CHAPTER - III

Today, the women's concerns in all sectors - education and literacy, health and nutrition, training and income generation, legislative and judicial reforms-have been flagged. The challenge lies in converting these concerns into reality. The empowering strategies would need to be further sharpened to make them effective and result oriented. The vision for the future should be built on the achievements to date and fully reflect a general perspective.

There is therefore, a need for comprehensive and holistic policy on women. This would enable the country to fulfil the constitutional mandate of women's equality and objective of women's total involvement in national development. This would neglect some of the distortions and gaps¹.

Traditionally, there have been strong reservations even among feminist groups about quotas in legislatures as a means of securing women's legitimate right to participation for the reason that it implies an artificial and not particularly healthy gender-based demarcation and exclusivity of interests. If over the years the concept of reservation has increasingly come to be seen as a viable option, it is because the main stream 'commitment' to gender equality have consistently failed to give adequate representation to women when it came to nominations for
legislatures and other elective bodies—this is true of the policy-
formulating bodies within their own organizations. Although more and
more women are taking to active politics their presence in the Lok Sabha
and Most State Assemblies has been dwindling.

It was found that how lack of power, in relation to men, means
that women have no control over material resources or even over their
own bodies. Further more, they have internalised their inferior status.
Therefore, change will be possible only if this power equation, which
draws on tradition and institutions that reinforce it, is altered in favour
of women.

It was suggested that 'empowerment' must be two-fold, it should
be externally induced so that women can exercise a level of
power and there should also be “self-empowerment” so that they can look at their own
lives and see the ways in which their acceptance of the status quo has
contributed to their disempowerment.

Women's access to power through the Panchayati Raj Institution is
clearly beginning to have an impact. But it is not enough. Holding position
of power in these institutions will have no real meaning until women have
access to and control over material resources like land and income which
in turn could over change the power relations within the family.
The 64th Amendment Bill, passed by the Lok Sabha but defeated in the Rajya Sabha in October 1989, as well as the 74th Amendment Bill introduced in Parliament on 7th September 1990, has attracted widespread attention. The major flaw of the new act was that it has adopted a uniform three-tier system below the state level. Even in bigger states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Assam, which, had three tiers, there were structural differences in the system of panchayats. This Amendment Bill, provided for direct elections to the post of chairman at the village and intermediary levels. At the district level, it was left to the legislatures to decide.4

It is true that the passing of the constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Bill by Parliament incorporated the Panchayats in Part IX of the constitution and has set right a serious lapse in our constitution. The argument for a constitutional amendment had gathered momentum in the second half of the eighties. There were two reasons for this. First, the concentration of power in Delhi had reached a flash point, threatening to break the very foundations of our polity. Therefore, the slogan, "Power to the people" raised the demand for decentralized structures down the village level. Second, the popularity of governments, which had implemented successful panchayats in West Bengal and Karnataka, had
sent signals that this was an effective instrument to win the hearts of the rural masses.

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

Empowerment of women for effective participation at various levels of Panchayat Raj Institution has been discussed and debated in different forums particularly from 1957 onwards since the Balwantrai Metha Committee was constituted. However, the first concrete measure to give constitutional sanction to it was taken by Rajiv Gandhi’s government by introducing the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill aimed to revitalize Panchayat Raj Institutions, by bringing changes in their powers, structure and functions. It was defeated with a small margin in Rajya Sabha. Subsequently, Narasimaha Rao’s government has been successful in enacting the constitution (seventy third) Amendment Act, 1992 which includes reservation of seats for women and other such provisions for strengthening Panchayats at all levels.

When Panchayat Raj System was introduced very few women contested or get elected. Balwantrai Metha Committee recommended that in the constitution of Panchayats, provisions may be made for the co-option of two women members, “who are interested in work among women and children”. Subsequently, the Ashok Metha Committee had mentioned
that two women securing the highest number of votes among the women candidates in the election could take the seats reserved for them, a method of co-option by election. Though Panchayat Raj Institution were established in almost all the states, women's representation did not exceed two or three.\(^6\)

It was only in 1976, with the publication of Report of the Committee on Status of women that there was a demand for the representation of women in the Panchayati Raj through reservation.

Karnataka became the pioneer State in whole of country to introduce the policy of reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions by the Act of 1985 which specified that 25 per cent of the total seats should be reserved for women at the District (Zilla Parishad) level and at the Mandal Panchayat level (a cluster of villages).

In Karnataka, election to the Panchayati Raj Institutions were held in 1987. Women occupied 25 per cent of the seats in all the districts. In 19 Zilla Parishads 218 women became members. It was found that not even single women got elected from the general constituency. Out of 54,688 Mandal Panchayat Members, 14,025 were women members and some had won from the general constituencies also.
However, the 1985 Act was superseded by a new act. The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1993, which incorporated the essential features of the 73rd constitutional amendment. Although, this Act provided for 33 per cent reservation to women, after election to Panchayats it was found that 43.2 per cent panchayat members were women in Karnataka.

The salient features of the 73rd Amendment Act is:

- In all the Panchayats one-third of the seats will be reserved for women.

- One third of the seats reserved for SCs and STs to be reserved for women.

- One third offices of chairpersons of Panchayats at all levels shall be reserved for women.

- Women and child development forms part of newly added 11th schedule of the constitution.

However, it is criticised the 73rd Amendment for not correcting historical mistake, to women by reserving 50 per cent of all seats to women candidates as women constitute half of the total population.
The Committee on Status of Women in India (1975) recommended establishment of all women Panchayats at village level with autonomy and resources of their own. Participation of women is particularly significant in demonstrating the effectiveness of participatory development as a process of empowering women to articulate their needs and aspirations, to decide and shape their future.

A study of women members of Panchayat Samithis and Zilla Parishads in Maharashtra reveals that the women of upper castes, wives of big landlords and politically influential persons predominate and the elections have become very expensive, excluding poor women who have little control over resources.

Hence, the constitution (73rd Amendment) Act of 1992 strived to remove those conditions, which prevented the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, less privileged women, poor and weaker sections of the women to contest in the Panchayat elections.

The Policy of reservation raises certain very pertinent issues - will one-third reservation of electoral seats in Panchayat institutions ensure greater and meaningful participation or involvement and contribution of women in grassroot institution and their decision making process? Will they be able to act as agents of the social and economic change in rural
India? The traditional and conservative attitudes of rural community, social forces, economic structure and existing political milieu place obstructions in their effective participation. Any how, these are not insurmountable barriers as despite these barricades encouraging experiences of women in Panchayat Raj Institution have been observed in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and West Bengal.

Elected women members have proved their worth by their excellent work in construction of social building and bio-gas plants, supply of protected waters, provision of self-employment opportunities, books and scholarship for needy students and 100 per cent tax collection.

According to G. Palanithurai, women constitute an integral part of the new Panchayat Raj System as the 73rd Amendment provides 33 per cent of representation to women. But he raises several doubts. For him, the issue is whether the women in the rural areas are ready to come forward and to take up leadership to work for the betterment of the rustic rural women folk. Will it be possible to generate enough women power in rural areas for the new task as per the reservation? Even if they are ready, how many of them are aware of the new Panchayat Raj System? Are they really equipped to comprehend the problems of the villages? Are they in a position to propose suitable solutions to solve
them? What is the level of their equipment in governing themselves if power is given to them to govern themselves and to administer development in the villages on their own. Further, he argues that the secondary position of women in the society will hamper the process of empowerment of women. To remove this, he insists that a little orientation must be given to the elected women members in the New Panchayat Raj System.

It is believed that a large number of women are illiterate, ignorant and poorly informed about the ongoing issues, debates and reforms concerning the society in general and women in particular. Therefore, the first strategy should aim at striking at ignorance by dissemination of information among toiling rural women. They should be helped to attain knowledge and awareness of their own self personal needs, like, issues, legal rights and society at large.

The realization of their capabilities, potentialities and the role in society would strengthen their self-image and would foster them with confidence to take action in life. Besides, general awareness, women need to be enlightened politically, not only about their rights and duties, but also the nature of our constitution, democratic processes and value, working of democratic institutions, concept and relevance of Panchayat
Raj particularly, the idea behind the one-third of reservation of seats for women and government polices for women and weaker section.

Serious misgivings were expressed in several quarters about the efficacy of the new policy of reservation of seats for women in Panchayats. In the first place, it is said that the rural women of heavy responsibility being entrusted to them. In defence of their argument they point out that even today female literacy in the country stands at 39.42 per cent as against 63.86 for males with their social subjugation and economic dependence, women suffer from a low self-image. Thirdly, lack of experience and knowledge of public affairs would hinder their participation in political decision-making process. Fourthly, doubts are also expressed about obtaining the support which they need from the men in the society, particularly, the male members of their own families.

Various studies relating to women's participation in the Panchayat bodies have revealed that these bodies being male-dominated, the presence of women in the local bodies is not considered important; when the quorum falls short at the meetings of the Gram Panchayat, women members are called. Otherwise, their signature is obtained after the meeting. Even if some women members are articulate and express their opinion on urgent matters of development concerning their needs, they
are ignored and not heeded. There are instances when women members even if they were present, were not allowed to speak; women's representation on these bodies has come to be symbolised by 'tokenism'. More over, in the traditional rural society, politics is regarded as 'unwomanly' and the traditional attitude prevents a women from taking an active role in the body politic.

Local Governments in India

On December 22, 1992, the LokSabha passed the 73rd Amendment to Indian constitution to provide a constitutional base to local-government. The constitutional recognition of the panchayats as the third-tier of the government is clearly laid out in their mandatory creation at the rural level. There shall be constituted in every state, panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels (Article 243 B), duly elected from territorial constituencies in the Panchayat area (Article 243 C) reserving seats for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, decided by the proportion of their population in the area and ensuring that one third of the total number of seats and offices of chairpersons at all levels of the local government were to be filled by women (Article - 243 D).
In addition, Article 243 G mandated the state governments to delegate powers to the local bodies necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and to fulfil the implementation schemes for economic development and social justice.

Panchayati Raj: Redefinition of Women's Power

The Panchayati Raj Act has given them a chance to wield a greater power, for the Act which came into effect on April 24, 1993, has a provision for less than one-third of the elected members being women not less than one-third chair persons at the different tiers of Panchayat (That is Village, Block and Zilla).

Women especially, rural women can take part in decision-making which has so far remained or far cry for them. The power envisaged in the Act has given them the constitutional rights to deliberate, debate and decide important policy matters, which concern the peoples day to day life. They can stake their claim in the process of planning, policy formulation and execution of rural development programme and funds allotment. Also laws can be enacted, amended programmes planned and executed. What is important is that all these can be done from a feminine perspective which is very much lading now.
The Present Status

Women by virtue of their gender, experience discrimination in terms of denial of equal access to power structure that controls society and determines development issues and peace initiative. This power in equation is mainly due to the socio cultural attitude in both men and women\textsuperscript{13}.

Bringing in Power Equation

And attitudinal change in women and men can bring about power equation. This undoubtedly can become a reality in the Panchayati Raj System. Women have been given a chance to redefine their power through two process. By occupying positions in Panchayat and by virtue of their positions creating conditions for women to raise their status. When the administrative body consists of one third of women, decisions can be made and remade towards empowering women.

Women should rise to the occasion in great numbers. Studies carried out by the Institute of Social Science between 1987 and 1990 in Karnataka and another in 1991 in Kerala have shown that women did take part in large measures in PRIs. In Kerala they even fought non-reserved constituencies for women.
Unless the first stage of empowerment in terms of contesting and winning PRI’s elections is possible the second stage of empowerment is not possible. Redefining their power lies in achieving these two pre-
conditions\textsuperscript{14}.\(\)
Empowerment - First Stage

The experiences with panchayat elections in Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal show that gender bias, upper caste domination, assetlessness, illiteracy and ignorance were the major impediments in women taking part in PRIs. Also women lacked self-confidence. Hence in each village motivation camps may be conducted for local women.

* Meenaxi Anand Chaudry, Opcit. P. 22
• Empowerment – Second Stage

Once women in large numbers occupy positions as panchayat members and chair persons the second stage of empowerment should begin in right earnest.

The country report of India (1995) presented at the Forth World conference on Women has identified certain critical areas which need immediate attention.

They include (i) Inadequacy of institutional mechanism for the advancement of women.

(ii) Persistent discrimination against girl children.

(iii) Feminisation of Poverty.

(iv) Gender blindness in macro-economic policies.

(v) Invisibility of women’s contribution to the economy and environmental system.

(vi) Poor participation by women in decision making structures and processes and

(vii) Gender gaps in literacy education and health.
(viii) Barriers encountered by women in accessing legal entitlement.

(ix) Growing trend of violence against women.

(x) Gender biased societal norms, and

(xi) Negative portrayal and perception of gender stereotype by mass media.

These critical areas provide guidelines for women functionaries to act\textsuperscript{15}.

The concept of empowerment of women is indicative of a shift in perspective emphasis from welfare-development to one of development of authoritative decision-making skills. It has been a basic aim of feminism and can be viewed as a carrying forward of developmental paradigms. And, women’s empowerment is a process of social transformation where women gain control of decision-making over issues which affect their lives to have access to and control over resources and benefits, and through empowerment, women become an important constituent of the society\textsuperscript{16}.

The process of empowerment begins in the mind, from woman’s consciousness, from her very beliefs about herself and her rights, capabilities and potential, from her self-image and awareness of how gender as well as other socio-economic and political forces are acting on
her from breaking free of the sense of inferiority which has been imprinted since of earliest childhood, from recognizing her strengths, above all from believing in her innate right to dignity and justice and realizing that it is she along with her sisters who must assert that right for no one who holds power will give it away willingly.17

Through the process of empowerment, women find a time and space of their own, and begin to re-examine their lives critically and collectively. They enable women to look at old problems in new ways, analyze their environment and situation, recognize their strengths alter their self-image, access new kinds of information and knowledge, acquire new skills and initiate action aimed at gaining greater control over resources of various kinds.

Empowerment is thus not merely a change of mind set but a visible demonstration of that change which the world around is forced to acknowledge, respond to, and accommodate as best it may. Armed with their growing collective strength, women begin to assert their right to control resources (including their own bodies) and participate equally in decision-making with in the family, community and village. As a result, women's empowerment will lead to a world where women and men ensure that resources are utilized not just equitably, but sanely and safely.18
All- Women’s panchayats exist since 1962 in Maharashtra, even before Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister. A Study of All-Women Panchayats in Maharashtra is an edited work of Bhishaka Datta, a writer and film maker. This work reveals the functioning of Eight all-women Panchayats among 25,000 such in Maharashtra. Datta observes that as a result of 73rd Amendment 8,00,000 women are expected to enter politics through reservation. According to Datta the issue involved in women reservation is more than any thins else, it is labour and the exercise of power, both with in and outside the home-Men, most of the arrangements of division of labour in favour of men. Women Sarpanchs come to grips with problems like providing water, building common toilets, schools and claiming benefits under government schemes.

Resistance to Local Government

Wherever Panchayats have not taken root or where ever they have been uprooted after brief spells of success, it has been observed that the Members of Parliament and state legislatures have been not too friendly to these institutions. Not only have these persons been indifferent to local governments, but at times they have also been hosfile to these bodies. No one likes to see another centre of power emerging as a challenge, nor does one like to see ones existing powers being diluted.
In fact, the arguments of the M.L.As and M.P.s have been in the same vein and against the strengthening or revitalising of panchayats. Perhaps this is the reason why, in an attempt to assuage their feelings and to pre-empt any mischief from them, the M.P.s and M.L.As have been given membership and voting rights in the panchayats in the statues now passed. This to my mind will undermine the panchayats which we are now aiming to strengthen.

However, if we had waited for a perfect legislative measure it would have been an utopia. What we have now got (in the form of the seventy-third constitutional amendment) is a major step forward. The provisions with regard to regular elections, reservation of one-third seats for women, reservation for SCs and STs (including for the office of the chairpersons) constitution of a finance commission, powers to raise resources, are welcome features of this long awaited measure to realise local self government.

It must be remembered that India won the 1971 was not with 33 per cent women armed forces, but under the able political leadership of one women-Indira Gandhi. Hence, a pragmatic alternative for the uplift merit of women may be considered from other angles, than reservation, which result only in remote-controlled puppets.
Women's quota Bill has had a checkered history. It was introduced by the United Front Government as far back as in August 1996 as a follow up to the elections promise of all political parties to give women a fair representation in Parliament and State Legislatures. After the introduction however, most political parties including non-left parties and BJP developed second thoughts and wanted that the Bill to be amended to provide for a special quota for women from SC/ST and Backward Classes within the proposed 33 per cent reservation. There was also a demand for reservation for Muslim women. The Bill was sent to a parliamentary committee, but its recommendations did not satisfy the critics. Since then a number all-party meetings have been held to evolve a consensus but the deadlock remains.\textsuperscript{22}

Opposition to Women's quota Bill without any doubt revealed the fact that no male parliamentarian or politicians supports the Bill. It also confirmed the ironical condition, how patriarchal politics splits women along class and caste lines. Then how did the women's reservation in panchayats and nagarpalikas find approval from the same patriarchal politics that now prevents women's entry into parliament? Was the policy making environment of 1992 so different from today? Or was the State stronger and able to command more say on dominant issues?
The few women leaders and politicians who emerged in Indian politics have been either so privileged or had to struggle incessantly for so little recognition and gain that they have not exactly become good role models.

Deprivation and powerlessness over centuries have motivated some of the movements working for social change in the country to seek political representation and power, without strengthening their economic base.

Easy and tempting though it may be, for the Laloos, Mulayams and Sharads of today to dismiss women in politics, using interestingly the colonial strategy of divisive politics, splitting the unity of the groups in question. In a way, the Bill seeking to reserve one-third of the seats in Parliament and State Assemblies for women, is only an extension of the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendments, under which a similar quota has been provided for women in the elected bodies at various levels in the panchayati raj and nagarpalika systems, and as such represents a big step forward in empowering them to play their rightful part in democratic governance as in the political process at the decision-making level. More
than correcting gender injustice, it will go to enhance the participatory character of India’s democracy very significantly.

The introduction of quotas at the panchayat and municipal levels of administration is what gives an impetus to the demand for its extension to parliament and the State Legislatures. The few studies undertaken indicate that while States like Karnataka have shown good results—women constitute more than 40 per cent of elected members, far above the one-third mark; there are others where the participation is only nominal. Qualitatively speaking, the performance varied, understandably, with the level of political consciousness, and socio-economic indicators like literacy, and where development programmes have met with some success the women representative are enabled to play a meaningful role. Basically, the women need to be properly trained and equipped to fulfill their obligations as people’s representatives are actively helped to overcome the obstacles encountered by them. The endeavour should be to create conditions where female leadership emerges from the grassroots to the top of the democratic structure. Reservation can at best be an interim arrangement and not a substitute for a system of female participation that is based on her own right and status of equality.
A survey conducted by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia, reveals the fact that a birth in the panchayat, hitherto to a male stranglehold might not have empowered women to the extent envisaged by the advocates of the 73rd Amendment to the constitution, but it sure has been successful in drawing women out of their hearths and into the main stream of village life in Haryana. While empowerment in the true sense of the word continue to elude those women, who have made it to the panchayats, a sizable number of women walk with their heads held high and interact with men of their village and others in the area with increasing confidence.

Contrary to popular notion that it was the immediate family which prevented a woman from shedding the traditional mould, it is found that 95 per cent of the politically empowered women enjoyed the support of their family. Only, 40 per cent of the sitting women member of the panchayats in the region are keen on contesting the subsequent polls. Approximately, 70 per cent of the elected women are in the plus-40 age group. The constitutional status accorded to panchayats, which have been the whipping boy of the bureaucrats, M.L.As, M.Ps and the rural and urban elite, will become a success story only if a strong people's movement to give it the necessary momentum supports it.
Interestingly, it is encouraging to note that a recent study of some 2,200 elected representatives in the Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan - "From Oppression to Assertion" - by a retired bureaucrat, Nirmala Buch, demolishes several myths about the ineffectiveness of women leaders. The study was conducted for the Ministry of Rural Development, by the Centre for women's Development Studies. The three States were chosen with a view to examine the achievements women had made by entering grassroots-level democratic structures, despite the States having low indicators of social development. Buch, who was a Secretary in the Ministry of Rural Development, argues that the presence and the experience of nearly one million women in the Panchayats and municipalities after the passage of the Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendment) Bill would set at rest the fears of paroxysm and control of posts by "elite women".

Among the 843 women representatives studied, the largest percentage of chairpersons and Panchayat members belonged to the OBC. Significantly, Uttar Pradesh had the largest number of OBC chairpersons and members.27
REFERENCES


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. P.38

5. Ibid


8. Ibid.


13. Ibid. P.56.


15. Ibid.


18. Ibid.


25. Ibid .
