CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment in any sphere plays an important role in moulding the social, political and economic life of people all communities. As such, empowerment is a universal phenomenon. For the last few decades, the concept of empowerment has come to occupy a key place in almost all the countries both developed and developing. Several issues relating to this concept have been engaging the serious attention of researchers of Social Science disciplines. It is widely recognized that democracy generally survives on the basis of the levels of political participation of different sections of the population of a given society. Unfortunately, women who constitute about half of the total population did not enjoy any political rights in the past in any society. They were never allowed to take part in the political process at any level. After the spread of democracy in several parts of the world and the concomitant introduction of universal adult franchise, establishment of democratic institutions and decentralization of power, women started taking part in politics to gain access to power at least to a limited extent. Nevertheless, politics is regarded as highly competitive field where women cannot compete with the males.\(^1\) Participation of at least a few women in politics fulfills the hopes and aspirations of the ordinary women who have an overwhelming faith in the leadership of their own sex. Such reposing of trust in women leadership in turn places certain responsibility on women who are in leadership positions. Invariably, the women leaders need to fight and create a niche and

space for themselves in the policy making and implementing processes.²

Obviously, the situation relating to the women world-wide did not remain static. In the recent past, it has started transforming in several countries. The political leaders and social reformers, since the last few decades and also feminist movements launched during 1960s decade and afterwards throughout the world have brought the issues of women to the forefront particularly, among the academicians and policy makers, development planners, feminist leaders etc., who started thinking seriously of the emancipation of women from the centuries old drudgery and destitution.³

In the Indian context, the political participation of women and ultimately their political empowerment have gained lot of prominence after the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. This landmark Act made a historical beginning in the direction of political empowerment of women by providing them with 33.33 per cent of reservations in the political offices in the local bodies, both rural and urban. It was conceived by those concerned that the participation of women in politics at the grassroots level, would certainly result in a space for them in the orbit of governance at the higher levels. It is hoped that the entry of women into the politics at the grassroots definitely brings about several radical changes in their socio-economic conditions also. In fact, this Amendment Act resulted in the phenomenon of empowerment permeating almost every aspect of the present day society in India. Under the impact of this Act a wild cry started among the women for more and better leaders among the women. However,

still deeply rooted in the traditional social environment, the phenomenon of political empowerment of women has yet to make strides. Further, the political empowerment of women is invariably linked with the socio-cultural setting existing in the country. Hence, the study of political empowerment with all its ramifications calls for greater attention from the scholars for a through and deep insight this phenomenon.

**The Concept of Empowerment:**

The popular view of empowerment which is very much consistent with the dictionary meaning of the term, is to give someone the official or legal authority or the freedom to do something. Power is central to the understanding of the term empowerment. That is, any notion of empowerment cannot be separated from the idea of power. As Betelle observes, although the concept empowerment is generally left unspecified, ultimately it is all about power.5

The term empowerment has different connotations in different socio-economic, cultural and political settings. The most salient feature of empowerment is that it contains within it the word ‘power’. Empowerment is therefore concerned with power and particularly, with changing the power relations between individuals and groups in the society. Obviously, the outcome of empowerment manifests itself as a redistribution of power between individuals, genders, groups, classes, castes, races, ethnic groups or nations. According to an another connotation empowerment means the transformation of structures of subordination, through affecting radical changes in law, property

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rights, control over women's labour and bodies, and the institutions, which usually reinforce and perpetuate male domination. In this sense, empowerment denotes making informed choices within an expanding framework of information, knowledge, and analysis of available options. In fact, there are several terms associated with empowerment, which include: self-strength, self-control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, life of dignity, one's own rights, independence, own decision making and so on. As noted by several scholars, the term empowerment has now become a buzzword and exchanged liberally within the development discourse and among politicians, health professionals, educators, social workers, managers, and labour organizations, not to mention marginalized groups. It is appropriated and employed with ease, implying that merely uttering the term may produce a groundswell towards empowerment. Further, a common definition which reflects the salient nature of empowerment is absent, leading to a wide variety of meanings to this term.

In the particular context of women, the word 'empowerment' is about power. It is widely used but seldom defined exactly. In participating in politics whether through electoral politics, public life or nongovernmental organizations and movements, women are empowering themselves. It is of gaining control over their lives, and participating in the decision-making within the household and society. According to Karl Marilee, empowerment is a process of awareness building about women's situation, discrimination, and their rights. It is capacity building and skill development which leads to greater

8 Wieringa, S.E., 'Women Interests and Empowerment, Gender Planning Reconsidered in Development and Change 25, pp829-848.
participation. It is the decision making power and control and bringing about equality between men and women. In the opinion of Batliwala the word in the context of women empowerment contains within it works ‘power’ which is control over resources whether it is economic or human resources or intellectual resources. The control over resources ultimately helps women in decision making. It is a process of gaining control. In this sense “Empowerment means gaining control over resources and freedom of choice”.

Empowerment can also be understood as the changing of the situation which has marginalized the women, especially the poor women in patriarchal society. Women should improve their ability to exercise control over the resources and make decisions. It is women’s access to new kind of knowledge and information whether it is general or social or political. It is their consciousness about themselves and their rights.

According to Karl Marilee empowerment is not an end product, it is a process which comes through women development. There are five levels of equality needed for empowerment. Welfare is the first level which requires the fulfillment of basic needs and services. The second level involves equality of access to resources, such as educational opportunities. The third level is raising the conscience of women so that they take the action necessary to close the gender gaps. Participation is the fourth level when women take decisions along with men and control is the ultimate level of equality and empowerment. At

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the fifth level they are able to take decisions on their lives and lives of their children.

The terminology of empowerment has arisen from the theoretical debates as well as practical debates especially from the experience of women working at the grassroots level in many parts of the world. In 1990s, when the terms like ‘participation’, ‘consultation’, and ‘partnership’ began to enter development thinking importance of development agencies was shifted to enabling approach i.e., enabling people to identify and express their needs and priorities. It is in this context the notion of empowerment has arisen\(^\text{12}\)

In the wider context, empowerment is a process which enables an individual to know about herself / himself, try to get what she/ he wants, have confidence, awareness, mobility, choices, control over resources and decision-making power. Empowerment helps people to “take more control over their jobs and work environment; enhance the contribution they make as individuals and member of a team; and seize opportunities for personal growth and self-fulfillment.\(^\text{13}\)

According to Kumud Sharma, the term empowerment refers to “a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power deletions. For individual and groups where class, caste ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognize the systematic forces, which


marginalize women and other disadvantage sections in a given context".  

In recent years, empowerment of women has been recognized as a crucial variable in determining the status of women. Empowerment covers aspects such as women’s control over the material and intellectual resources. It is a process, not an event, which challenges the traditional power equations and relations. Abolition of gender-based discrimination in all institutions and structures of the society and participation of women in the policy and decision-making processes at domestic and public levels are few dimensions of women empowerment.

In the opinion of Kanhere the recent women studies describe about the notion of power which gives women the equality and opportunity with men by trying to remove their disadvantages such as illiteracy. Women’s autonomy is synonymous to women empowerment. It is the decision making power over their own lives and activities.

Scholars like Carr, Chen, Jhabvala have emphasized this trend in their studies on empowerment of women in rural Bangladesh; Sydney Schuler and Syed Hashemi who focused on empowerment of women concluded that there were six specific components of female empowerment in Bangladesh; sense of self and vision of a future;

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16 Kanhere, Usha, Differential Socialization of Boys and Girls; A Study of Lower Socio-Economic Households among Gujarati Castes/ Communities in Ahmedabad, Gender and the Household Domain led, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1989.  
17 Carr, Marilyn, Chen, Martha and Jhabvala, Renana; speaking out-women’s Economic Empowerment in South Asia, Vistav Publications, New Delhi, 1996.
mobility and visibility; economic security; status and decision making power within the households; ability to interact effectively in public sphere; and participation in non-family groups.

The empowerment of women is also becoming an increasingly popular term in the realm of human rights and development literature. In these fields women’s empowerment is considered as a process through which women gain greater control over the material and intellectual resources of the society. It is also conceived that empowerment challenges the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society. In fact, women’s empowerment is not against men, but against the system of patriarchy and all its manifestations. The empowerment benefits every person in the society along with the environment.

**Empowerment of Women: Conceptual Dimension:**

Empowerment of Women can be seen through women’s physical mobility, socio-political and general awareness decision making power regarding their lives and the lives of their children and also through their working status. Empowerment also talks about participation. So it can be assessed through women’s participation in public life and their political participation.

Feminists like Rowlands Jo, Bunch and Frost argue that most of the theories of power take the view of power over, which itself is constraining. Instead, other forms of power, that is ‘Power to’, Power with’ and ‘Power from within’ are important for providing a different meaning for empowerment. In this kind of understanding power is enabling and generative. For Foucault, power is relational and is
something which exists only in its exercise. According to Bunch and Frost: “Empowerment is a process that aims at creating the conditions for the self-determination of particular people or a group”.

In recent past empowerment of women has come to occupy a prime place in the academic discourse. It is widely asserted in these discussions that empowerment occurs when someone who did not have power earlier is given power and this power makes the person who is empowered experience a sense of ownership and control over resources. Empowered individual must be made to realize that their jobs belong to them. Given a say, the empowered must feel responsible. When they feel responsible, they show more initiative in their work, get more work done, and enjoy the work more. Empowerment is facilitated by a combination of factors, including values, leadership actions, job structures, and rewards system.

Balbair Sone defined empowerment in the context of women as an active multi-dimensional processes which should enable women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It should consist of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by customs, belief and practice.

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It is also necessary to emphasize that in the context of women, empowerment has assumed some special nature. Empowering women require a fundamental and dynamic change in the perception of women’s issues and a scientific and rational understanding of women’s problems and needs. Empowerment of women is the pre-requisite for the sustainable development of any country. There are mainly three indicators of the empowerment of women that are generally and widely adopted. These indicators relate to empowerment of women in the household, in the work and in the community. In the household, the indicators are the degrees of influence in decision making exercised by women. In the three different types of work viz. Factory work, domestic work and home based work, the indicators are the positive and negative reactions to work and to what extent work has a positive impact on the lives of women. In respect of community, the indicator was the involvement of women in political participation and in the occupational organizations. While these indicators may not capture the full range of the concept of empowerment, still they are generally employed to examine the women’s empowerment under what conditions women feel more empowered and what conditions women feel less empowered.

**Political Empowerment of Women: An Unique Approach:**

The approach of empowerment in politics which gained currency only in 1990s has become a very important dimension of power. As Barret assumes empowerment goes hand-in-hand with politics.²² Empowerment, in the view of scholars implies the process of exchange of power. People empower themselves through a positive way of being political. They become political without being manipulative. Thus,

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empowerment involves the development of positive political skills among the people. In another way, people can be empowered politically, by involving them in the political process.

In the context of women political participation is regarded as one of the key factors that perpetuate empowerment. Political participation has long been acknowledged as a central theme of democratic governance, where the citizens enjoy the right to participate in governance. In other words, political participation in a democracy has got a wide connotation, which ranges from popular participation in electing representatives to the actual participation of representatives in the process of governance.

The right to participation is an essential element of democratic governance, inseparable from such other attributes of democracy as consent, accountability, majority rule, equality, and popular sovereignty. Indeed, the growth of democratic governance is in part measured by the extension of the suffrage and the correlative rights to hold office and so associate for political purposes. Whereas, traditional monarchies restrict power and participation largely to the nobility and their agents, democracies have in principle transformed these prerogatives into rights enjoyed by everyone.

The overall development of a nation requires maximum utilization of human resources without any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, religion or sex. But the bitter reality is that women, who constitute about half of the population of the world have been discriminated against socially, psychologically, economically and politically in relation to their male counterparts. It is repeatedly observed that no nation can stake a claim for development if fifty per cent of its population is lagging behind in every sphere of life.
Abraham Lincoln asserted that “No nation can move forward if it is half free and half slave”.\(^23\)

Political participation is closely intertwined with the political empowerment. Hence participation of women in political process warrants some attention in any discussion on their political empowerment. Political participation refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection or rules and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. The active forms of participation include formal enrollment in a party, canvassing and registering voters, speech writing and speech making, working in campaigns, and competing for public and party office.\(^24\)

Currently, the participation of women in political life assumed top priority in the agenda of most of the political parties in India. However, the translation of this goal into reality has achieved only limited success. For any such endeavor to be successful, it must be recognized that the equal participation of women along with men in the decision-making is a prerequisite.

It is a universal fact that politics has always remained under the male domination. Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose ideas inspired the French Revolution, advocated women’s exclusion from politics. American Declaration of Independence also denied the right to equal participation of women in politics. Later, thinkers like J.S. Mill however, advocated gender equality in every field including politics. He observed that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes- the legal subordination of one sex to the other –


is wrong in itself, and now one of the serious hindrances to human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other”.  

According to Joseph “women should be empowered as economically viable and politically independent. Equal rights and equal participation can change their condition”. Change comes in women’s self image from subordination and subjugation to self confidence and equality. Women’s knowledge and awareness of their own situation, their health and reproductive rights, social, economic and political awareness increase dramatically. Positive change comes into the women. They leave their age old traditions and superstitions and enable to fight against the social evils like early marriage, dowry, wife beating etc.

In the opinion of Devi “Decision making is very important measurement of empowerment which is an activity process involves three stages awareness of the situation, evaluation of the alternatives and taking the final decision. Empowerment of women comes through here power of making decisions regarding their own health, family size and education of children etc.

Relevance of Women Empowerment:

In case of women, empowerment underlines the process of enabling women in different fields to realize their own potentialities, abilities and capacities that enable them to take necessary measures to achieve development. It is argued that the crucial components of the process of women empowerment process include increasing awareness, accessibility, adoptability, participation and control over the decision-making. Further it also implies that the empowerment involves development in the economic-social cultural and political dimensions of their life. As Venkata Ravi and others rightly observe the process of women empowerment focuses on exposing the latent abilities and capabilities of the women. Thus the process of women empowerment implies broader and systematic change in the way a society is structured. Ultimately, the process of women empowerment aims at changing the balance of power between both the sexes so as to create a more equitable distribution of power in the society. If we examine the over all process of women’s empowerment more closely, it can be noticed that the empowerment of women has to take place in the economic, social, political and legal spheres. These spheres are closely interrelated and influence each other.

As a scholar felt the ‘social empowerment of women’ means more equitable social status for women in the society, while in ‘legal empowerment’ is the provision of an effective legal structure which is supportive of women’s empowerment. Politically ‘Economic empowerment’ implies a better quality of material like through sustainable livelihood owned and managed by women. ‘Political

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empowerment takes place through struggles and movements are based on important preconditions for economic empowerment’.  

Thus, women’s empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Empowerment of women in the lowest level political institutions aims at enhancing their ability in the decision making process. It implies their participation, beginning from voting to holding office and thereby shares power, to effectively influence policy formation. 

Political Empowerment of Women: Indian Scenario: 

The goal of political empowerment, which enable the women to have due share in the exercise of political power, has assumed importance only in the decade of 1990s in India. The Beijing Conference (1995) highlighted the gross neglect of women in political field all over the world and the importance of bringing women into the political arena. In the Indian context, although political consciousness has been quite high among the women during the independence struggle it has not been transformed into formal political expression in the post independence period. 

After independence, the Constitution of India guaranteed equal rights to women in all fields including politics. Accordingly, besides exercising their franchise women can contest for any political office. 

There should not be any discrimination against women on the basis of sex. However, these rights have not endowed them with empowerment in any field. The Constitutional rights given to the women have not empowered them to participate in the democratic political process of the country. As rightly noted by Indira Gandhi, former prime Minister of India, the patriarchal culture of the Indian society totally diluted the freedom and equality of women in the political sphere. Indeed, the existing social and economic pattern of society has marginalized the women in the society and as a result, there are very few women in the public life and also in the remaining fields of the society.32 In fact, the few women in politics belong to the families of political leaders in the urban areas.

Even these few women were denied important positions and at the same time they were dominated by their husbands or other male members of their family.33 A major change took place in this grim situation in 1990's decade. During this decade several women's organizations have become active and started raising their voice against the exploitation and discrimination of women and their efforts were channalized as a movement for the achieving empowerment, a newly conceived goal in the light of growing empowerment mania world wide.34

After women made rapid progress in the field of education and due to the various initiatives of the Government they are in a position to effectively participate in the decision-making process along with men. There is growing confidence in the ability of women to play an effective

33Dubey, Anju, Political Participation of Women: A Study in Indian Parliamentary Context, Tenth Lok Sabha, Centre for Social Research, New Delhi, 1992.
role in the decision-making process. They are actively pursuing their demand for empowerment in different fields.

The guarantee of various rights by the Constitution of India was supported by a series of legislations by the Government. Before dealing with these legislations, it is important to mention that the Constitution has guaranteed several rights to women which include equality before law and equal protection of law (Article 14), prohibition of discrimination against women on the ground of sex and so on. The Constitution also requires the State to provide for just and humane conditions of work along with maternity leave (Article 23 and Article 42). It is a constitutional duty of every citizen to renounce practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51A). In view of these Constitutional Provisions during the post-independent era the Indian women were recognized as a separate target group and the Government was directed to initiate necessary measures for the mainstreaming of women into the national developmental process. Because of these measures, there occurred significant changes in the living conditions of women. However, these changes have failed to ensure the participation of women in the political process at different levels to extent desired. The socio-economic constraints prevented the women from occupying the positions of power and assuming leadership roles. In course of time emerged a growing demand from among the women for their rightful place in the political process and a share in the political power at all levels. In view of these developments occurred during the 1980's the political empowerment of women has been placed on the top of the development agenda of the Government. Consequently, the Government evolved a new strategy which viewed

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political empowerment of women as a crucial means for their total emancipation. Thus the goal of political empowerment of women assumed top most priority in the policy making, planning and government.36

The strategy adopted by the government for attaining the goal of the political empowerment of women has twin objectives: short term and long term objectives. The former end relates to their involvement in the current development process, while the latter end seeks to make the women morally strong, self-reliant and confident so that they can initiate their own plans and solve their problems independently. It is emphasized that the Government should have necessary trust and confidence in the capacity of women and give them an opportunity to play their role, accept their ideas and views seriously and also channelize and integrate their energies and resources for improving the quality of their life.37 It is contended that political empowerment of women is not to be viewed in isolation. It needs to be integrated with the broader development by increasing their awareness process and through achieving gender equality in the social and economic fields. It is especially emphasized that promoting cultural ethos is an important prerequisite for political empowerment of women.38

Changing Status of Women in India:

A look into the past and present image of women in Indian society projects a mixed and yet complex picture of ambivalence, which ranges from their contempt and hatred to deep fascination. The study of status of women in this country is indeed very crucial and also fascinating because it goes a long way in providing a correct understanding of its inherent nature. Traditionally, women in India are widely regarded as the weaker sex and a marginalized section who are ignored as well as exploited for centuries together.  

There were distinct stages of rise and fall in the status of women in India. In the Vedic period women used to enjoy equal respect and importance along with men and took active part in every sphere of society’s life. They used to enjoy several rights including the right to have a share in the property of their parents and husbands. They used to take part in the public affairs along with men. They are evidences which reveal that the women went to the Guru Kulas to receive education and married only after getting education.

There are also evidences which prove that the women of Vedic India were well educated and occupied high positions in the society. In the social and religious functions, they were given an equal role along with men. Moreover, the girls had an effective voice in the choice of their husbands. Very often there were love marriages which were subsequently blessed by the parents. They used to perform religious, social, ceremonies and functions along with their husbands.

After the Vedic period, the status of Indian women started deteriorating and their subordinate position continued throughout the

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40 Upadyay, H.C., State’s of Women in India, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1992, p.1
subsequent periods and was reinforced by the complete subordination of women by men. During the middle ages the women were completely dependent on men and being subjected to the domination and authority of either father or husband. The outstanding change was the transformation from freedom to bondage and from honour to disgrace. The customs of Sati, child marriage and prohibition of widow re-marriage were widely prevalent even during modern days as observed by Altaker for about 2000 years from 200 B.C. to A.D. 1800. The position of women steadily deteriorated though she was funded by parents, loved by her husband, and revered by her children. As ‘Neera Desai’ comments “ideologically women were considered a completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no significance.41 By all means, the position of female education during the 19th century was very pathetic as they were steeped in complete illiteracy. It was revealed that education was restricted to a small section of boys only education among girls was still more meager.

During the national movement in the 20th century Gandhiji who championed the cause of women made extensive and tireless efforts to stress the need for women’s education. He emphasized that women should be granted the right to education. Education according to him develops and sharpens one’s intellect and it increases one’s capacity of doing good.42 However, there were no serious attempts to promote education among women. After independence, the Indian Constitution which totally committed itself to the welfare of women along with the weaker sections included several special provisions which required the State to take necessary measures for the promotion of education among

women. The educational experts argue that this failure is mainly due to the slow progress of education among the girls.\textsuperscript{43}

In fact, in India the specific activities to enhance the status of women were initiated during the 19th century. The British Government as well as several social reformers tried to promote the welfare of women by improving their pathetic conditions. Social Reformers notably, Rajaram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ranade, Karamdas Mulji, Mahatma Phule, Maharshi Karve and so on strived very hard to espouse the cause of women. However there were no specific policy initiatives by the British Government to improve the sordid conditions and promote the welfare of women.

After independence, there were serious attempts for the upliftment of the women and to ensure them equal status with men in the society. The year 1975 was declared as the International Women’s Year. During this year the Government took certain welfare measures for improving the condition of women. Responding to the call given by the World Plan of Action introduced to mark the International Women’s decade i.e., 1976-1985, the Ministry of Welfare, Government of India took up the preparation of National Plan of Action for Women for promoting their allround development and eliminating the disabilities to which they are subjected to since for ages. A special cell was established in 1975 to create empowerment opportunities to women. Further, the Remuneration Act was passed in 1976 to remove the disparities in the wages. A new division to look after the welfare and development was also established within the Ministry of Social Welfare.

\textsuperscript{43} Indian Council of Social Science Research, Status of Women in India, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1975, p. 89.
It is evident that up to 1980s even though women had different types of problems, the Government did not adopt any particular strategy for their welfare. There were no specific or exclusive policies, programmes, schemes etc., which had relevance to their backwardness of distinct nature. It was not realized that women are not just a segment of the society but that they are major contributors to the overall development of the country. However, it was during 1970’s that there was a major shift in the strategy and approach of the government towards the welfare of women in view of the peculiar nature of their problems. Consequently, a special programme called as the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) was initiated as a part of the wider antipoverty programmes namely, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) specially, designed for the uplift of families living below the poverty line. The DWCRA programme aimed at provision of employment to the women of rural areas living below the poverty line for helping them to earn income that supplements their family income. Later, a National Women’s Fund (NWF) was established in 1992 to grant loans to the women for productive purposes. Besides, the Government of India initiated several other schemes which were women specific. In 1985, itself the Government of India constituted a separate department in the Ministry of Human Resource Department to look after the development of women and children. The Sixth and Seventh five year plan included a number of programmes envisaged to provide employment opportunities to women, to extend legal support in the case of needy women, promote education among them and so on. The National Committee on Women in India was constituted in 1985 to suggest guidelines and a plan of action to take up the problems of women in order to achieve their allround development.
As a result of all these policy as well as administrative measures, there is substantial development in the conditions of women. The measures like the reservations in the public offices and educational institutions, provision of health facilities, creation of employment opportunities and so on have resulted in the women moving forward on the path of progress along with men. During 1990s and 2000 decades certain remarkable measures were taken up by both the central and state governments in the direction of welfare of women.

**Women in Panchayati Raj Bodies:**

Political empowerment of women has become a worldwide accepted strategy for the development of women. This strategy was not thought of by the Indian Government till 1980s’ even though women had extremely meager representation in the political institutions at all levels including the local bodies.

When the Panchayati Raj was introduced in the Country in 1959, as a system of rural local government very few women contested or got elected to the various positions in these bodies at the three levels. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) which conceived this system recommended that there should at least be few women as co-opted members in the Panchayati Samithis and Zilla Parishads.\(^{44}\) This Committee considered the conditions of rural women at length, and argued that they should be assisted to improve their economic conditions and also the conditions of their children.\(^{45}\) The question of women’s participation in rural development process drew the attention of the Committee on the Status of Women constituted in 1974. The Committee recommended the establishment of exclusively women


panchayats at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the implementation of women and children development programmes. It was conceived as a transitional measure to eradicate the traditional attitudes that prevented the women from articulating their problems. The Balwanta Rai Committee recommended the reservation of two seats for women in the panchayats and also cooption of certain number of women, in case they are not elected in the elections. The Committee on Panchayati Raj headed by Ashok Mehta (1978) laid stress on the need for recognizing and strengthening the women’s role in the decision-making processes in all the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The National Perspective Plan for Women dealt with which was introduced in 1988. The question of political participation of women in the grassroots level democratic institutions. Some important recommendations of the Plan are as follows:

There should be reservation of 30 per cent of seats for the women in all local bodies at three levels from the Village Panchayats to the Zilla Parishads.

There should be reservation of 30 per cent of the political executive positions in all bodies from the village panchayats to Zilla Parishads for women.

The 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill took up the issue of providing reservations for women in the rural local bodies and sought to give it a constitutional sanction. This Bill provided that thirty percent of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women. In order to ensure the participation of the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes Women it was further laid down in the Bill that where two seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes, one of the two seats should
be reserved for women belonging to these sections. The Amendment Bill could not be enacted because of the countrywide protests and failure of the ruling party to gather required support in both the Houses of the Parliament. The principle of women’s participation in the local bodies through reservations was however accepted by the Parliament. The Seventy Third Constitutional Amendment Bill which was introduced in the Parliament in 1992 was modified a version of the earlier Sixty Fourth Constitution Amendment Bill which was given a final shape. This Bill was passed by both Houses of Parliament and consequently became an Act in the name the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992.

The important provisions of this Act relating to reservation of certain number of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj bodies are as follows.

Not less than one third of the total number of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women belonging to these two sections.

Not less than one third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and allotted by rotation to different constituencies in panchayat raj.

The Act also provides for reservation of one third of the total number offices of Chairpersons in the panchayats at all levels for women including women from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

It needs to be mentioned here that certain States had introduced the system of reservations of seats for women in the local bodies through making necessary amendment to the concerned Acts even before the
The enactment of the Seventy Third Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. The extent of these reservations varied from State to State, the range of variation being 10 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, to 33 1/2 per cent in the case of West Bengal. After the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act the States enacted necessary Acts for meeting the requirement of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. Karnataka was the first state to do it. The States which followed suit include Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Tripura. It needs to be emphasized here that the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayat Raj bodies is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end, the end being extensive involvement of women who constitute nearly 50 per cent of the total population in the country, in the political decision-making processes at the grassroots level and effective implementation of women and child development programmes with their active participation.

It is evident that the 73rd Amendment Act created adequate space structurally for women and the impact of this Act can be measured in terms of the number of women who have contested the Panchayat Raj elections held in 2006 in different States in the Country. The following table reveals the exact position.
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<th>S.No</th>
<th>States</th>
<th>Grama Panchayat</th>
<th>Panchayat Samithi</th>
<th>Zilla Parishad</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Women</td>
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<tr>
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<td>8260</td>
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<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Assam</td>
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<td>130091</td>
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<td>05</td>
<td>Chattishgarh</td>
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<td>06</td>
<td>Goa</td>
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<td>Male Literacy Rate</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>10398</td>
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<td>58328</td>
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Women Leaders in Panchayat Bodies in Some States:

The position of women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions/Raj bodies in different States was reported by the National Institution of Rural Development through conducting a study on this aspect in some selected States. They include Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Maharashtra.\textsuperscript{46} The findings of this study in different states are presented below:

Andhra Pradesh:

This study reveals that in Andhra Pradesh, at the village Panchayats level, one-third of the political seats are reserved for women who include those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes based on their population under the Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1994. This system of reservations for women was extended to the remaining two tiers--Mandal Parishads and Zilla Parishads also by this Act.

Karnataka:

In Karnataka, the Panchayati Raj Act of 1993 reserved one-third of the total political offices existing in the village Panchayats, Mandal Parishads and Zilla Parishads for women. The implementation of family welfare and immunization programmes were transferred to the Zilla Parishads along with subjects like Agriculture, Watershed development programmes, ground water resources, animal husbandry, development of waste land, secondary school education and

management of hospitals and dispensaries which have impact on the conditions of women.

**Himachal Pradesh:**

The Government of Himachal Pradesh enacted the Panchayati Raj Act in 1994 which reserves one-third of all the political positions in the three-tiers of Panchayati Raj for the women. The Act also prescribes that in every Village Panchayat a justice committee which takes care of the welfare of women has to be constituted. The Panchayat Samitis are vested with necessary functions for the promotion of the welfare of women and children along with the functions for the development of agriculture, animal husbandry, health and sanitation, adult education, cottage industries, family planning and rural employment. The Panchayati Raj Act in this State made several arrangements to facilitate the active participation of women in the functioning of the Panchayati Raj bodies, as revealed by the study of National Institution of Rural Development.

**Gujarat:**

In Gujarat, the Gujarat Panchayats Act, 1993 provides for the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions at the three levels. Further, the Village Panchayats are vested with responsibility of looking after the maternity and child welfare. The Taluka Panchayats which are the middle tier are entrusted with the function of implementing certain schemes like maintaining welfare centers, craft and tailoring centers and so on for the welfare of women and children. The District Panchayats which are the top tier and most powerful bodies are also assigned several functions which include like supply of milk to children and nursing mothers in the
families of the low income groups, protection of women and children against diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus, assisting family planning etc., for promoting the well being of women and children, particularly those belonging to the weaker sections.

**Haryana:**

In Haryana, the Panchayati Raj Act of 1994 reserves one-third of the seats for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions at the three levels. The Gram Panchayats are assigned certain functions specially for the development of women and children in addition to their routine functions in the fields of agriculture, public health, drinking water, family welfare, public distribution. However, women are given priority in providing all these facilities.

**Kerala:**

The Kerala Panchayati Raj Act of 1994 also reserves one-third of the total number of seats in the Gram Panchayats, Block Panchayats and District Panchayats for women. In Kerala, certain women welfare institutions were transferred to the Gram Panchayats from the state government which include the day-care centers, establishment and maintenance of anganwadis and balwadis for the women and children of Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and also primary health centers and dispensaries for women and so on.
Madhya Pradesh:

In Madhya Pradesh, the Panchayati Raj Act which came into force in January 1994 reserves one-third of the total posts in all the three tiers of Panchayati Raj for women. The Janpad Panchayats, the middle tier in the Panchayati Raj system are required to perform a wide range of functions for the welfare of women, children and youth.

West Bengal and Maharastra:

Under the Bengal Panchayats Act of 1994, in the three tiers of Panchayat Raj namely, the Zilla Parishads, Panchayati Samits and Gram Panchayats, one-third of the total political offices are reserved for women. In Maharastra, the Maharastra Zilla Parishads and Panchayati Samitis Act of 1994 provides that one third of the total number of seats in the Panchayati Raj bodies at the three levels should be reserved for women. In the Zilla Parishad there is a Standing Committee which exclusively exists for dealing with the women and child welfare. Fourteen subjects are transferred to the Panchayati Raj Institutions by the State Government of Maharastra. Women and child development is one among them.

Thus, all the states in India laid down a provision provided for the reservation of seats in the Panchayati Raj bodies at the three levels for women in their respective Panchayati Raj Acts. The participation of women in the political process at the grass roots level made possible through this reservation system certainly a positive step in the direction of changing the position of women in the rural areas. Though disproportionate to their population in the country the 33 per cent of reservations in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has given them a share in the political power at the local level, which enabled them to march on
the path of progress independently without depending upon the male members of the society. However, the available evidences like the study conducted by the National Institution of Rural Development projects a different picture.

It is revealed by several studies that the reservations offered to rural women in the Panchayati Raj bodies at different levels by the 73\textsuperscript{rd} Amendment Act and the confirmation Acts enacted by various States were not availed by the women to the full extent. Those women who were elected to the different offices in these institutions failed to exercise the powers attached to their respective offices effectively. The male leaders continue their domination over the working of these bodies as in the past, notwithstanding the women occupying one-third of the positions of decision-making in almost all states.

\textbf{Focus of the present study:}

Historically, in India the women were confined completely to the domestic life. They were totally alienated from the public sphere. Even after independence, for a long time, women were not allowed participate in the public affairs, particularly in the political process even though the Constitution prohibited discrimination against the women in any sphere. However, the Constitutional Amendment Act of 73\textsuperscript{rd} Amendments that provided reservation of certain number political offices the Panchayati Raj bodies for women ensured women’s participation in the political process at least at the grassroots level.

As a result of this land mark legislation, there is active participation of women in the grassroots politics. This remarkable change in the position of women drew the attention of scholars of various disciplines on this issue. Consequently, there is a spurt in the research on various
dimensions of the participation of women in political process at the local level particularly, in the Panchayati Raj bodies at different levels. It is in this backdrop that the present study also attempts to examine the various dimensions of the political empowerment of women at the grassroots with particular reference to the Panchayati Raj Bodies in which 30 per cent of the political positions are reserved for women as a consequence of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. The study focuses on the socio-economic background of the women political functionaries working in the panchayati Raj bodies, the manner in which they are performing their roles, how effectively they are exercising their powers, their political knowledge and awareness and so on. Further, the study also focuses on those factors that inhibit the effective exercise of the powers vested in them by the Act. An assessment of impact of the existing political situation on their functioning and so on is also included in the present study.

Further, the study examines the changes taken place in the socio-economic conditions, their status in the society and position in their own families after they assumed the leadership roles in the Panchayati Raj bodies. Finally, the impact of the system of reservations introduced in the Panchayati Raj bodies for women on the political process at the grassroots level in the rural areas and its implications for politics at higher levels are also addressed by the present study.
Objectives:

The main objectives of the present study are:

To examine the socio-economic background of the selected women leaders who are occupying different political positions in the Panchayati Raj bodies functioning in the area of the present study.

To assess the extent of political knowledge, views and perceptions of these selected women leaders on various political issues for assessing their political awareness.

To examine the pattern of role performance of the sample women political functionaries functioning in the Panchayati Raj bodies covered under this study.

To analyze the problems and constraints faced by the women leaders of the Panchayati Raj bodies arising from different sources including their own families in the exercise of their powers and carrying out of their respective functions.

To assess the extent and impact of political empowerment gained by the rural women due to holding the positions of power in the Panchayati Raj bodies on the political system and also on the socio-economic conditions of women of the rural areas.

Hypothesis:

1. Women representatives play a vital role in social service activities in their respective places.

2. Women representatives had experience regarding political awareness in the past.

3. Women representatives regularly discuss important political issues and matters with their relatives and friends.
4. Women representatives are taking decisions in the official matters effectively and independently for the sake of achieving political empowerment.

5. Women representatives have been paying more attention for solving problems in their respective places.

**Sample Selection:**

The present study is conducted in the Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh. This district is selected basing on several factors. Women political functionaries working in the Panchayati Raj Bodies at the three levels i.e., Zilla Parishad, Mandal Parishads and Village Panchayats situated in this district above were covered under the present study. The political executives of these bodies selected for the present study include the Sarpanches of Village Panchayats, the Presidents of Mandal Parishads, Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency and Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency Members. The number of the respondents selected from the each category of these political executives is furnished below:
### Table No-1.2

**No of Sample Selected from Different Political Offices of the Panchayati Raj Bodies:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Functionary</th>
<th>Z.P.T.C. Members</th>
<th>Mandal Presidents</th>
<th>M.P.T.C. Members</th>
<th>Sarpanches of village Panchayats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Women Functionaries</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sample respondents selected</td>
<td>9 (40.9)</td>
<td>9 (42.9)</td>
<td>150 (41.9)</td>
<td>132 (42.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures given in the brackets indicate the percentage to the total sample.

The statistical technique stratified sample with propositional allocation adopted for picking up the sample from among the total number of elected women functionaries existing in each category of Political Office in the Panchayati Raj bodies is as follows:

1. Sarpanches of the Village Panchayats = \(313/714\times300 = 131.6\) (132 members)
2. Presidents of Mandal Parishads = \(21/714\times300 = 8.8\) (9 members)
3. Z.P.T.C. Members = \(22/714\times300 = 9.2\) (9 members)
4. M.P.T.C. Members = \(358/714\times300 = 150.4\) (150 members)

Total number of samples respondents = 300

The selection of the Panchayati Raj bodies for the purpose of present study is primarily based on the following factors:

The extent of area and population covered by the Panchayati Raj bodies.

The total number of women political functionaries in these bodies.
The various activities and programmes undertaken by the women political executives for the welfare of women as well as the total population

The socio-economic conditions of the concerned areas like caste composition, literacy level, level of economic development, communication facilities and so on.

In the selection of the above sample respondents, certain guidelines were followed for making the sample a representative one. The respondents were selected by using the simple random sampling technique. However, certain variables like caste, education, economic position, family background were also taken into consideration.

**Methodology and Source of Data:**

The present study is basically an empirically-oriented exercise and hence the major part of the data was collected from the field by means of techniques of empirical research, such as: 1. Questionnaire 2. Interview 3. Observation. 4. Discussions.

The main research technique used for collection of data was the questionnaire which was administered among the sample respondents selected from the women political functionaries of the three levels of the Panchayati Raj bodies included in the present study. The questionnaire which included both open-ended and closed-ended questions was intended to collect data from the respondents on relevant aspects such as the socio-economic background, political knowledge and perceptions of the respondents, the style of their functioning, the effectiveness of their role performance, the obstacles and constraints that impede the exercise of their powers effectively, their changed position in their families and society and so on. Another research technique extensively
used in the present study was the interview. The researcher interviewed a number of persons of different backgrounds for the purpose of collection of required data. They included the various categories of women political functionaries of the concerned the Panchayati Raj institutions, the officials occupying various positions in these bodies, the leaders who were occupying different positions in various political parties, activists of women organizations, the leaders of the NGOs and so on. These interviews were held in both formal and informal manner. The formal interviews were held with the respondents selected from the women Panchayati Raj leaders for information relating to the relevant and crucial aspects of the study. These interviews were pre-fixed and held on the basis of a systematically prepared questionnaire. The informal interviews were with various officials and non-officials according to the convenience for the collection of information of general nature concerning the subject under study. The information gathered through the above two important research techniques was supplemented by the data collected through other tools like the participant observation and discussions. The scholar has personally attended several meetings of the deliberative wings of the selected Panchayati Raj bodies to observe the pattern and extent of participation of the women leaders in the discussions and other proceedings of these meetings. Further, the researcher also observed the selected women political executives of the Panchayati Raj Institutions to study how they are carrying out their official activities, functions and responsibilities in practice, how they are dealing with the male political executives, and political leaders, officials of these bodies, public and so on.

Further, the scholar closely observed the activities of the selected women political functionaries when they were on the field visits,
attending the meetings of their respective political parties, the meetings of higher level bodies and so on. The data gathered through the observation method provided deep insights into the reaction and feelings of the women leaders while dealing with crucial issues and how they are treated by the male officials and non-officials of their respective Panchayati Raj bodies and also their interaction with the people of various capacities, including the functionaries of different programmes and so on.

**Secondary Data:**

Apart from the primary data, necessary secondary data was also collected from various sources. The secondary data was used for the purpose of presenting the descriptive part of the study which includes the conceptual issues particularly, the concept of political empowerment, the structure and functioning of the Panchayti Raj bodies and other related aspects of these institutions and so on. The secondary data was gathered from the published and unpublished literature available on the subject. Several books and journals published on the subject of Panchayati Raj were referred to for gathering this data. The Reports of the Central and State Governments, the Committees and Commissions and the Research Institutes were also used for connecting the secondary data. Further, the official documents like the Administrative Reports, minutes of meetings and other records of the Panchayati Raj bodies covered under the present study were consulted for this purpose of gathering data. The Census Reports, Acts, Manuals, District Gazettes, Statistical Abstracts, News Papers etc., also were used as the sources of secondary data for the present study.
Importance of the Study:

The empowerment of women at the grassroots level has yet to become a visible reality inspite of the introduction of a landmark 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. It became evident that mere provision of reservations in the political offices in the local bodies alone cannot lead to the political empowerment of women substantially. The meaningful utilization of reservation facility by the rural women largely depends upon several factors, social and economic. Hence it is imperative to examine whether the existing environment in the rural areas is conducive for the effective utilization of reservations in the local bodies by the women and attainment of political power at the local level. It is also important to ascertain whether the women really got politically empowered and sharing the political power along with men at this level by availing these reservations. It is in this context the present study is carried out to explore how far the reservations in the Panchayati Raj bodies have politically empowered the rural women and also the impact of such empowerment on their own socio-economic conditions and also on the political situation in the rural areas. As a micro level exercise, the present study is expected to provide deep insights into all the crucial issues relating to the dynamics of political empowerment of women at the grassroots and emerging political leadership among the women which is a new phenomenon in the political system working in the country. These insights would certainly enrich the existing literature in the field of Panchayati Raj System in India.
Organisation of Present Study:

The Present Study is organized into eight chapters as shown below:

The First Chapter, which constitutes the introduction, contains a detailed statement on the theme selected for the present study. It also includes the objectives of the study, methodology adopted for the collection of data and, sources of data, significance and need of the study and so on.

The Second Chapter carries a survey of literature published in various forms in the area of Panchayati Raj in India. Several important studies conducted on different aspects of Panchayati Raj bodies in different states by various scholars are surveys in this chapter.

Third Chapter describes the role of women in Indian politics past and present. It briefly outlines their participation in the national movement. This chapter also examines the extent of participation of women in electoral politics as voters, contesting candidates in the Parliament and State Assemblies ever since the beginning of independence. The chapter also analyses the extent of participation of women in the cabinets at various levels and their performance. The latest trends emerged in the role of women in the politics at different levels are also presented in this chapter.

Fourth Chapter presents a detailed profile of the District selected for the study. It mainly focuses on the Panchayati Raj System functioning in the system. The historical, geographical and socio-economic and political aspects of the district are also briefly discussed in this chapter.

Fifth Chapter attempts to analyse the socio-economic and political profile of the respondents selected as sample from among the universe of the study which includes Sarpanches of Village Panchayats,
Presidents of Mandal Parishads and members of the M.P.T.Cs and Z.P.T.Cs covered under it. The political background of the respondents and their political knowledge are also examined in this Chapter.

Sixth Chapter contains an assessment of the political knowledge of the respondents on the political system and its pattern and process. The exposure of the respondents to the political system is also included in this chapter. This chapter also focuses on the knowledge of respondents on different issues of panchayati Raj system in existing India.

Seventh Chapter reflects the views and perceptions of the respondents on the functionaries of Panchayati Raj System working in the state. It also analyses the views of the respondents on how they perform their roles in practice as the political functionaries of the respective panchayati Raj bodies. The attitudes of these respondents towards their male leaders, the attitude of their families members, their present role in their families, the autonomy and freedom they enjoy in discharging their duties etc., are analyzed in this chapter. The changing conditions and style of life the respondents as the result of the assumption of the positions of power are also discussed in this chapter.

Eighth Chapter presents a summary of the findings and conclusions of the study. It also includes few suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of women Panchayati Raj leaders in discharging their roles.