mobilisation of women. The antagonists, on the contrary, are apprehensive about the outcome of such reservation policies. Reservation for women as chairpersons is the biggest irritant as it undercuts the power and privileges of upper castes/class male dominating rural power structure. The aspirants of upper class/caste are naturally could not reconcile with this idea. They are totally dismayed as for generations' power and

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politics was the domain of landed upper caste/class males and now this would change. More so, when this is not merely a political stunt and certainly is going to change texture and functioning of PRIs.\textsuperscript{20}

Reservation per se, of course, does not create egalitarianism but gives these sections as mentioned above a share of participation. Social change never occurs without the active participation of those excluded from the decision-making process. Along the same line, reservation by itself may not lead to effective participation. However, this opportunity can be used for political training and mobilisation, which forms the basis of collective common interest and common development.\textsuperscript{21}

Women in Panchayats – Post 73rd Amendment Act- A Review

Let us now review briefly the experience for women in PRIs in the post-73\textsuperscript{rd} Amendment Act.

In Tamil Nadu, it was observed that half of the electorate comprised women and that male canvassers could hardly enter homes to seek the support of women voters. It was also noticed that some women candidates were dummy running for their husbands. Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyer noted that- “India is, to the best of my knowledge, the first country in the world to adopt a grassroots approach to the conscientisation and empowerment of women. Where others have reserved seats for women MPs and MLAs and trusted on a trickle-down effect to bring women into political sphere, we in India have begun at the lowest tier of governance and are working our way upwards.

\textsuperscript{20} Bohra, op. cit., p. 675.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.674.
A vast reservoir of women politicians is thus being created and will soon be in a position to challenge male dominance in the general constituencies, up to and including the Lok Sabha level...

After all, the ultimate aim is not to get a female presence in a third of our Panchayats/nagarpalikas, but women’s participation in at least half our polity as a whole. 22

In Madhya Pradesh, Rashmi Arun23 pointed out that though women constitute about half of the population in India, their participation in the decision-making processes has always been negligible. This naturally will have an impact on the decision-making process as regards reservation for women. The Panchayati Raj Act however has envisaged and implemented to a considerable extent true participation of women and power sharing. In most of the cases, women are housewives and first time entrants in politics, most of whom are illiterate or educated up to primary level. Importantly, the decision to participate in the election resulted in the birth of, at least, in some cases, the Institution of ‘Sarapanch-Pati’ or ‘Adhyakshya-Pati’ and started functioning in many Panchayats in the state. In some cases the women have come forward but not very effective. Often illiteracy and lack of adequate education are the impediments, the outcome of which is that most of the women sound vague about their role. With the help of the training programme however the women are encouraged and they are gradually coming out of the social purdah. Looked at from different perspective, besides, education and ignorance, social pressures also prevent

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women from assuming their responsibilities fully. Invariably, they have to struggle to establish their presence. In addition, some times caste also plays a negative role. For SC/ST women life as a panch is much worse than their upper caste counterparts. They feel ostracised on caste grounds. And also these women are doubly disadvantaged because of the lack of education or illiteracy. However, the situation is not entirely grim. In many cases, women have started coming forward recognising their roles. Many of them have also seized with the desire to do something for other women. Almost all of them recognised the need for education. They have also started getting themselves appraised with government schemes for villages. Given a little more time, these women will definitely gain greater political maturity.

A recent study of Panchayati Raj in Haryana has reviewed the progress of some 100 elected women in four districts of Haryana over two years and indicates the beginning of discernable revolution. A majority of the elected women panchs, including younger women, were illiterate when elected to office. After two years in office they demand literacy skills and generally feel the need of education for their daughters. This clearly is an outcome of reservations for women in the decision-making process. Another indication of progress was when women got elected into office, majority of them were married with family of more than six members, many worked in their own fields, and some were agricultural labourers. Yet rarely did any family member express resentment at Panchayat work affected domestic chores. Some even found sons and spouses coming forward to help. Before coming to office these women did not have any idea about the Panchayat system. Now, within two years, many of the female panchs were calling the shots, organising quorums, exercising their judicial powers, reorganising development
work. At the second tier of the PRIs also there were some progress made. As observed- a few PS chairpersons had within two years, affiliated themselves to political parties and actively participated in assembly elections. Many of them now feel that they had an identity distinct from their husbands. “The law had made women equal to men, they cannot take us for granted.”

In Uttar Pradesh, in one Rajput (Thakur) village the women candidate who was elected as “Pradhan” from the women general seat was teaching in a school, and found very active. Her husband was also very much supportive and helping in her Panchayat work. It was revealed that since this seat was retained by her father-in-law for more than a decade, and now it came in the women reservation category, there was no option left to the family except to nominate someone from their own family to retain the seat. In another village, two Muslim women candidates who were also relatives to each other contested the election, but the ‘Bahu’ (daughter-in-law) of the family won the election because of her husband who was very active in politics, and now she is doing very well. Similarly, the women seat of one village of Meerut district was contested and won by the wife of a patrol pump owner of the village who is very influential.

A study of women’s empowerment in Rajasthan conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences reveals that the male deputy chairmen working under women chairperson have moved no confidence motion against latter. The worst victims of this have been dalits and OBCs chairpersons. For example the data from Alwar and Pali districts show that out of 61 no confidence motion brought

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24 O.P Bohra, op.cit., p. 674.
25 Ibid., 679.
for hearing from March 1997 to Feb. 1998, 56 cases related to Gram Panchayat and 5 to PS chairperson/deputy chairperson. Out of these 61 cases fifty per cent were against women. The allegation levelled against these women were not on account of remising their duties as elected representatives, but due to caste prejudices which the upper caste could not express in open GP or GS meetings.²⁶

Jaytilak Guha Roy has conducted a study of Kulthikari Gram Panchayat of Sankrail Block in Midnapore district, West Bengal. It is an all women Panchayat. The study among others reveals that despite inexperience in Panchayat work and constraints of socio-economic backwardness, the elected women of this first and foremost Mahila Panchayat of West Bengal has done appreciable work in literacy, poverty alleviation and development programme during their tenure. Based on its overall performance during the year 1994-95, this Panchayat has been adjusted by Midnapore ZP as one of the three best panchayats out of 572 GPs of this district.²⁷

The experiences of different regions of Maharashtra reveal that very few women contested the elections on their own volition. As is the case in other states, they are projected as mother or wife or sister or widow of someone. In respect to the local bodies election, the women of rural community were generally encouraged by the male members of their family to contest. The reason was not that they were interested in incorporating their women into mainstream by allowing them to participate in political development. Rather, the reasons were: first, the seats were reserved for women, so their male counterparts could by no means contest the election. Second, they had the advantage of getting women of

²⁶ Mahi Pal, op.cit., p.36.
²⁷ Ibid., p.38.
their families to be elected to these coveted posts. Because, once the female members were elected, their husbands were the heroes of the winning processions and the elected women candidates were contend in watching the processions from the windows of their houses. In some cases, male members of their families guided them in meetings. Whereas, in most of the cases, male members of their families attended the meeting on their behalf. The respondents themselves admitted that illiteracy and ignorance amongst women are the two main stumbling blocks in the way of their effective and meaningful participation. When required, approximately 90 per cent of the total respondents could not mention the number of votes that they have secured in the recently concluded Panchayat elections. In general, majority of them did not have any idea as regard to meetings. Papers were sent over to their houses for their thumb impressions or signatures, if the women representatives happened to be the Sarapanch.  

The Institute of Social Sciences' study on Panchayat Election held in 1995, in Karnataka, reveals that most of the women members were younger than their male counterparts. Most of the women members were belonging to poor families, specially at the gram Panchayat level. Illiteracy was higher among women than their male counterparts and more glaring at the lowest tier of Panchayat. Family members or the husband in a number of cases had motivated the women to contest the elections. Women members were aware about their social, economic and educational realities. That is why they stressed upon social justice and education as their main priorities. However, it was also found that even the educated women

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were lacking the knowledge of various aspects of Panchayati Raj system, specially constitution and composition of Subject Committees.\textsuperscript{29}

Mahi Pal in his assessment through the experience of Kerala observed that Ms. Fatima Suhara, the President of Puthige village Panchayat in Kasargoda district of Kerala had to resign under the pressures from local CPI (M) leaders who compelled her to follow their dictates in Panchayat affairs. She refused to follow their dictates and choose to adhere to the prescribed rules and regulations of the Panchayati Raj Act\textsuperscript{30}.

K. Jayalakshmi in her paper based on the field study conducted in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh on all women Panchayat maintained that with all the limitations, these women were able to identify the village needs. The most important need was portable water, sanitation, primary school, and income generating activities for women. To a greater extent, these women collectively have made all efforts to gain the confidence of all sections. Most of them stated that allegations and accusations were made against them, however, having accepted the task of development of the village they marched ahead with their activities. They abide by the rules and follow procedures pertaining to the functioning of the Panchayat. It was also observed that women’s involvement in these bodies encourages both individual and social assertions of women’s right and responsibilities, and urges them to assist each other in accomplishing these quests. Given the opportunities and avenues they seem to deliver goods in a reasonably better manner with a human touch. As participants in the

\textsuperscript{29} Mahi Pal, op.cit., p.35.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
developmental planning process, their priorities are different from their counterparts. Their effort towards development seems to be based on sustainability. However, Jayalakshmi believes that all seems not too well with the representatives, they need to be given sufficient training and be provided with all the wherewithal to function both independently and collectively as representatives exclusively towards developmental goals. They have taken in good stride with the challenging tasks ahead.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{Panchayati Raj in Orissa}

\textbf{Orissa: A Brief History}

The name Orissa is derived from the Sanskrit word “Odravishaya” or “Odra Desha”. In ancient times, specially during Ashokan times, it was known as Kalinga. It had a distinguished past till it lost its independence first in 1568 when the present Ganjam district was conquered by Golkonda Sultan and there after in 1803 to East India Company. Orissa, the land of Oriya speaking people was constituted as a separate province on 1 April 1936 as per the Government of India Constitution of Orissa Order, 1936. At that time there were six districts in the State. It has acquired its present form only on 1 January 1949 after the merger of all the erstwhile princely states into the Indian union. The capital of the State at the initial stage was established at the historic city of Cuttack located at the apex of Mahanadi delta. In 1956, the capital was shifted from Cuttack to Bhubaneswar, which is a planned town of post-independence period. The State was reorganized into 13 revenue districts under three revenue divisions till 1992. In 1992, district

\begin{footnote}
\end{footnote}
reorganization was further started and 17 new districts were created for administrative convenience.32

Physical Features
Orissa extends from 17° 49' N to 22° 34' N latitude and from 81° 27' E to 87° 28' on the east coast of India.33 It is bounded by the states of West Bengal on the northeast and Bihar on the north, Madhya Pradesh on the west, Andhra Pradesh on the south and Bay of Bengal on the east. The entire coastline is 480 km. The total geographical area of the State as reported by the Survey of India is 1,55,707 sq. km., which accounts for 4.74 percent of the total landmass of India34.

There are 30 districts in the state in 2001. For administrative convenience, the state has 58 revenue sub-divisions, 147 tehsils, 314 blocks, 5,263 gram panchayats, 51,061 revenue villages (out of which 46,638 are inhabited), 2 corporations, 29 municipalities and 70 notified area councils during 1999.

The state is divided into two broad natural divisions, namely, the costal plains in the east and the inland in the west. The plains consist of the districts of Balasore, Bhadrak, Jaipur, Kendrapara, Jagatsinghpur, Cuttack, Puri, Khurda, Nayagarh and part of Ganjam district and cover a little less than a quarter of the area of the state. It lies as a narrow strip on the east coast flanked by the eastern

Ghats and the Bay of Bengal. The inland region consists of the remaining districts, and it can be sub-divided into three natural divisions, namely, the southern plateau, which is a part of the Deccan Plateau, the Mahanadi River Valley, and the broken high lands of the north and north-east. A major portion of this division is covered by dense forests. The main rivers are: the Mahanadi, the Subarnakantha, the Baitarani, the Brahmani, the Rushi Kulya, the Buhabalanga, the Vansadhara and the Sileru. In brief, physiographically the state can be divided into costal plains, the middle mountains region, the plateaus and rolling uplands\(^35\).

**Panchayati Raj in Orissa and Reservation for Women in Orissa**

Like elsewhere in India, the evolution of PRI in Orissa occurred in ups and downs. Before Orissa emerged as separate province in 1936, the region of the present state was partly under the Bengal Presidency (later Bihar-Orissa Province), the Madras Presidency, Sambalpur District and other Princely States, which merged in 1948-49 to form the present state of Orissa. Hence, various laws applicable in the different Presidencies, Provinces, and Districts regulated rural self-government in these regions that constitute Orissa today\(^36\).

In the three costal districts forming British Orissa from 1803 onwards, urban local self-government was introduced for the Municipalities under the Bengal Municipal Act III of 1884 and after the creation of Bihar and Orissa Municipal Act VII of 1992\(^37\). Rural local government in the three costal districts initially followed the Bengal Local Self-Government Act of 1885, which was

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\(^35\) Ibid., p. 7.


brought under this Act from 1887 onwards. Three district boards were formed, and below them local boards at the sub-district level. The government nominated all the members, including the chairperson. Following the suggestions made by the Simon Commission in 1909, and the Montagu-Chemistford Report in 1918, the Bihar and Orissa Local Self-government Act of 1922 was passed, which introduced the elective system to all the self-governing institutions and established Union Boards consisting of several villages. However, the area covered by the institutions was very large and the operation of district boards was quite confined. 'These boards did provide for limited popular participation through periodic elections under limited suffrage. These bodies were, however, apologies for democratic institutions and the British themselves regarded them as training schools for democracy, rather than as full-fledged autonomous institutions'.

Taking into consideration that in most princely states no rural governments on a representative basis was operating at all; the base for popular rural self-government was rather weak.

After independence, Orissa acquired the distinction of being the first state in India to introduce village panchayats through the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1948. By 1950 the merger of the feudatory states was complete and gram panchayats were gradually established in these areas as well. The Orissa gram Panchayat Act, 1964, passed in 1965, later placed the Gram Panchayat Act of 1948. This Act consolidated all laws pertaining to gram panchayats in Orissa.

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39 Evelin Hust, op.cit.,p.61.
Apart from setting up gram panchayats very early, Orissa was also quite innovative as regards schemes for rural self-government at higher levels. The Land Revenue and Tenure Committee headed by Nabakrushna Chaudhury (a Bhoodan leader who subsequently became Chief Minister) in 1949 made interesting suggestions concerning the decentralization of authority through the formation of ‘Anchals’, that were, however, never implemented (Government of Orissa, 1949). It is evident that this scheme was an attempt to evolve a comprehensive system of local self-government in Orissa, which was to undertake development function too. However, this scheme was overtaken by the on-rush of events culminating in the Balwantrai Mehta Committee recommendations.

In place of the proposed scheme, a full-fledged but short-lived three-tier system as envisaged by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee came into being through the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959, implemented on 26 January 1961. Former Community Development Blocks were converted into Panchayati Raj Blocks, counting 314, and Zilla Parishads were set up in all of the then 13 districts, replacing the former district boards. The already existing gram panchayats were organically linked up with the two higher tiers.\(^{40}\)

The pivot of the administrative level for rural development was the block, which was inherited from the Community Development Programme. The main functions of the second tier- the PS-were thus concerned with the execution of development in the block. The ZPs as a higher level were not only entrusted with powers of coordination, but also with powers of supervision over the execution of the works and programmes by the PSs and power to approve their plans and

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p.62.
budgets. Nevertheless, they were abolished by the newly elected Swantantra/Jana Congress coalition through the Orissa Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad (Second Amendment) Act, 1967 in 1968 after six years of existence as being ‘superfluous’. The Zilla Parishad was replaced by the District Advisory Council (DAC), which was heavily dominated by the District Collector. Thus the Panchayati Raj system in Orissa became effectively reduced to a two-tier system. This instance shows already that the PRI was often used by the parties in power at the state level for their ends. The Swantantra-led government had good reasons to dissolve the ZPs, for the Congress Party dominated them at this time. In this set up of 1959 the position of women was negligible as elsewhere in Indian republic. There were provisions for the nomination of one woman in case there was none returned through the general election to the PS and ZP. This rule obviously followed the recommendations of the Mehta Committee for the nomination of women.\(^{41}\)

After the abolition of ZPs not much development in the PRI took place. Elections were not held regularly, at political parties at the state level misused the PRI for political mileage. In 1983, for example, elections to the PRI took place under the J.B Patnaik led government, which was accused of utilizing official machinery, money, and coercive power for securing the seats.\(^{42}\)

The Panchayati Raj system in Orissa took a major rejuvenating turn under the Janata Dal Government led by Biju Patnaik, which was voted into power in 1990. It is interesting to note that the PRI had flourished in the early 1960s also

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p.62.

under Biju Patnaik’s stewardship, and there seemed to be a genuine concern for
devolution of power ingrained in his thought, however, only as long as it served
his political interests as well. Without much loss of time, three important Acts,
namely the Orissa Gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1991, the Orissa Panchayat
Samiti (Amendment) Act, 1991, and the Orissa Zilla Parishad (Amendment) Act,
1991 was passed. These three Acts contain many revolutionary provisions for the
reservation of marginalized groups, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes,
and women. The Orissa Act 9 of 1991, for example, which amended the gram
Panchayat Act, 1964, gave the provision for a reservation of not less than one-
third for women.\footnote{Reservation for women is given in clause 10 (3) (b) (ii) for the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and in clause 10 (4) for the general seats.} In 1992, another novel and progressive provision only found
in Orissa was enacted. It reads that in case the Sarapanch happens to be a man, the
naib-sarapanch has to be a woman\footnote{Evelin Hust, op.cit., p.63.}. The provisions for reservation for women in
the other two-tiers were formulated like-wise.

The amendments were of a very progressive nature not only in regard to
the strong reservation for women, SCs, and STs. Experts on the Panchayati Raj
also praised the following initiatives taken by the government:

The amendment made with regard to the direct election of the members of
all the PR bodies was a ‘radical step’ taken to make the PRIs in the field of rural
reconstruction and development, and the provision for the constitution of a state
level Finance Commission to look into the financial position of PRIs showed the
government’s interest in the PR system.
Elections to the two lower tiers (Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samiti) and the local urban bodies took place in May-June 1992 on a non-party basis. Unfortunately the election was marred by violence, which hints at the importance of these institutions in the political fabric of the state. In the 1992 election, 480 women representatives were returned in 94 municipalities and 28,068 women representatives in the village panchayats. Among them were 14 sarapanches, 5,237 naib-sarapanches, 1,841 members of the PSs, 15 chairpersons, and 301 vice-chairpersons of the PSs\(^45\).

Apart from holding elections very soon after the assent of the amended Acts, the government also organized a nationally well received Panchayati Raj Convention on 5 March 1993 in the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar and the day, not incidentally the birth day of Biju Patnaik, was declared as the ‘Panchayati Raj Divas’ (Panchayati Raj Day) to be celebrated every year. The assembly of about 16,000 chairpersons, vice-chairpersons and members of PSs, all sarapanches and naib-sarapanches of gram panchayats-who along with the MLAs and MPs from the State, Government officials and invitees, deliberated at the Kalinga Stadium for two days on the new panchayat system that had been resuscitated after a lapse of 12 years, was historic\(^46\). This episode shows that the Janata Dal government might have been really interested in devolution of power.

However, the same government delayed elections to the ZPs, which would have taken place after the gap of 23 years. This adjournment was partly due to political bickering, but a genuine reason was the reorganization of the 13 districts,

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p.64.

which was an important task especially in light of their unwieldy size hampering efficient administration. They were first increased to 17 districts, and from 1 April 1993 onwards 28 districts started functioning. Since 1994 there have been 30 districts in Orissa. The chief minister announced elections to the ZPs from April 1994 to be held on party basis, which were later deferred to November and again to December 1994. Controversy arose over the manner of the demarcation of the ZP constituencies and the identification of the reserved constituencies. It was alleged that political calculations were the main consideration, instead of a just and rational routine. Finally the State Election Commission, due to ‘non-availability of ballot boxes’, postponed the elections, then scheduled for 20 December 1994. A revised programme was only planned to be drawn up after the State Assembly elections, which were due in the spring of 1995. Biju Patnaik claimed that this cancellation was nothing short of a conspiracy.\(^{47}\)

In the following State Assembly elections in March 1995, the Janata Dal lost its majority and the Congress (I) under the leadership of J.B Patnaik come to power in Bhubaneswar. Clearly the panchayati Raj and municipal bodies were seen with suspicion and as the legacy of the Janata government. Not too surprisingly, the new government thus decided to dissolve them. The Notification No. 673/95 of 1 August 1995 gave as the reason for the dissolution that the law under which the elections had taken place in 1992 did not conform in some points with the 73rd Amendment.\(^{48}\) As a pivotal problem the lack of a provision for the reservation of the offices of Sarapanch or chairperson for SCs, STs and women as provided by the 73\(^{rd}\) Amendment in Article 243-D (4) was cited. However, the

\(^{47}\) Evelin Hust, op.cit., pp.64-65.

dissolution of previously elected bodies that did not comply with the regulation laid down by the Constitutional Amendment was not mandatory, though possible. Article 234 N of the 73rd Amendment Act concerning the continuance of the existing laws and panchayats reads: ‘provided that all the Panchayats existing immediately before such commencement shall continue till the expiration of their duration, unless sooner dissolved by a resolution passed to that effect by the Legislative Assembly of the State (emphasis added)’49.

Hence one can argue that the premature dissolution of the bodies was constitutional, but most likely politically motivated. The lack of interests and reluctance towards a meaningful devolution of power by the Congress-government in Orissa can also be seen in the deferment of elections until January 1997, although they were constitutionally due six months after the dissolution, or until 2 February 1996. The pretexts were first that the constituencies had to be newly delimited, and a routine procedure for the reservation of the constituencies had to be developed. This happened through an Amendment in December 1995, as well as a reservation of not less than 27 percent for the OBCs. The government also said that it would set a Finance Commission, Orissa being the last state that had not constituted one until February 1996. The State Election Commission announced polls for June and July 1996, but because of joint appeal by all recognized parties to put them off considering the onset of the rainy season, they were cancelled. In October 1996, the Supreme Court promulgated an ordinance

49 Evelin Hust, op.cit., p.65.
that the elections were to be held without further delay, notwithstanding the pending writ petitions in the High Court.

On 20 November 1996, the State Election Commission fully issued notification of holding elections to all the three-tiers of the PRI in January 1997, and the notification had to be filled in December 1996. Yet, the government tried again to postpone the polls in view of several drought conditions prevailing in some parts of the state. It made a plea to the Court, guided by a resolution taken by the State Assembly on 28 November. The Assembly was of the opinion that the elections would affect the drought relief measures, since the administration would be busy with the preparation and carrying out of the election. However, the appeal was of no avail, and the elections took place at last from 11 to 15 January 1997, one and a half years after the gram panchayats and PSs had been dissolved. The elections to the ZPs took place after a lapse of 30 years⁵⁰.

Like the elections in 1992, these were also marked by violence in 19 districts of coastal Orissa, claiming 9 lives and leaving 200 injured. Polls were ordered in 597 booths because of violence, snatching of ballots, and other incidences, and the elections were completed in all respects including elections to chairpersons and vice-chairpersons by 25 February 1997 (State Election Commission, Orissa 1997). Elections were held in 30 districts having 854 ZP constituencies for 5,260 PS constituencies in 314 blocks, and in 5,261-gram panchayats having 81,077 wards. The total number of electors was 1,93,93,602. Computing the data given by the state election commission concerning the reservation of seats for the various offices shows that 35.27 percent of the ward

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 65-66.
members (28,595), 35.39 percent of the sarpanches (1,862), 35.55 percent of the Samiti members (1,870), 36.31 percent of the Samiti chairpersons (114), 34.43 percent of the ZP members (294), and exactly 33.33 percent of the ZP presidents (10) have been reserved for the women. Thus, 32,745 positions have been reserved for women.

All in all, elections took place for 92,452 offices, out of which 35,290 (38.17 percent) offices holders were elected unopposed, and for 4,548 offices (4.92 percent) no nominations were filed. Unfortunately there is no information on whether these have been predominantly seats reserved for women. The remaining 52,604 offices, however, were contested with an average of 3.65 contestants. It is not too astonishing, as will become clear later, that the position of the sarpanches was the most highly contested with an average of 7.58, followed by ZP members (4.7), PS members (4.11), and ward members (3.1). The election for the ZP was conducted on a party basis. Out of 854 seats, 444 went to the congress party, 191 were won by the Janta Dal, 119 by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), 11 by the Communist Party of India (CPI), 4 by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), 17 by the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), 12 by the Samajwadi Janata party (SJP) and 56 by Independents.51

The following tables show the recent number of districts, blocks and PRIs in Orissa; number of elected members in the three-tiers Panchayati Raj system in Orissa; and the number of elected representatives showing break up SC, ST and women.

51 Ibid., p.66-67.
Table No. 3.1: Number of Districts, Blocks and Panchayat Raj Institutions in Orissa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Block</th>
<th>Gram Panchayat</th>
<th>Panchayat Samiti</th>
<th>Zilla Parishad</th>
<th>Total Number of PRIs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(As on 23.01.2004)</td>
<td>(As on 01.04.2004)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>6234</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6578</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table No. 3.2: Number of Elected Members in the Three Tiers Panchayati Raj System in Orissa (As on 01.04.2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gram Panchayat</th>
<th>Panchayat Samiti</th>
<th>Zilla Parishad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number Elected Representatives</td>
<td>Number Elected Representatives</td>
<td>Number Elected Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6234</td>
<td>87547</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table No. 3.3: Number of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Orissa in Three Tiers and its Elected Representatives showing break up SC, ST and Women (As on 01.14.2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gram Panchayat (GP)</th>
<th>Panchayat Samiti (PS)</th>
<th>Zilla Parishad (ZP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14930</td>
<td>23049</td>
<td>31414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Orissa

In order to understand the functioning of the Panchayati Raj, it is pertinent to discuss the structure and functions of different levels of the Panchayati Raj System in Orissa. Even though the 73rd Amendment led to a more or less uniform system all over India through the Amendments of the various State Acts, differences in the arrangement and also in several features in which the states have the freedom to lay down specific rules. Orissa has presently a three-tier arrangement, with the ZP as the apex body at the district level, the PS at the block level, and the gram panchayats at the state level. There are two more distinct general bodies at the village level, namely the ‘gram sabha’ and the ‘palli sabha’.

The Gram Panchayat: The gram panchayat is not only the lowest tier located at village level, but also the oldest. The first major innovation in local self-government in Orissa occurred when, in 1948, the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act was passed. The Orissa gram Panchayat Act, 1964 which is still valid with modifications up to now, replaced the former Act. The gram panchayat Act is very elaborate, having 154 sections with multiple sub-sections, and one schedule giving the vehicle tax rates. In the act, the constitution and function of the gram panchayats is laid down as well as the definitions for ‘grama’, the ‘gram sasan’, the ‘gram sabha’, and the ‘palli sabha’.

A ‘grama’ in Orissa consists either of a big village or several contiguous villages, declared and notified by the state government in the gazette as a ‘grama’. It comprises a population of not less than 2,000 and not more than 10,000 people, but a village should never be divided. Thus the grama is very big and the average

number of villages per panchayat is the highest. The Orissa gram panchayats, thus, are rather unwieldy in size. Taken together with the fact that the communications in the State are relatively poor, the size of the gram panchayats is bound to tell upon their efficient functioning.  

The ‘gram sasan’ is the electorate situated in the area of the ‘grama’; this means all persons of the electoral roll for an Assembly Constituency in this area. The Gram sasan shall be a body corporate by the name of the Grama to which it relates, having perpetual succession and common seal, with power, subject to the provisions of this Act and the rules made there under, to acquire, hold and dispose of property and to contract and may be the said sue and be sued.  

There used to be two meetings of the members of the gram sasan, one in February and the other in June, and these meetings are called gram sabha, but since 1999 four more dates have been introduced. The quorum of these meetings is 1/10 of the members of the gram sasan. Incase the quorum is not met, the meeting will stand adjourned to a future day and no quorum is needed for the second meeting.  

At the gram sabha held in February the programmes and works to be undertaken by the gram panchayat for the ensuring year and the annual budget for the gram panchayat for that year in regard to the recommendations of the ‘palli sabhas’ are discussed, and the recommendations are given to the gram panchayat. At the gram sabha in June, the Sarapanch submits the report of the programmes and works undertaken by the gram panchayat, and their progress during the  

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53 Ibid.  
54 Evelin Hust, op.cit., p.69.
preceding year along with the audit report. Proposals for the levy of taxes, rates, rents and fees, the organization of community service, and the drawing up and implementation of agricultural production plans can be brought forward in any of the gram sabhas.

When a grama consists of more than one village, for every village the state government shall constitute a ‘palli sabha’. Provided that a ward (constituency for the election of the ward member) consists of more than one village, only one palli sabha will be constituted for this ward. The electorate and the meetings of the electorate of the ward are called palli sabha. The palli sabha is supposed to meet once in a year in February, and no quorum is required. The duty of the palli sabha is to give recommendations to the gram sabha regarding development works and programmes that might be taken up during the ensuring year in the ward and concerning the annual budget estimate submitted by the gram panchayat. Consequently, the meetings of the palli sabha should take place before the gram sabha. Many villagers, especially in the hinterland blocks, complained that they are asked to participate in two separate meetings to basically discuss the same matters. They do not appreciate the double burden and often were of the opinion that participation in the institutions of grass-roots democracy is basically a waste of time.

If one could call the gram sabha the ‘village parliament’, then the gram panchayat could be called the ‘village government’. A gram panchayat has to be established as the executive authority for every gram sasan. For the constitution of the gram panchayat the gram has to be divided into several ‘wards’ by the District Collector, and the total number of wards shall not be less than 11 and not more
than 25. These wards form the smallest constituencies in the Indian electoral system. Every gram panchayat shall be composed of a Sarapanch, who is directly elected by the gram sasan, a member elected from each ward, and a naib-sarapanch, who will be elected from among the ward members. The fact that the Sarapanch is directly elected strengthens his/her position vis-à-vis the gram panchayat.

Wards are reserved for SCs and STs as far as possible proportionally according to their strength in the population of that area as follows (Bhargava and Samal 1993:196):

\[
\text{Seats to be reserved for SC/ST} = \frac{\text{Total SC/ST population}}{\text{Total number of seats}} \times \frac{\text{Total population of the gram panchayat}}{\text{Total population of the gram panchayat}}
\]

If the SC or ST population is not sufficient for the reservation of any seat, one seat shall be reserved for them. Not less than one-third of the seats are reserved for women, including one-third of the seats reserved for SCs and STs. If only two seats have been reserved for SCs or STs, one of them has to be filled with a woman. The reserved ward shall be allotted by rotation. Since the reservation is done in single-member constituencies, the legislators did not want to block certain constituencies for consecutive elections. That is why they decided that the reserved seats should rotate in every election, so that each constituency gets reserved for a woman again only after 10 years\(^{55}\). The quite complicated procedure of the reservation of wards and offices of Sarapanch for the specific groups was inserted through the Orissa gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1995 (Orissa Act 18 of 1995) after the PRI had already been dissolved by the Congress.

\(^{55}\) The provision for proportional reservation for SCs and STs and for one-third for women has been introduced by Orissa Act 9 of 1991. However, the regulation given above was introduced through Orissa Act 6 of 1994.
government. The main consideration was to make the reservation procedure a rational and not arbitrary one; otherwise it could be easily used for political gains. In the same Amendment Act, the provision that additionally not less than 27 percent of the wards are reserved for OBCs, also in the women’s quota was inserted.

The offices of the Sarpanches shall be reserved for SCs and STs as far as possible according to their proportion in the state, and not less than one-third of the total number of sarpanches in the gram panchayats shall be reserved for women. No reservation is provided for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). the state government makes the reservations of the offices of the sarpanches by rotation among different gram panchayats. As mentioned earlier, the naib-sarpanch position is reserved for a woman in case the Sarpanch is a man\textsuperscript{56}.

Anyone who has attained the age of 21 years, is able to read and write Oriya, and is not contesting any other position in the PRI is eligible for the office of Sarpanch and ward member. Section 25 sub-sections (a) to (v) give several disqualifications for becoming a member or Sarpanch of the gram panchayat, among which is the much-disputed two-child norm [Section 25 (v)]. The provision in regard to literacy, however, has been pragmatically adapted in reality: members are required to be at least able to sign their name-without this adjustment it would be difficult to find enough qualified candidates. Otherwise, most of the disqualifications are meant to secure that the candidate is mentally and bodily fit, that s/he does not hold more than one political post at the same time, that no

\textsuperscript{56} Evelin Hust, op.cit., p.71.
criminal can stand for election, and that the candidate is not an employee of the state or central government\footnote{Ibid.}.

The Sarapanch is the main executive of the gram panchayat, acting under its authority. S/he has the responsibility to convene and preside over the meetings, conduct, regulate, and be responsible for the proper maintenance of the records of the meetings, and other records of the grama sasan. The Sarapanch has to execute documents relating to contracts, is responsible for proper working of the panchayat, exercises control over the acts and proceedings of all officers and employees of the panchayat, and can discharge certain duties. The naib-sarapanch can exercise such powers, discharge such duties, and perform such functions as the Sarapanch may from time to time delegate to him/her. S/he will also perform as the Sarapanch if the posts fall vacant until a new Sarapanch is elected, and in absence of the Sarapanch the naib-sarapanch presides over the gram panchayat meetings and attends the Samiti meetings.

The important officials at the gram panchayat level is the panchayat secretary, whose duty is to maintain the records of the proceedings of the meetings and to remain in custody of all records, documents, cash and valuables. He is often the most knowledgeable person at this level, as he is doing his job for longer periods, whereas the non-officials can change more frequently and are often novices, especially since the introduction of the reservation. Thus, the newly elected members are often dependent on his guidance.

Meetings of the gram panchayat shall take place at least once every month, and when circumstances so require, emergency meetings can be held. The
Collector or some other officer deputized by the state government can attend the meeting, but has no right to vote. There is also a provision that Standing Committees should be constituted for the efficient discharge of the duties, but apparently they do not function in many gram panchayats. The regular term of office is five years from the date appointed for the first meeting.

The powers, duties, and functions of the gram panchayat are rather extensive nowadays. The first section of the Act attribute to the gram panchayats, among others, the responsibility for infrastructure like the construction, repair, maintenance, alteration, and improvements of public streets, the drainage system, and water supply. The gram panchayat also has to care for health issues such as the prevention and control of pests (for example, scavenging, removal and disposal of rubbish), for the registration of births, deaths, etc., and maintenance of other records (e.g. cattle and population census), supervision and regulation of fairs, weekly markets, etc., and assistance to the Samiti in the realm of primary education. This was the catalogue from the Act of 1964. The main responsibility for development rested with the PS. However, this has changed radically with the Orissa Gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1991, where the following functions have been included in the list:

(44)...

(w) Minor forest produce;

(x) Small Scale Industries including Food Processing Industries;

(y) Rural housing;

(z) Poverty alleviation programme;

(z-1) Women and child welfare;

(z-2) Social welfare including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded;
Thus nowadays the gram panchayats have a major responsibility for executing development programmes.

The obligatory functions of the Gram Panchayat are to collect, among others, vehicle tax, water and lightning tax, drainage tax, fees on markets, cart stands, slaughter houses, animal brought for sale, fees for the use of buildings such as shops owned by the gram panchayat, and license fees on brokers and commission agents. Interestingly, the District Collector can require the gram panchayat to impose a tax when he feels that the gram panchayat fund is unbalanced and its income insufficient for the discharge of the obligatory functions (Section 91). Section 93 to 100-A of the Act deal with the finances. It is stated that a grama fund has to be constituted, where all proceedings of any tax, toll, fee, fine, or rate imposed shall be placed, as well as all sum received as loan, gift, grant, and contributions, and all income from various assets owned by the grama sasan. This fund has to be deposited in a bank. The problem is that generally the funds from own resources are very slim, and that the budget is mainly constituted out of state-sponsored programmes, where the money is tied to specific undertakings. Thus, the financial position of the gram panchayats is precarious and money for the pursuit of local initiatives is basically nil. In Orissa, only very few financial resources have been devolved to the PRI and the power of taxation is very meager if one regards the precarious financial position of the citizens of which a high proportion live below poverty line.

58 Ibid., p.72.
It is the duty of the Sarapanch to prepare a budget estimate showing the probable receipts and expenditures and place it before the gram panchayat, which in turn will place it before the palli and gram sabhas for consideration. This (revised) budget then has to be placed before the Samiti for approval, and the Samiti has the power to modify it. Accordingly, the Samiti has a supervisory function in respect of finance. Apart from financial supervision, the gram panchayat is also under the control of the District Collector, and Section 109-20 deal with control over the gram panchayat executed by the District Collector, Samiti chairperson or M.L.A. The Collector holds the greatest powers. He can even suspend or remove a Sarapanch, naib-sarapanch, or ward member, if he thinks the person is violating provisions under this Act or the further continuance in office would be detrimental to the interest of the gram panchayat. Thus, the position of officials is very strong in the PRI in Orissa.

The Panchayat Samiti: The second tiers in the panchayati Raj system in Orissa are the PSs. They are situated at the block level and ‘have emerged as the principal units of developmental administration in the state having regard to the volume of responsibility presently assigned to them’. However, this is not really a new development, since the block became the fulcrum at the administrative level for rural development already under the Community development Programme of 1952; and therefore the PS was most important in this respect right from the beginning. The PS unlike the gram panchayats do not have their own source of

59 Ibid., p.73.
income. Over the years, they have been functioning as the principal units of developmental administration in the State\textsuperscript{60}.

Interestingly, when compared with the Orissa gram Panchayat Act of 1964, the Orissa panchayat Samiti Act of 1959 is quite slim and regulates the constitution, conduct, and business of the Samiti in only 58 sections with various subsections. However, there are several separate rules that regulate comparable procedures, which are directly incorporated into the gram panchayat Act.

The state government divides each district into local areas known as 'blocks'. For every block, a Block Development Officer (BDO) is appointed by the state government, and in every block a Samiti has to be constituted consisting of the following members:

Section 16 (1):

(a) the chairman and vice-chairman, elected from among the members given under (b),

(b) one member directly elected from every constituency within the block,

(c) all sarapanches of the Gram panchayats situated within the block,

(d) every M.L.A and M.P representing constituencies which comprise wholly or partially the area of the Samiti,

(e) and every member of the Council of State (Rajya Sabha) who is regarded as an elector within the area of the Samiti\textsuperscript{61}.

All members named above have the right to vote. It is quite interesting to note that this was only established through the Orissa Panchayat Samiti


\textsuperscript{61} Evelin Hust, op.cit., p.74.
Panchayati Raj in India

(Amendment) Act, 1994, Orissa Act 7 of 1994. Before, only the directly elected members from the constituencies had the right to vote, whereas the ex-officio members (sarpanches, M.L.As, M.Ps, and members of the Council of States) could only take part in the discussions and proceedings of the meetings without voting rights. This gives the Sarpanches maximum power in the two lower tiers, whereas the Samiti members have been effectively reduced to the electorate of the Samiti chairperson. It also gives undue power to higher-level politicians who might use it to interfere with local level politics.

The rules for the reservation of seats are basically the same as for the gram panchayats. Seats reserved for SCs and STs in every Samiti proportionally to the population in the Samiti area allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the Samiti area. As in the case of the gram panchayats, new provisions for the reservation of 27 per cent of the seats for the OBCs were inserted through the Orissa Panchayat Samiti (Amendment) Act, 1995. Offices of the chairperson are also reserved for SCs and STs according to their proportional population in the state, and one-third of the total number of offices of chairperson in the samitis has to be reserved for women. Again, as in the Gram Panchayat Act, no provisions have been made for the reservation of the office of the chairperson for OBCs, and like the naib-sarpanch, the vice-chairperson has to a woman, in case the chairperson happens to be a man.\textsuperscript{62}

In addition to the non-official members of the Samiti given in section 16 (1), several officers like the collector or the sub-divisional officer have the right to speak or take part in the meetings of the PS or in the standing committees. These

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p.75.
officials however, have no right to vote. The chairperson of the Samiti is the executive authority, and the BDO is the executive officer of the committee, functioning under the control under the former. Thus, the elected representative is in fact the superior of the official, which is resented by some. One reason is that the official are normally highly educated, whereas the local level politician usually has less formal education. As a result of this the official feel uneasy to be supervised by ‘uncouth’ villagers, who are seen rather as obstacles for the development process.

The catalogue of the powers and functions of the Samiti is much smaller than that of the gram panchayat. However, it is more general in nature, and subsumes many functions under the subsection. Thus, subsection (1) (a) of section 20 states the function of the Samiti as ‘planning, execution and supervision of the development programmes, schemes and works in the Block relating to community development including those pertaining to “tribal development blocks” for the time being recognized by government such and of such other programmes, schemes and works as government may from time to time by general or special order in respect of any Samiti…

With this rule the Samiti has been made the prime agent in rural development, which is mainly financed and regulated by through several state sponsored development schemes, e.g. the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY). Additionally, the PS is in charge of the management, control, and spread of primary education in the block, management of trusts and endowments under orders of the government, supervision of enforcement of laws relating to vaccination and registration of births and deaths, and most importantly.
supervisory powers over the gram panchayats within the block. The chairperson and every other non-official member have the power to supervise all works undertaken by the Samiti and all institutions under control of the Samiti. Like the gram panchayats, the PS shall constitute ‘standing committees’ for the efficient discharge of the duties. The chairperson has to convene and conduct the meetings of the Samiti, and s/he has the power to inspect and supervise all works undertaken by the Samiti. The function of the vice-chairperson is formulated like the one for the naib-sarpanch.

The Zilla Parishad: The highest tier of the system of local government is the ZP, constituted at the district level. The history of the ZP is not an exemplary one. Before elections took place in 1997, ZPs had existed only once for seven years, constituted under the Zilla Parishad Act, 1961, and abolished already in 1968. Thus, after a lapse of nearly three decades, ZPs were constituted again in Orissa.

One of the major exceptional features of the ZP that distinguishes it from the lower bodies of the PRI is the provision that elections are to take place on a party basis, whereas the other bodies are supposed to be party less. Among those contesting for ZP seats one can find former M.L.As and ex-ministers. The positions of the ZP bodies were, next to the sarapanches, the most highly contested. The ZP is at the apex of the PRI, and its functions will be given as delineated in the Orissa Zilla Parishad Manual, 1994.

The functions of the ZP are given in chapter 3 (3) (I-xii); the most general listing of functions is given in the first paragraph of this section:

3 (3) Every Parishad shall have power to-
Panchayati Raj in India

(i) undertaken schemes or adopt measures including giving of financial assistance relating the development of agriculture, social forestry, livestock, industries, cooperative movement, rural credit, water-supply, distribution of essential commodities, rural electrification including distribution of electricity, minor irrigation, public health and sanitation including establishment of dispensaries and hospitals, communications, primary, secondary and adult education including welfare and other objects of general public utility.

As one can see, it is a very generalist in, leading to the problem that the distribution of functions between the three-tiers is not clear-cut. Concerning the relationship between the three-tiers, Article 3 (3) (xi) states that the ZP shall “coordinate and integrate the development plans and the schemes prepared by the Samiti in the district”. Thus, it is also a supervisory body for the PSs.

The idea is that the micro planning from the lower tiers gets coordinated by the higher tier, and the ZP and the parallel executive body of the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) will devolve the funds accordingly. The DRDA was created in 1982 for the purpose of allocating money and implementing projects under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and other central and state sponsored scheme. The district collector is the chairperson and members are the heads of various functional government departments. Before the constitution of the ZP, the DRDA acted more or less independently, and was the main body for rural development. Generally speaking, at the highest level the officials appointed by these state government have great influence, which reduce the impact, the decentralization of political power to the PRI could have.63

63 Ibid., pp.76-77.
Women in Panchayati Raj in Orissa – Post 73rd Amendment Act- A Review

Snehalata Panda\textsuperscript{64} in her study of village Panchayat in Orissa found that women entered politics due to mandatory provision of reservation. Most of the women are from non-political background and entered into politics due to persuasion of their family members or pressure from the village community. The important aspect of her study is that women who entered into politics reluctantly showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role and responsibility. In another study Panda (1999), brought out an interesting point in her field study that there prevails strong caste feelings and women belonging to upper caste have not come forward to represent Panchayat. This has provided an opportunity to the women from the labour and lower caste to emerge as a potential force in village politics:

Mohanty’s (2000) recent study on the impact of 73rd Amendment in Orissa through field experience analyses that about 80-90\% of women attend the Panchayat meetings regularly, which shows that democracy has become participatory than before at least at the grassroots level. From her interview of the elected women Panchayat representatives from Orissa, Mohanty observed that the socio-economic background of these women showed that majority of them have come from lower income group particularly at the villager Panchayat level. The study also shows that the working culture of the Panchayat has changed because of the presence of women. She also found that the slight increase in the female literacy rate could be attributed to the presence of the women in Panchayat and their willingness to get educated. It is alleged that since many of the women

representatives are first timers and illiterate, they depend upon their men folk for conducting Panchayat activities and act as the proxies of their family members. However, Mohanty states that the first one or two years of their tenure, the women representatives act as the proxies of their family members but gradually they become independent and take their own decisions regarding Panchayat matters. Finally, she maintained that the 73rd Amendment Act has actually an empowering impact on women.

Evelin Hust (2004) in her empirical study of Gania and Balipatna blocks of Orissa is of the opinion that with regard to women’s political presence, while the quota has indeed been implemented, the presence of SC women was over-proportional. The fact she found out was that higher prevalence of women from landless families and from households with lower income disapproves the supposition that quota mainly benefits the elite. It also appeared that high status families are still reluctant to introduce their womenfolk into public sphere. Another interesting observation she made was the higher prevalence of daughters in PRIs rather than ‘bahus’ (daughter-in-law). The reason Hust felt that daughters have greater freedom of mobility and are less constrained in their social intercourse with the village males than bahus. Also the rules of seclusion apply to a lesser extent to daughters. In her comparison of representation and empowerment in the two blocks, Hust observed that while women in Balipatna felt more empowered than in Gania, it would be due to the higher literacy levels of women in Balipatna. Hust’s study establishes that the reservation for women is a step towards women’s empowerment. However, the question she put forth, was the size of this step as well as the social context in which this step was taken.
Nirupama Rath\textsuperscript{65} is of the opinion that regional and local factors have a strong impact on the operation of Panchayati Raj in Orissa. Although women in Orissa have got the right to be elected, but in actual practice their political participation is very very limited. They have a minority voice in the decision-making process. In spite of being a member of PS or local urban bodies a woman can hardly do anything for her females, as male members do always constitute the majority. Although the experience has opened a new chapter in the women’s participation in the panchayati raj system, due to mass illiteracy, lack of awareness and traditional conservative attitude there are few takers for the system. Due to reservation those women who have been elected are just like pawns in the game of power politics. She, however, maintains that women constitute almost 50 per cent of the state’s population. So population wise 50 per cent of the seats should be reserved for them, so that they can have a say in the decision-making process.

Prabhat Datta\textsuperscript{66} (1998) in his book while discussing about the reservations of seats for women in Panchayats of different states of India maintains that in Orissa there were certain representatives whom villagers had nominated without seeking their consent. Their husbands greatly proxied for them in panchayat meetings. Sixty per cent of women were unaware of mission of panchayat, 27.5 per cent were ignorant about their responsibilities and assumed that their only duty was to attend meetings when the Sarapanch summoned them. Even when they attempted to do their job they encountered a whole set of problems. Sexual

\textsuperscript{65}Nirupama Rath, “Women in Panchayat System in Orissa,” \textit{Teaching Politics}, vol. XVIII, no. 3-4, 1992, pp.73-4.
Panchayati Raj in India

harassment apart, they were denied their positions and power in their brush with officials.

Pratyusna Patnaik\textsuperscript{67} (2005) in his study of elected representatives belonging to weaker sections in the functioning of the four gram panchayats in Dhenkanal district of Orissa is of the opinion that elected representatives were not able to properly articulate group-specific interests or to exercise their own judgement in panchayat decision-making. Thus bringing into question the very notion of representation of marginalized groups through affirmative action. The representatives in a majority of cases were answerable to the elites of the village and remained under their control rather than exhibiting any accountability to citizen at large. However, he maintains that local governance has ample scope for the inclusion of hitherto excluded sections of society in making decisions and formulating programmes that would affect their lives. It is also reasonable, to some extent, to expect the disadvantaged groups to break the dependent and patriarchal relations which have excluded their political participation since generations. Besides, most of the representatives were also first generation politicians for whom this was the first public exposure and with time and experience these representatives will be able to effectively represent their constituency.

Conclusion

From the above discussion on the positions of women in panchayats of other states and Orissa, it can be inferred that after five decades of planning in India,

women are far below their counterparts. The main reason for such plight of women has been their non-involvement and participation in governance and development. Therefore, women’s empowerment is legitimate and critically important in its own right not merely to address the issues of decentralized democracy, but also to foster the well being of all women. Women, especially the rural women, have multiple and vital roles as housewives, mothers, and food providers. To leave them out of participation in decision-making process and to deny them a share in the fruits of development is to miss the point of what effective participation is all about.

The provision of 73rd Amendment Act and the conduct of Panchayat elections in various states reflected that women enthusiastically participated in the political process at the local levels both as contestants and the electors. In certain cases, apart from the seats reserved for women, they have also contested from general seats. In majority of the seats reserved for women the contests were either direct or triangular or multi-cornered. Various studies have revealed that though women have infiltrated into the Panchayati Raj bodies in their full strength, yet they were dominated by the male members of their families. The experiences gathered about women’s participation in Panchayat show that they have been projected as somebody’s mother or wife or sister or widow and not as people’s representative. On the other hand, there are cases where women played a leading role in local development. After being elected as a member or chairperson or vice-chairperson of Panchayats, their lives have been affected positively. Examples show that women initially were non-participants in the meetings of Panchayats, started participating later on. Experience has also shown that where women

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68 Lokesh K. Prashad, op.cit., p.160.
leaders in the village have taken the reigns of power in village panchayats, there has been decisive and meaningful improvement in the key sectors of village society and economy; be it land patta, sanitation, drinking water or a primary school. They have challenged the male stream dominant view of village society as a patriarchal society, and have been successful in highlighting the village issues from the feminist perspective; a perspective, which is eco-sensitive and rights respecting. The basic disabilities before women are illiteracy, assetlessness and ignorance. If these disabilities are removed, they could perform their role no less effectively than their male counterparts.

Now what is required is to raise their economic and educational status by making special effort on the parts of the state and central government. For removing their ignorance government and development, they have to be imparted training on these issues. For this purpose, the Government Training Institution, NGOs, Women Organisations, Universities and Research Institutions and professionals have a greater role to play in this regard. Above all, the political will and administrative support in the endeavour of empowering women are a sine qua non. Harold J. Laski has rightly pointed out in the Grammar of Politics (p.411) that:

“We can not realise the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems in their incidence require decision at the place and by the persons by whom the incidence is most deeply felt.”

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70 Mahi Pal, op.cit., p.35.

71 As quoted in Lokesh K. Prasad, op.cit., p. 163.