The focus of this research has been to study and examine the participation of the elected rural women members in the panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). The rural women, for the first time, were given an opportunity to enter the local political institutions through the intervention of the reservation policy by the state of Panjab. Keeping the reservation policy in view, the study was carried out by selecting 6 blocks, from which 10 villages per block, were taken for research randomly from Gurdaspur district. The study comes out with interesting and revealing facts that signify the participation of women members in the panchayati raj institutions.

In the first chapter, history of women's political participation in PRIs in India is discussed. The political participation of women defined in terms of degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in the shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by society to this role of women. Participation of the woman in different countries of the world indicates that it has been varying i.e. she was subject of admiration to the Greeks, Chinese, Romans, Europeans and others. The wave of democracy, equality, socialism and justice in the 18th and 19th centuries, brought significant progress which affected women. With all this, women were not allowed to participate in the political process of the country. The attempt by Western Europe and North America for political status was voiced by many other countries. In case of India, the Indian National Congress gave an important position to women in the party. The aspect to be noted is that the Indian women did not fight for their political status, it was given to them by the Indian Constitution.

As far as the status of Indian woman is concerned, she occupied an equal status during the Vedic period and the British rule. With independence, and the equal rights granted by the Constitution, the women's status was raised to some extent. However, it has remained in theory because in practice, in the Indian political structure, the participation of women has remained almost negligible. This is evident when we look at the poor representation of women in the parliament and gender-wise
breakdown of voters, contestants and elected candidates in India from 1957-2001, in (Chapter 1) (Tables 1.1 and 1.2) on page 22 and 24, respectively. Although numerically the strength of women members in Lok Sabha has been increasing, their participation in the decision-making process is significantly smaller.

In order to improve the participation of women, the 73rd Amendment was introduced by the government. The brief review of literature in the area confirmed that there was hardly any study dealing with the participation of women in PRI's in Gurdaspur district of Punjab. Keeping this as the backdrop, it was felt necessary to undertake an in depth empirical study. So, the present study focuses upon various aspects of women’s participation in PRIs most especially in the district Gurdaspur in state of Punjab.

In the second chapter, impact of the 73rd Amendment and terrorism on PRIs in Punjab is examined. Regarding women's participation in the political process of PRIs in Punjab the position of women is no better. Women, by and large, are bogged down of domestic working, rearing cattle, other support and productive works. They are, by and large, not a part of the decision-making process and have little control over money matters and assets even though they contribute substantially in the asset formation.

The participation of women in formal politics in Punjab parliamentary and assembly elections shows that they were ignored politically. In (Chapter 2) (Table 2.4) indicates the position of women’s political participation. There have been four elections in Punjab in which not a single woman has been elected to the Lok Sabha. The participation of women in the state legislative assembly is generally lower than it is in the Lok Sabha. Given the socio-cultural environment in the country, the women's movement ensured that the critical mass of women came into the Parliament only with specific affirmative action. This has got established with the 73rd and 74th amendment to the Constitution, which created space for women in urban and local bodies.

The state passed through critical times due to the rise of militancy and terrorism which affected the normal functioning of democratic political institutions since the early eighties. The state remained under the President’s Rule for a long time. With the improvement of law and order situation, the state is back to normal
democratic functioning. The elections to the state assembly were held in 1992 followed by panchayat elections in 1993.

No doubt, the 73rd Amendment by ensuring the inclusion of women in local government has taken the local government politics a step forward. The amendment represents an opportunity to focus on the priorities of development that women feel are essential to themselves, their families and their community. The successful participation of women in PRI is unquestionably linked to a process by which the society begins to break down the walls of traditions and customs that limit women’s mobility and restrain their actions as key players in the society. Only the societal support can make room for the women to act powerfully within the society and thereby within its local political structure.

An analysis of the Socio-Economic Profile (Chapter 3) of the women respondents in Gurdaspur district of Panjab highlighted socio-economic status of the respondents. The caste hierarchy which symbolizes the rural life in Punjab is found dominated in the selected blocks. Caste plays an important role in these districts. Sub-caste also plays a role in the panchayat election, scheduled caste also get share in decision-making process. Caste factor indicates that although JatSikh are dominating yet in the case of selected blocks in Gurdaspur district, women from all castes have been able to find a new identity as representative with equal status as of other members. Women from all sections believed that Reservation policy had provided them with a great opportunity which was otherwise not possible. They felt that in a hundred years they could not have got the status that is provided by the virtue of the 73rd Amendment to them.

The occupational pattern indicates variety of occupations (Table 3.17) followed and practised by people. The economic pattern in the surveyed area is in line with social pattern. Few people belonging to general caste category, agriculturists by occupation, enjoy social and political power. But as far as women occupation is concerned, more belong to housewife category.

An analysis of the age factor (Table 3.13) reveals that maximum women participation in PRI’s fall under middle age. The study reveals that the younger women or age group made an entry into the PRI’s. The opinion that the younger
women or generation lack political experience does not hold good in the case of women since for the majority, involvement in political sphere in itself is new.

Illiteracy among women is main hindrance for political participation (Table 3.16). Although education level of women in Gurdaspur district is quite good in comparison to other district of Punjab, still education level of the respondent is very low. Education of the girls should be given more importance, so they become more confident, independent and aware of society’s problems and as members of PRI’s, they will be able to participate more actively.

The economic status (Table 3.18) is an important indicator of the level of participation. The economic status of the respondents revealed that the majority of the respondents were from low and very low income groups. The economic status has been an important factor in selecting and electing candidates. This may be mainly because women coming from poor families have lesser influence over the political institutions.

The pattern of land holding (Tables 3.21 and 3.22) also reveals that it varies in size. Few land owning families have the permanent control over the power. Not even a single woman in surveyed blocks had land ownership. Most of the women are housewives, below income women respondent work as laborers in fields, make basket and work as servants or maids.

Political participation of women at the grassroot level (Chapter 4) reveals that people’s participation is the introduction of a new set of people into the decision-making process with regard to resource allocation and distribution.

The majority of women respondents accepted their ignorance that they had not gone through the Panjab Panchayat Act (Table 4.1) and the reservation policy as envisaged in the 73rd amendment. The main reason is lack of awareness, time and education among the women members.

Majority of the women (98.6%) respondents were of the opinion that reservation is a necessity.

Women are also interested in carrying out the functions of panchayati raj institutions. It was revealed that women members were largely carrying out their functions in all the fields but also they were facing problems while doing so. For that
some orientation was needed. This is possible through government agencies and civil society organization.

Data collected from the blocks revealed that women attended meetings regularly at village and block level (Table 4.2). But some women sent their husbands. It was revealed that only a few women members participated effectively, while participation of others was either limited or extremely limited. It was also revealed that welfare of women did not receive enough attention at the meetings.

Study has also revealed that the participation of women in electoral politics as voter was steadily increasing. In sampled blocks, 97% women agreed that they cast their vote in each election.

Regarding the relation of the women members with electorate (Table 4.5) revealed that they were not as mobile as men. They had social constraints. Despite the social constraints, they were able to meet the electorates. They also tried to solve problems faced by the people. Among the problems they helped in solving were water-related issues. In kandi area they were Jaundice related problems that were addressed by women panchayat members.

The majority of the women members traveled from their village to block and district headquarters. So, participation is also seen in terms of the extent of travel that members were able to do. (Table 3.11) shows distance from headquarters of women members of panchayat. This indicates wider participation.

The analysis revealed that their experience as elected members was itself new and they were not exposed to the formal official procedures. They depended quite often on male members. In fact some reported that in many cases they were dependent on their menfolk to take home related responsibilities while they attended panchayat work.

Participation and emerging pattern of leadership among women in PRI’s (Chapter 5) revealed the level of political participation with correlation of leadership indicators such as age, education, caste and sub-caste. The data analysis indicated that the majority of women members were in the middle age group of 40-50 years, (Table 5.2) which was most appropriate to make an entry into politics.
Field data showed that (Table 5.22 and 5.23) majority of the respondent contested elections due to pressure or influence from family, political parties, relatives, husband, village leaders, people etc. Very few women contested elections their own. It has to be understood here that because of the historical and socio-cultural milieu in which Indian rural women are placed, it would probably take some more time for women to be very independent without any assistance or pressure from outside. Decision-making power is an important factor contributing to the women empowerment. The study has revealed that these qualities were evident in the women respondents which were very encouraging.

Study revealed that the JatSikh, Rajput and Scheduled Caste women emerged with new leadership in the three areas i.e. plain, submountainous and the border. In Dera Baba Nanak and Kalanaur blocks, the JatSikh caste dominated the village panchayat (Table 5.5). In Gurdaspur, Dinanagar, Pathankot and Sujanpur blocks, JatSikh, the Schedule Caste, Saini and Rajput women emerged in the panchayat politics.

Some women gram panchayat leaders belonging to affluent classes were inducted into these posts because of their husbands, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law or other relative’s active role in politics. In Kaunta village the sarpanch has been from the same family. People vote for them because they have funds which are used for development purposes. Family background dominated women members in the panchayat. The husband tried to be in local politics through his wife, making her a proxy member. Under such circumstances, the women representatives were not allowed to get politically empowered in the real sense of the term.

Male member perceptions revealed (Table 5.24) that the male members welcome the reservation policy for women. There were a few male members, typically traditional, who were against women entering panchayati raj institution. But overwhelming majority of them were happy that an opportunity had been given to the rural women.

Nevertheless, whatever change has occurred after the implementation of the 73rd amendment with regard to the political empowerment and emerging leadership is substantial and is to be appreciated.
Main findings

It is a matter of satisfaction that women’s entry into panchayats, both as members as well as chairpersons, after the implementation of new panchayati raj system, has made them strong, vocal and pushing. They are, once and for all, trying to cross the rigid boundaries drawn by the male members of the panchayats and government officials/bureaucracy. This has transformed their lives tremendously, giving them confidence and freedom and exposure to the outside world. They are trying their best to understand the concepts of planning, financial management, development of social sectors and so on. However, women still face many problems in the present system.

Most of the women representatives face opposition from political parties. In addition, the patriarchal views of male society regard women representatives are incapable and not fit for politics; their illiteracy and lack of economic resources are also major handicaps to them.

Social environment is also not conducive to them and domestic work, child care duties, lack of mobility due to social reasons are among the other handicaps. Sometimes, the elites, who have been in power in past panchayats, mischievously try to bring no-confidence motions against women chairperson merely to embarrass them.

It is revealed that although the women representatives of PRI’s in Punjab are continuously showing great interest in the rural development process, still they are facing many problems. The most important issue relating to their difficulties is interference of Government officials and other influential persons in their jurisdiction. The influences, which may be identified as problems for them are (i) interference of MLA’s and other politicians in panchayat administration (ii) no proper support from government officials (iii) no respect in administrative set up (iv) interference of police in panchayat affairs (v) problems of male head of the family working as sarpanch pati (vi) no official/formal relationship between other village level institutions and gram panchayats (vii) insufficient funds available for PRI’s (viii) no consultation with women headed sarpanch for use of MPLADF (ix) funds are not transferred fully (x) sometimes bribes need to be paid to the sanctioning/disbursing authority (xi) women headed panchayats are not considered as good as men headed panchayats.
Study revealed that elected women representatives have shown keen interest for re-elections. Women, who were elected for the first time to gram panchayat, took it as an opportunity to understand, learn and acquire the necessary skills of governance. Even though, in some instances, they were elected due to family and party pressure, they realized that they had the hope of contesting re-elections for the second or third time to improve their learning.

Study revealed that many women sarpanches contested elections under the patronage of national and regional political parties, as it facilitates their political advancement. This has promoted the use of money and muscle power (Table 5.9) and even communal clashes have taken place in panchayat elections. Politicization of the panchayats is also responsible for the dismal functioning of Gram Sabha (Table 5.18). It is also revealed that there is a lot of factionalism in the villages and this becomes sharper during the panchayat election. This has created a lot of tension and conflicts among the people.

The study also revealed that many women respondents were elected unanimously by members of the village. This way the villagers demonstrated their unity and brotherhood by avoiding any direct contest or elections. It showed that the potential of women as leaders was publically accepted.

Study revealed that centralization of power in the hands of sarpanches dilutes the objectives of decentralisation of power. Citing the case of West Bengal, Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) remarked. “The power of the village council is totally concentrated in the hands of Pradhans, for all practical purposes, and the Pradhan is a powerful man”. During the study, the representatives of the PRIs in Gurdaspur district many panches complained that the sarpanches did not take them into confidence while performing the functions of gram panchayats such as spending government grants, selecting the beneficiaries of welfare schemes and implementation of development programmes.

Study also revealed that (Table 5.16) there was high degree of interference in the working of panchayat by political parties. The party in power always tried to use the panchayats for its own interests. Although it was decided unanimously by all the major political parties of the country, which they would not participate in the elections of panchayats yet they interfered in the elections of panchayats indirectly. The party
in power always favoured those panchayats which were of their own ideology and the other panchayats were not given proper co-operation. Instead of giving political education to the people through local government institutions, political parties were dividing the people in different groups.

Study also revealed (Table 3.28) that there were no unmarried women who would get elected as a sarpanch or panch. The reason was that in many sampled area, unmarried girls of certain communities could not cast their votes. It was also a matter of family status. If an unmarried girl was to get elected as a sarpanch/panch, it could be very difficult for her to get married and she could not expect any respect in her husband’s family.

The cultural norms operated both as a restriction on a woman’s mobility as well as an impediment for her participation in the public sphere. These cultural norms were perpetuated and sustained by powerful institutions of family, caste and religion.

Women’s representation is restricted by the predominant value of protectionism toward the weak. This continues to be the male domain (Table 5.13) and women representation is seen as legitimate to the extent it promotes masculine norms, condones values, and abides by the codes of conduct of restrictive mobility. In this framework, representation becomes symbolic without reflecting the cultural ethos where violence is seen as a legitimate instrument of resolution of conflicts. Local leadership is further characterized as capable in terms of providing hospitality and timely patronage. Renuka Dagar views on that “Being a panch is an expensive and time consuming proposition. The kitchen must continually respond to the streams of people visiting for grievances, show of solidarity or for establishing contact-petrol has to burnt to run around for people’s work.”

During interview with women respondents, the study revealed that some women did not attend the meetings of gram panchayat and block level, because the sarpanch did not inform them about the meetings as they were in opposite group. At times even when the quorum of the panchayat was complete, the male sarpanch totally dominated the panchayat. The inconvenient timings, location, distance and lack of escort were the impediments for the elected women representatives to attend.

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1 Dagar, Rainuka (2008), Authority Systems and Construction of Masculinities in Punjab, Chandigarh, Institute For Development and Communication, p.41
meetings. Often, there were situations when emergency meetings were called at inconvenient timings, preventing women's attendance, and thus excluding them from the decision-making process at large.

Sometimes women panch members were not invited for proposals and expenditure of the budget because they were in the opposite group. Even one male panch member (he was ex-sarpanch) of the village told that his village was dominated by the family of the sarpanch. The researcher found that in many cases where a lady sarpanch came to preside the panchayat, she never came in front of the public as her husband or father-in-law dominated the proceedings of the panchayat. She was also not informed by them about the decision, money, grants and developmental issues in gram panchayat meetings.

It is revealed the standards of leadership are masculine characteristics at the panchayat level, women representation is seen either as supportive to male leadership or are represented through proxy variable. Classic instances of visitors being directed to a sarpanch’s house, the epitome of leader, owner of a large landholding, affluent, huge house with a ready crowd of hanger-ons, eventually leads to the information that the post of sarpanch is actually held by a wife or servant (often a Dalit) in the household. Such an established pattern, while making a mockery of reservation highlights the situational requirements dictated by informal management that resides in caste and gender structures.

Another interesting finding of the study pointed out that if there was a reserve seat for a schedule caste woman, some influential person of the village offered her money to represent as a sarpanch in order to dominate the village panchayat. During the study the researcher found that in Manj, Jungle and many other villages in which many sarpanches who were schedule caste or where the seats were reserved, they did not want to be sarpanch and even did not know anything about the issue of leadership. Ex-sarpanch and the so called big brother forced them to become panch and pushed them to background to do their job as panch.

Another finding was that illiteracy among women was a major hindrance in their political participation. Many respondents confessed this. But the glaring aspect was that the husband, brother and brother-in-law participated on behalf of many women who were well educated.
Although the reservation gave an opportunity to women to participate in political affairs of the government and PRIs, (Table 4.1) according to the researcher’s study it became evident that the participants did not know what reservation was, what was panchayati raj institution and what were the various functions of these institutions. Even during interviews, they asked the researcher, “Can you explain to us what is the 73rd Amendment and PRI’s in Punjab?” The women-members, majority of them accepted their ignorance that they had not gone through the Act, but knew in general about the content of it. The main reason is lack of awareness and education among the women members. Majority of them were of the opinion that reservation is necessary and that it should be increased.

The study gave a picture of the women’s participation in PRI’s in the selected blocks in a true manner. They told the researcher that they participated in the meetings but many respondent during the formal interview said ‘our husband, son, brother-in-law, father-in-law etc. represent us because we do not have any time to serve the people.’ Some were scared when the researcher tried to ask questions, they told that the male members were not at home and they could not tell anything. Only the male members knew everything. If women participants said something wrong, it could create problems in their families.

Some respondents who were actively involved in PRI’s told that they were equal to men and were part of the society but many members of the society did not recognize their presence. One female respondent said that they accepted Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister of India but did not accept women as sarpanch or panch. They elaborated by giving examples. One respondent informed about a dispute in the village when a girl committed suicide. Some villagers went to the police station with her, she said. There the police and other male members from the girl’s side told her to go back and send her husband as they did not think her to be fit to settle the dispute because it was prerogative of the male members.

Male members perceptions about the women’s political participation in PRI’s were totally different. They said that the women were still a rubber stamp. Even sarpanch and panch women signed everywhere and did not know anything. Government should educate them before giving them reservation. Many respondents
said that the government just forced the reservation on women and their family members enjoyed the status and prestige because a woman from the family was a sarpanch or panch.

Another observation (Table 5.14) made was that many families had a long tenure as sarpanch or panch. If there was a reserved seat for women, they won the election by putting a woman from the family in contesting the elections as sarpanch or panch. For example in the village Jungal, the brother-in-law who had 25 years experience as a sarpanch forced his sister-in-law to become a sarpanch when the seat was reserved for woman. During the course of the interview it was observed that, the brother-in-law tried to give answers on her behalf. He told the researcher that she did not know anything and he knew each and everything. The researcher’s observation is that if a lady can handle the whole house and she can decide the matters of the house, the relative is just insulting her in public by saying that she did not know anything. It is exploitation of women as she is not allowed to excel in the political affairs as expected of her as the elected sarpanch or panch of the village.

An interesting fact revealed that (Table 3.28) the widows commanded remarkable respect. It was observed from the three samples in the study that the three women were made panchayat members because their husbands had died in the tenure. This was very much in line with the phenomenon of female leadership in the subcontinent where in the contemporary political compulsions and politics bring them to power either on behalf husband or father as in the case of Smt. Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi (India), Sirimao Bhandanaike (Sri Lanka), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), Begum Khalida Zia and Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh) and Aung san kye (Myanmar).

The study revealed that (Table 4.4) the issue of welfare of women did not receive enough attention at the meetings. The women had also not shown interest regarding welfare of women, nor had they put forward any proposal for the rural women. However, they expressed their opinion on many issues proposed in the meeting. It was observed while doing research that no special attention was paid to issues of women’s health, female foeticide, and there was not a single sampled village in which Women International Day was celebrated, even though there were woman Member of Legislative Assembly (M.L.A.) and Member of Parliament (M.P.) belonged to this district. There was lack of awareness among the village women
because they did not know what was the Women’s Day and many health issues like breast cancer, cervix cancer and female feoticed law and rules.

Regarding the relation of the women members with the electorate, the study revealed that as they were not as mobile as the men. They had social constraints. But still when they were able to meet the electorates, they tried to solve their problems.

Though both female and male members were given an equal opportunity to enter the political institution, the study revealed that (Table 4.3) there was discrimination in the sitting arrangements at all the selected villages. Women were usually made to sit in a corner of the room or behind the men. One reason was that older person were in panchayat meeting and women could not speak in front of the elderly males. Secondly, women were also in the veil in front of the elderly males as a sign of a respect. They could not remove their veil in front of them as in some places, system of veil was still prevalent.

An examination into the reaction of the family and society towards women’s entry into politics indicated that it had been encouraging and supportive with a few exceptions where they had to face hostile treatment.

The analysis revealed that (Table 4.12) their experience as elected members was itself new and they were not exposed to the formal official procedures. They depended quite often on the male members and officials for advice and for clarification. Though the numerical strength of the women members had increased, they had not been able to affect the decision making substantially.

It was observed that Mahila Mandal and self-help group play an important role in helping the rural women. They did conduct training in different fields to help the women to be economically independent and to support the family. The Mahila Mandals at the selected villages and blocks had been playing a reasonably satisfactory role. A few women members who were president and vice presidents of Mahila Mandals had encouraged the women to make use of the benefits. A more or less similar role was also being played by a few voluntary organizations in the district.

An examination (Table 4.13 and 4.15) into the various development schemes indicated that there were many programmes which were helping the rural women directly and indirectly. A few such programmes had been dealt with in detail in the
study. The disheartening note was that the women members had not been able to introduce any new schemes or programmes for the women, though they had been able to help the rural women to make use of the benefits of the ongoing programmes and schemes. At the Gram Sabhas level meetings which were supposed to identify the beneficiaries and put proposals for the development of villages, it was observed that the rural women did not attend the meetings regularly. The rural women expressed their inability because of their domestic work and also the work on field. The fact was that the majority of the rural women were ignorant about the important role of the Gram Sabha and this was perhaps the chief obstacle for rural women not participating effectively in this institution.

**Suggestions and Strategies**

No doubt the 73rd amendment, by ensuring the inclusion of women in local government, had taken the local politics a step forward. The amendment represent an opportunity to focus on the priorities of development that women feel, are essential to themselves, their families and their community. The successful participation of women in PRIs is unquestionably linked to a process by which the society begins to break down the chains of traditions and customs that limit women’s mobility and restrain their actions as key players in the society. Only the societal support can make room for women to act powerfully within society and thereby within its local political structure. The women representatives opined that the problems faced by women can be solved by raising funds for panchayats bodies, stoppage of commission to government officials for approving works of PRIs, demonstrating that women were as good as men, establishing a network of women gram panchayat members, checking the interference of MP and MLA’s and other political leaders, increasing the knowledge of women members through capacity building activities, assuming responsibility to create environment for women’s empowerment and eliminating the male domination.

Improving the women’s opportunities in the area of decision-making requires long term strategies. They have to be systematic and they must aim at challenging prevailing structures. Concrete measures are needed to remove many obstacles that make the process of participation difficult. New strategies and mechanism need to be
developed to increase women’s access to decision-making positions within different political power structures. Some of these mechanisms may be set up by the government such as quotas, while others should arise from the collective action of women. Some such strategies can be stated as follows:

   Education plays a very important role in fostering greater social participation. Education helps the women to develop a sense of motivation to achieve more. It was observed in this study that many women had primary and secondary education. What about the older women who had no formal education? Even with limited education these women were participating to a certain extent. If some non-formal education could be provided, they may gradually overcome their timidity and embarrassment, through the experience of membership. Though the women were quiet at the meetings, outside the same women were very friendly and ready to share their experiences. These women need to develop confidence in them so that they could participate more effectively.

   We have to accept that the silver lining appears to be that rural women are now ready for change and that they have heard of emancipation and empowerment and they want information. Information itself is an empowering device, the basis for collective action, struggle and knowledge the stimulus of a new political identity. It was observed that women were concerned with their responsibilities to a greater extent than men who were more concerned with the exercise of power.

   Women are made to think and live in a social setting in which politics is regarded as bad and even unwomanly. This situation prevents women from assuming active role in politics even if they enter it.

   So, when the reservation of seats was announced, it must have taken some time and thinking if the rural women could contest the election. Influence of the political parties, relatives and friends have made the women to cross the traditional barriers, this itself is a sign of development. The women's representation on these bodies came to be symbolised by ‘tokenism’ but now it implies a meaningful association. It will take some more time for the rural men to accept the women as their equal at the panchayati raj institutions and also listen to their views and opinions. A beginning has been made by the 73rd amendment and there is no going back now.
The feeling that women are meant for home should be replaced by a feeling of equal partnership. Education to bring about social and political awareness should be given to men and women. Proper use of adult educational programmes should be made.

The *Mahila Mandals* which exist in the rural areas can be used as effective instruments to organise and mobilize women. The Mahila Mandals should become more active not just conducting tailoring classes or basket making etc. They have to encourage women to participate in the social activities. They have to motivate women to contest the panchayati raj elections and they in turn the elected members should help the rural women to develop.

The women are financially dependent on the men. This has a negative influence on the women’s sense of independence and confidence. So women should be involved in economically gainful activities or income generating activities.

Political parties take a fancy in promising benefits to women, forgetting that unless this 50 per cent of the population is fully involved in the political institutions, the democratic aspirations of the people will not be fulfilled.

The Manifestoes of political parties mentioned, removing gender discrimination and granting equal status to women, reserving 30 per cent of jobs for women and enabling them to fully participate in the development process. Putting emphasis on issues like women’s education, health and their right to parental property, female foeticide etc. deserve equal attention.

The women’s wings of various political parties have not quite succeeded in mobilising women in rural areas. The decline in the status of the women cannot be stemmed by a token welfare programme.

Women who constitute 50 per cent of the population in the largest democracy have been hitherto neglected in politics. But the strength of the women electorate demonstrates that they can no longer be co-opted in any system which relegates them to a social sphere. They are demanding their rights and not asking for favour. The rural women have to be helped and encouraged by the political parties and voluntary organisations including women’s organisations.
The political parties should play an important role in recruiting candidates. They should not be influenced by caste, religion, kith and kin relationship. The women’s wings of the political parties must see that capable and effective women are chosen for the elections. The women must be made aware about the panchayati raj institutions.

Forming a women’s shadow cabinet as was the case with Czech women could be a welcome step in this direction. The Czech Social Democratic Party has long had an internal quota of 35% women in all party bodies and also has a women’s bureau. But when a few years ago, the party formed the government, not one woman was appointed to the cabinet. The women promptly formed a shadow cabinet, to show that there were just as many women as men qualified to head the departments.

A larger issue is that the reservation for women should be extended to the Parliament and State Legislatures. A serious thought needs to be given to this issue. Why should there be reservations only at the panchayati raj institutions? The general elections have clearly proved that the political parties are not keen to give tickets to women. If through an amendment the Government introduces 30 per cent reservation at the legislatures then it would become binding on the political parties to recruit women. In this way, large number of women can enter the political institutions, gain confidence and also influence other women to contest the elections.

If reservations of seats are made at all the three levels, the Centre, State and District level, then the women will be motivated to contest the elections. However, these reservations need not be there permanently. It may be hypothesized that with successive elections the number of women participating in political institutions at different levels would increase. In this context, it is worthwhile to note that in the 1993 Act 33 per cent reservation was given to women. In the election held after the implementation of the reservation, many women won the election and became panchayat members. Now Punjab Government implemented notification of 50% reservation for women. Reservation should not degenerate into marginalisation of women in the political process. Reservation has been seen as a means of integration, ways and means have to be found to increase the number of women representatives and make their participation more effective.
Training before and after the elections, to the women members will help them to play an effective role in the panchayati raj institutions. The complexity of functions of the local government demands skill, knowledge and aptitude. This could be acquired only through systematic training. A committee should be set up by the Government to look into their training needs and identification of organisations which could meet them. The first task will be to train the trainers, who should be committed. If the trainers are females, then they would understand the fears, inhibitions and aspirations of women.

There is a strong need for pre election information dissemination on panchayati raj, its structures, functions, especially the importance of Gram Sabha, peoples’ role in it, the need for women’s entry to panchayati raj etc. Relying on men folk for everything for knowing about the system and surroundings in which they live, is not a healthy sign for women’s empowerment. Pre-election information dissemination will not benefit the women alone, it will benefit everyone who is part of the same political system.

Post election training is the most important factor of their role transformation. State Government must make efforts to orient specialized training pertaining to:

- Panchayati raj and rural development
- Personality development and participatory approach.
- Gender sensitization of the male members of rural society including male officials and functionaries.
- Training must be of short duration and should be provided at the nearest possible place to the trainees. If possible, allowances should also be paid to the trainees so they do not feel financial reluctance to attend the training.

Dissemination of information and raising general as well as political awareness/political socialisation among and of the rural women should be aimed at on priority basis. A large number of rural women are illiterate, ignorant and poorly informed about ongoing issues, debates and reforms concerning the society in general and women in particular. The women need to know about their legal rights and duties, the nature of our constitution, democratic processes and values, working of democratic institutions, concept and relevance of panchayati raj, various poverty
alleviation programmes for their economic or material upliftment, about government policies and intervention and strategies especially for weaker sections. In this regard, Department of Women and Child Welfare, NGOs, Women’s organisation can adopt various strategies for educating women on issues and problems.

There is a need for greater interaction and exchange of visits among women belonging to various regions of India. The social variations and developmental experiences, apart from the travel and exposure would help the elected women compare and learn. Such interaction is needed among panchayat chairpersons and members within the state as well as with those of other states. So, to bring about attitudinal change in the grassroot bureaucracy, training workshops or orientation programmes should be organised where the officials as well as women members of PRIs get frequent interaction between them which will certainly bring about affirmative attitudinal changes in them.

More and more programmes need to be formulated only and exclusively for women. It was reported by a thought provoking study\(^2\) that, Integrated Rural Development Programme was started for generation of income and employment opportunities for the very poor in which 30 per cent reservation was made for women but in practice achievement was only to the order of 16 per cent. Hence, empowerment has to be in terms of information, knowledge, and skills awareness.

It is necessary to sensitize the women about the issues of women’s development and rights. Attitudinal reorientation of administrative machinery at village, block and district levels is of crucial significance in this regard.

It is necessary to provide certain support services to women members of PRIs for strengthening the process of their political empowerment. Since, money and muscle power happens to play an important role in local electoral politics, making elections extremely expensive, violent and corrupts, women will require greater assistance for canvassing, travelling to different villages and mobilising political support for themselves. Creation of a special fund for women candidates by political parties, in this context, may be thought of. Local Mahila Mandals and varied women’s organisations may also raise resources to enable women candidates to contest and win

elections. A larger issue here is how to contain the role of money and muscle power in the functioning of Indian political system including the grassroot political institution. The issue needs serious attention and concerted efforts on the part of the government and conscientious voluntary/non-governmental organisations including women’s organisations.

*The Gram Sabha (general body meeting of village)* is considered as the bedrock of the panchayati raj system. The purpose of constituting the Gram Sabha is to make panchayat administration accountable and transparent to the people of the village. Study showed that the Gram Sabha has not been able to achieve the purpose to the extent it was expected of it. If the Grama Sabha really has to be ‘catalysts’ to development, the educated rural youth should organise awareness programmes in the villages and motivate all people and in particular the rural women to participate actively. For this some institutional and non-institutional devices may be thought of.

At the panchayat level, NGO’s should be empowered to pursue cases of violence against women and solve their problems with creative efforts. The government should also take serious measures to eradicate this evil.

To overcome illiteracy, rural women require proper education and training. After that rural women should be made aware of their powers and duties. NGO’s and social organization should also develop leadership quality in rural women.

Panchayati raj institutions should also be given adequate and real powers. The power that is often vested with the state government in almost all the matters requires decentralization. There is need to involve women representatives in the planning and execution of various development and welfare programs of the government to provide them an opportunity for practical learning of the process of development and program implementation at the local level.

The *media* can also help a lot in achieving the objectives of the establishment of panchayati raj institutions in India. Through media, a continuous communication is required to be maintained between the state government and the panchayati raj institutions. Moreover, national level seminars and workshops should also be organised. Through these seminars and workshops, old myths such as male