CHAPTER 6
Evolving a Relational Framework

This chapter attempts to understand the varying levels of women’s participation by analysing the key transitions in their lives. It has been argued that women in India pass through the gamut of acceptance, resistance and negotiation through different stages in their life cycle. Empirical evidence is brought to bear on such a conceptualisation of gender in this chapter. The underlying assumption is that women with greater scope to assert their agency in other aspects of their lives will be able to function as ‘autonomous’ members. Further, women’s agency is an outcome of their relationships with their husbands or other adult males, which, in turn, is influenced by the dynamics operating in different household structures, levels of education and their access to, and control over economic resources. The following section examines the significance of these indicators in enabling a woman member to assert her agency in the political sphere. How far does age, work outside home and education enable women to be active agents in their lives in general and in their political roles, in particular? Are there variations in agency between women from similar ‘background’ and can these be related to their differential performance in Panchayats? Using these interactions as a base, an attempt is made to demonstrate the centrality of relations between people and the manner in which they are conceived and allowed to reproduce and perpetuate, and in determining the political performance of women members.
However, it has to be mentioned that developing a broad framework that will account for the commonplace processes of everyday life is a convoluted task (Ganesh, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1998). The field data from Kodagu are also intricate with a set of equally significant factors seminal to a single process or observation. Further, we have a set of observations allowing only for an examination of reasons for acceptance, while the others lead exclusively to reasons for resistance. Therefore, the need is for a framework that can explain the entire continuum of women’s patterns of practice.

The femininity and masculinity construct runs along the patterns of practice within the household and in the immediate community and extends to interaction in the Panchayat. These patterns establish rules and norms, which in turn regulate the appropriateness of behaviour. Each individual Panchayat member perceives, articulate and negotiate his/her gender identity from the standpoint of typical and common practices, routines and rituals of everyday life. Hence, a member’s performance needs to be understood not merely in terms of a dichotomy of passive or active member, but in relational terms, wherein members participate in other significant relationships. By thus contextualizing actors, the relations between people gain centrality and so does the relatedness in which these relations are conceived and given shape (Ganesh, 1999).

6.1. Marriage Arrangements and Women’s Agency

Marriage is seen as a very important event in a woman’s life. It is posited that the ability of a woman to act as an independent agent is influenced by the type of marriage —
‘arranged’ or ‘love’ — that is prevalent. Amongst scholars, the above idea is crystallised as: “women who assert themselves by marrying into either a familiar household or a known person may be expected to be in a better position than those who submit to the ‘normal’ socially approved form of arranged marriages.” Against this commonly perceived association, the effect of socially ‘accepted’ and ‘defiant’ forms of marriage on women’s agency is examined.

As elsewhere, arranged marriages continue to be the norm in Kodagu. In all castes and communities, the parents arrange marriages and the newlyweds start their married lives sharing a residence with the grooms’ family. However, as is clear from the sample of women Panchayat members, this general principle does not mean that all marriages are arranged. Amongst the sample of 24 women Panchayat members, three chose independently to marry men from other communities and in one case, the Gram Panchayat member opted to have a relationship with a married man from her own community. But generally, there is no evidence to suggest that women play any crucial part in taking decisions about their marriages.

“Nobody asks a girl for her opinion. In any case, parents know what’s best for a girl.

For instance, in my case my father chose a boy who was educated (class IX) and had a steady income.”

(Shyamala, a Keralite Hindu woman has studied till class VIII and is married to a shopkeeper. She is a member of the Siddapur Panchayat.)
"A girl’s wish is the same as her parents’ wish. In some homes, parents do consult their daughters, but that was not so with ours. In our case, we cannot say that we do not like the boy or his family. In my case, my parents did not have to search for a groom. My husband’s elder brother asked for my hand for his brother. My husband is educated and therefore, they were looking for an educated girl."

(Ayesha is also a Keralite but hails from a Muslim family and has studied till class X. Her in-law’s house is 600 km away from her parent’s place. Her husband’s family runs a teashop, but her husband is an unemployed tailor.)

“No parent asks their daughter for her opinion about the match they have in mind. Every parent wants his or her daughter to be comfortable and happy after marriage and will, therefore, find such a place for her. In my case, my parents told me that I was to get married in three months. I agreed. They made all the preparations for the wedding. I never involved myself with the arrangements. In my daughter’s case too, as she is a doctor, we found her a doctor, a boy working in London and decided that this was a good match. However, we did ask her for her opinion on the matter and like any other ‘well brought up’ girl, she said that her decision would be the same as hers.”

(Muthamma belongs to a Kodava family and is married to a big planter. She retired as a school principal.)

As is evident from the above narrations, women rarely have any control over their matrimonial destiny. Moreover, most parents feel very strongly (as in the case of Muthamma) that their daughter’s silence is a sign of good upbringing. This is true for
many men as well. The difference lies in the fact that the opinion of the men is often elicited, though in their case too, they are socially and morally obliged to follow the advice of their parents and family members. As compared to women, men have a greater say about their marriage.

"My parents have started looking for a girl for me to marry. I will only marry the person they choose. But I have told them that I want an educated girl. An uneducated girl will not know how to dress properly or to bring up children. Though I do not mind her working, I don't want to marry a girl working as a plantation worker."

(Ponappa belongs to a Backward Caste Kodava family and has studied till class XII. He is often unemployed though he is a plantation worker.)

"Marriage is always decided by the parents. My parents took my opinion on the kind of girl I wanted to marry and then started looking for a match. I was keen to marry an educated girl. I now have a daughter and a son. My daughter is 14 years old and I am keen that she, too, studies. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to get her married. My daughter is a well-mannered girl. She is very obedient. I think she will trust my judgement and allow me to look for a match for her when the time comes."

(K.K. Ravi is a Keralite and belongs to a Backward Caste community. He has studied till class VIII and runs a small shop).

Marriage is viewed explicitly as a familial matter. Young people — whether men or women — are not expected to take an independent decision in this regard. However, men
seem to have greater freedom in at least voicing their opinions as compared to women. Although, not the normal mode, there have been a few cases of sampled respondents who have independently chosen their partners. All the three women Gram Panchayat members, who chose their life partners, have been ostracised by their families but have found reluctant acceptance by the grooms’ family. But they have had to cut all ties with their natal families. In the face of such consequences, it is obviously very difficult for women to have a meaningful say in the arrangement of their marriages. But even where women have made an attempt to be independent, they have no more control over their lives than other married women do. In fact, the husbands’ family members take it upon themselves to teach, control and manage these ‘errant’ women effectively. Having faced the loss of one family and being totally dependent on their ‘acquired’ family, these women are even more docile and reliant on their husbands than those who have had their marriages arranged by their parents.

“I was in school when I met him (Mustaffa) and we decided to get married. I eloped with him as I knew my parents will never agree to our union as I was a Hindu and educated while he was a Muslim and uneducated. Well, it was a long time back but now when I think about it, I know I should not have behaved as I did. I tried to see my parents several times but they have never forgave me for what I did. My husband insisted that I convert, so I went to Kerala for three months and learnt the Quran. My sisters-in-law and husband used to beat me as I was not aware of the way things are done in their houses.”
(Safiya is a Keralite Hindu and has studied upto class IX. She is married to Mustaffa, made her convert to Islam. She is a Siddapur Panchayat member.)

"We were neighbours and wanted to marry. But as I am a Keralite and he a Tamilian, our parents never agreed. I was sent to Mysore to do my nursing. I ran away from the hostel and got married. My parents have never visited me since, not even when my son was born. Though, we do not live with my in-laws, they keep scolding me for being ignorant and not keeping the house properly".

(Sharada is a Keralite married to a Tamilian overseer. She has studied upto class XII.)

Recalling the conventional indicators outlined in Chapter 4, we find that out of the 24 women Panchayat members, only three of them pass the test of an 'effective member'. Two others are assertive and vocal but without the inclination to learn the ways of the Panchayat — i.e. without 'member-like' traits. Politically, more dominant male members use these women to voice their views. However, it is difficult to attribute a woman Panchayat member’s 'assertiveness' and efficiency to the type of marriage that they have had. Out of the three effective women members, only one had love marriage and one has led a life of an unwed mother. This means that of these five members who can be regarded as efficient, only two have taken an independent decision in an explicitly familial matter like marriage. The other three have followed the traditional path and allowed their families to arrange their marriages. In fact, from the life stories of two Gram Panchayat members (Safiya and Sharada from Siddapur Panchayat), who have
chosen their respective life partners against the wish of their families, it is clear that they have been unable to sustain their effort of being an independent agent.

6.2 Age Gap and Duration of Marriage

The age gap between the spouses found a significant place in the literature on women and autonomy as it is considered as a determining factor of women's autonomy (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997). Some have attributed it a crucial role and posited that women married to men closer to their age and those married for a comparatively longer period of time have more say in household matters. In the latter case, there is substantial empirical evidence, which points to the changing possibilities of power throughout a woman's life cycle (Ganesh, 1998; Rajan et al, 1996; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997). For instance, though a woman begins her life as a young bride facing physical deprivation and hardship as well as mental oppression, eventually, she acquires power and authority to control the newer entrants (husband’s brothers’ wives, sons’ wives, etc.). Considering the high proportion of women in their 30s, in the present context, it would be interesting to examine the impact of the difference between the ages of the couple and the duration for which they have been married on their public persona.

Many scholars have posited that there is a marked difference in women’s status when the difference in age between the couple is insignificant. Of the 22 Gram Panchayat members, nine were married to men ten years their senior and eight to men 6-10 years their senior, compared to two who were married to men about two years their senior. The
three single women, i.e. the widow, the deserted wife and the unmarried mother, were married or had a relationship with much older men (6-10 years). Thus, on an average most wives are about ten years younger than their husband. Further, there is no evidence to conclude that the age-gap as a factor has a significant effect on their performance as Panchayat members.

However, the duration for which they have been married seems to significantly affect their decision-making capacity within the household and level of participation as a Panchayat member. It has been observed that the decision-making capacity of the women members increases proportionately with age and duration of marriage. In other words, women's access to and control over resources, and their potential for mobility increases with age. This has a direct bearing on their performance as a Panchayat member. The younger women, in their early family life, irrespective of the age difference of the couple and educational qualification, are prone to greater degrees of control. This also affects their performance as a Panchayat member. On an average, only those women who have been married for a considerable length of time (above 10 years) seem to have a certain degree of decision-making capability within the family. However, this does not necessarily translate into higher levels of participation as a Panchayat member. The prevailing code of conduct grants them a certain degree of freedom to take some family-related decisions and monitor the behaviour of the younger women. This directly affects their participation as Gram Panchayat members, as a Gram Panchayat member is required to take public decisions, adjudicate and settle disputes and in general operate as community leaders. Their approved social code of conduct is an antithesis of the
approved role that they are to perform as a Gram Panchayat member. This is true for most of the respondents. The exceptions being Chinnamma and Yamuna. For all the other women Panchayat members, their position in the development cycle of the family is of crucial importance.

“When I first came into this house as a new bride, life was very difficult. My husband used to beat me regularly. But I never did anything properly those days. I was very playful and used to commit mistakes. I have been married now for 12 years and have learnt to do things properly. Now, he trusts me and allows me to handle the house”.

(Shyamala, a Siddapur Panchayat member, is married to a man 10 years her senior.)

“When life is always difficult for a new bride. That was the case for me as well, but now things are easier what with me having a daughter-in-law. My daughter-in-law and my husband do not allow me to do anything on my own. I can’t even go to the shop at the end of the road to buy provisions. I never leave the house without somebody accompanying me.”

(Bhojamma is married to a man 13 years her senior.)

“As mine was a love marriage with a Muslim, I had to learn everything anew. Initially, he used to beat me a lot, especially when his sisters were living with us. But, now he leaves most things to me. He was against my becoming a Panchayat member, as it would involve intermingling with men. But the religious leaders stood guarantee for
me. They told him that I was one of the most faithful and religious Muslims and that being a older woman, I would set an example for the younger folks.”

(Safiya has been married for 18 years to a man nine years her senior.)

Age is thus a critical factor, since the ideological underpinnings of restricted mobility are based on sexual control. Young girls, whose virginity before marriage is of vital concern, and in the reproductive years, sexual monogamy is of utmost importance, are not permitted to move about as freely as older women. As they grow older, women are themselves conditioned to accept, promote and practice the customs and norms that subjugate them. They are given the role of socialising their young into the rules of mobility. They condition their own daughters, sisters, daughters-in-law and other female relatives, to accept the controls of mobility (Batiwala et al, 1999).

6.3 Post-marital Residential Arrangements

A woman’s everyday existence, her day-to-day activities are heavily dependent on and influenced by the household in which she lives. This has been said in many ways — the extreme being the advantages of matrilineal kinship arrangement over a patrilineal arrangement (Dube, 1988, 1994). One of the most important indices for measuring women’s autonomy has been her role in managing economic resources and the workload within the household. Starting with the premise that a woman’s political behaviour is influenced by the degree of autonomy she enjoys within the household, it is imperative to understand the process through which a woman comes to control household finances and
other areas of operation, both within the household and in the community. In terms of household structure, amongst the respondents, there are women living in a joint family with the parents-in-law, sometimes with brothers-in-law and their wives and unwed sisters-in-law. There are also others who live in a nuclear family and a few live with their natal family. Here, an attempt has been made to answer the following question. What are the factors that influence the type of household that a woman lives in? Does her class or access to natal kin make a difference to a woman's influence over the use of economic resources? Finally, does a woman's household structure affect her political participation as a Panchayat member?

Across the various caste and communities represented by the various Gram Panchayat members, most women begin their married lives in a house together with their parents-in-laws, brothers-in-laws, their families and husband's unmarried siblings. Living in a joint household of this nature invariably involves joint cooking, sharing of domestic chores such as cleaning, washing and in poorer families collecting water and fuel as well. The picture becomes less clear in wealthier households due to the employment of servants. In any case, irrespective of the class, expenses are shared amongst the various family members if they belong to a joint family.

Following the marriage, the controlling authority over women shifts from one male to another — from her father to her husband. However, the husband's mother and sisters play a very influential role in a newly married woman's life. They affect her relationship with her husband and monitor her behaviour. It is only with the birth of her own children
that she gains some measure of authority and in due course, with the arrival of her daughter-in-law she takes on the role of policing. Further, her graduation to a senior woman brings a reduction in the household chores to be performed. However, a large percentage of the households break away from the extended family and set up independent hearths after about 5-10 years of marriage, and largely follows the cycle of subordinate to independent control over other women.

"Most people start life in a joint household. It has its advantages and disadvantages. The biggest advantage is that the responsibility of handling finances does not lie with us when we are young. For a long time, my parents-in-law managed all the financial matters. But, the greatest disadvantage was that I could not even buy anything for my children without their approval. Moreover, it is a bit difficult, when everything has to be told to the elders. But, I believe that a house should be joint."

(Muthamma, Chennayana Kote Panchayat member)

“I lived jointly for 12 years. We have only recently established a separate household. My sisters-in-law used to chide me and tell my husband that I was disobedient and slow in work. He used to believe them and beat me up. Finally, because of all these tensions, we decided to move. Now life is a lot more peaceful. I even go out on my own, especially since I became a Panchayat member.”

(Safiya, Siddapur Panchayat member)
“We lived in my husband’s father’s house for six years. But, then things started becoming difficult. The house was small and there was no space for us. Moreover, there was a lot of tension between me and my mother-in-law, so we decided to move to a separate house nearby.”

(Maadevi, a Scheduled Caste woman, Maldare Panchayat adhyaksha)

Of the 24 sample respondents, ten live in traditional joint families, nine have separated after more than five years of living in a joint household, three live with their natal family and two have lived in a nuclear family right from the beginning. In the two cases wherein the women Gram Panchayat members live in joint households with their natal family, they belong to the Scheduled Caste community and are married to economically and

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52 It would be simplistic to treat women belonging to the SC category as a homogenous category.
educationally ‘less privileged’ men. However, beyond these common features, there are differences. Cauvery is a Tamil speaking, third generation migrant with strong village ties, while in Yamuna’s case, though her parents were second generation migrants from Kerala and Dakshina Kannada, neither of them had any linkages with their village of origin.

“My grandfather migrated to Kodagu when he was about 16 years old. All the men in my family, including my grandfather, father and brothers have brought their brides from Vazhyapadi (Tamil Nadu). In my case, my uncle arranged my marriage. However, as my husband had no work, my father suggested that he come to Kodagu to either work with my brothers repairing shoes or work on the plantation. He does no work even now and so we have to live with my brothers’ families.”

(Cauvery, uneducated and married to a Tamilian, is a Maldare Panchayat member.)

“Both my grandfathers were migrants. My mother’s family comes from a family in Kerala while my father is from Dakshina Kannada. They had a love marriage. They are very progressive. Though they were plantation workers, they insisted on educating all three of us. My husband’s family is quite different. They come from Dakshina Kannada, but they do not know the value of savings or education. So, after a year of living with them in Dakshina Kannada, I convinced my husband that we could have a better life in Kodagu. We moved in with my parents. My husband now earns a lot more than he did in his village.”

(Yamuna, Scheduled Caste woman, Siddapur Panchayat adhyaksha)
As Kodagu has such a large migrant population, there are a few cases like the above where the 'more privileged' girls' family has a considerable say in the married life of young couples. The type of household a woman lives in has grave repercussions on the extent of freedom she enjoys. While living in a joint family, especially if the woman is one amongst the junior members of the household, it is perceived that she has to be controlled and managed — 're-trained' in the ways of her new household. As she graduates to a more 'senior' position due to the marriage of a brother-in-law, she pushes for a separation of hearths. The process of separation results in a change in the relationships of power and authority. Although the younger woman is still 'watched', she plays a more expanded role within her own household. Thus, a woman's age, duration of marriage, and household structure seems to be directly related to her performance as a Panchayat member. The following pattern can be seen among a majority of Gram Panchayat members: as the women of the households reach their 30s and have children around the age group of 10-14 years, it is more likely that the process of separation has started or already taken place.

From the point of view of understanding women in PRIs, nuclearisation of households seems to benefit the younger woman, for it marks a change in the relationships of power and authority. Being the sole adult woman in the household, she now takes on many of the duties and responsibilities of her mother-in-law. She also gains a certain degree of freedom with regard to the control of day-to-day expenditure and a greater sense of mobility within the household. Further, in the community, too, as her position rises with
the family’s development cycle, she is allowed a greater degree of mobility and ‘managerial’ responsibilities. It is for these reasons that in all the three Panchayats, there is a greater clustering of women members in the categories of duration of marriage and residential arrangements. And these same reasons contribute to a woman member’s seemingly autonomous behaviour. In fact, this is evident in the interactions of many of the older women Gram Panchayat members with others in the Panchayats. In their visits to the meetings, approaching the secretary and in lobbying with male members, such women are seen to be more active, keen to ‘improve’ their constituency by getting a road metalled, lights and hand pumps installed or help their ‘people’ to get ration cards, pension, etc. They also tend to adopt a posture of ‘negotiation’ similar to the ones they often adopt with their husbands within the household. However, this rarely translates into autonomous performance indicators. In other words, though there is evidence that duration of marriage and household structure determine the degree of woman’s autonomy, it seems unlikely that these contributory indicators per se result in her autonomous performance as a Panchayat member.

6.4 Control over Economic Resources

It is argued that women who control a significant source of income either through ownership of property or through employment outside the house will have a higher level of autonomy (Carr et al, 1996; Bhatt, 1989). Despite the established link between female economic autonomy and political behaviour, experiences seem to vary in our sample. A priori women who are ‘gainfully’ employed outside the house seem more confident,
vocal and have greater degree of mobility than those confined to the house. But the important question that needs to be answered is whether their life histories suggest that they have been able to be really 'autonomous' in their lives. In this study sample of 24 women Panchayat members, only ten were gainfully employed and three actively assisted in their family business. Moreover, with the exception of one where the decision to work was voluntary, in all the other cases the women members work out of necessity. The economic condition of the family often necessitates them to work as daily wagers. This was true of eight out of ten women who were economically active outside the house. It is undoubtedly true among the plantation workers that they enjoy a very high degree of mobility, but their employment is borne more out of necessity. Obviously, the same norms of mobility cannot be applied to all women. For, this would not only result in the loss of the labour of poor women to the fields and the rich households, but also threaten the survival of poor households whose economies are dependent on women’s incomes and subsistence work (Batliwala et al, 1999). Further, the issue of controlling income does not arise in these cases as their entire earnings are used to meet the daily needs of the family.

"I come from a very progressive family. I always wanted to work. As I had done a teacher’s training course, I thought it was a waste to sit at home doing nothing, especially when there was a crying need for my services in Chennayana Kote. However, when I was of marriageable age, my father had a lot of problems in finding a progressive family that would accept a working girl as a daughter-in-law of the
family, especially when there was no economic necessity. Things are different today, but in my time no respectable family allowed their girls to work”.

(Muthamma, wife of an estate owner and a retired school principal, Chennayana Kote Panchayat.)

“I have worked since I was ten. My parents were very poor to support all of us. My husband is a drunkard. He has never contributed even one paisa to help raising the children. Sometimes, if I do not give him money to buy a drink, he even beats me up. He never bothers with the Gram Panchayat work, and I do not have much time to really understand what is happening. Harishanna guides me and tells me what to do and I do what he tells me.”

(Baby, a plantation worker, Chennayana Kote Panchayat)

Thus, the discussions with the gainfully employed women reveal that except in the case of the highly educated, women rarely express a desire to work on their own. In fact, as Muthamma says, not working is seen as a sign of an economically well off family. And in the cases of women helping in the household business, their contribution is rarely ever acknowledged.

“My wife does not work. How can she? She does not understand anything about business. In fact I allow her to sit in the shop only when I sleep in the afternoon when the business is anyway dull or when I need to do something urgently.”
(Narayan, husband of Shyamala. Shyamala looks after the shop in the afternoon when her husband takes a nap or when he goes out for purchases).

“I sit in the shop in the afternoon when he is tired. I make a lot of mistakes so he does not let me do much. When the Gram Panchayat seat was reserved for a woman, he was initially very angry, then he asked me to stand for elections, but I was not interested as I am quite ignorant and was scared of doing things incorrectly. Only once did I go to ask for votes. My husband managed the rest. He tells me what to do in the Panchayat and I do accordingly.”

(Shyamala, wife of Narayan, Siddapur Panchayat member)

In all the three researched sites and amongst Gram Panchayat women, it was observed that there is a direct relationship between female work participation and caste, class hierarchies. There is a higher probability of lower caste and lower class women being gainfully employed. Work is an economic necessity for these women as well as for their families.

6.5 Education and Autonomy

Modernisation theories viewed development less as a matter of increasing wealth or economic opportunities, and more as the spread of a set of attitudes. These new attitudes are usually considered transmitted through formal schooling. Schooling has increasingly been seen as the key feature of modernisation that might change the worldview of rural
people. Many political sociologists believe that only women’s education will result in good governance (Currell, 1974; Subha, 1994; Inbanathan, 1992). In the general modernisation literature, formal education is supposed to spread rational attitudes. And, conversely, other forms of socialisation, especially traditional forms of education, are portrayed as the main cause for the spread of ‘backward’ fatalistic attitudes (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1997). ‘Schooled’ boys are expected to be more economically productive and have a more ‘modern’ outlook of life. Girl’s schooling is seen as necessary for the reinforcement of modern ideas within the family, especially to the children. Since the mid-1970s, most discussions of the effects of girls’ education have moved beyond the spread of ‘modern’ ideas to a concern with the effect of schooling on the status of women. Formal education is expected to enable women to take a more pro-active role in the family and provide them with the necessary skills to take decisions regarding their family and community. “An educated woman is usually less closely confined, physically and psychologically, within her husband’s family… A young wife who has been to high school or college is not as duly submissive to her mother-in-law as is a less educated daughter-in-law” (Mandelbaum, 1997). In other words, formal education is supposed to enhance a woman’s autonomy and expand her decision-making roles within the household and community.

The last three decades have seen many studies focusing on the reasons for the relative absence of women in public life (Currell, 1974; Kaushik, 1992). The evidence in these studies claim women’s lower educational achievement as one of the primary causes for their relative absence from and poorer performance in public life. However, in Chapter 4,
it was seen that though there is a difference between educated and uneducated women’s participation, it does not qualitatively make any difference to their political achievements as a Panchayat member.\footnote{53}

To return to the current theme of this thesis, this is true of Kodagu society too. Parents want to educate girls to ensure that she gets a ‘good match’. The conventional perspective on schooling for girls is that it would enhance their marriage chances.

“Like all parents, my father, too, wanted me to get married into a good house. Today everyone wants an educated girl. An uneducated girl is considered useless. She cannot remember things, keep the house clean or send the children to school. So my father made all of us go to school. And now as you can see, I have got married into a good family.”

(Shyamala studied upto VIII and her husband runs a small shop, Siddapur Panchayat)

“An educated person looks better, talks better and dresses well. She can also keep the house well. I will educate my daughter till she is able to find some work. Things are becoming difficult because boys generally want to be married to educated girls. We do not know when to stop her from going to school, as she should not be over-educated.

\footnote{53 Studies focussing on indicators of women’s autonomy and status have noted that in many parts of India the need for girls’ schooling is felt for its material possibilities, most common examples being status, productive work or the management of household (Basu, 1992). Concomitantly, they have found that few in their sample areas see the possibility of schooled women being assertive and being actively engaged in decisions which affect key aspects of their lives such as marriage, number of children etc. Jeffery and Jeffery (1997) go one step further and claim that in Bijnor society there is very little evidence of schooled women being any different from unschooled women with respect to assertiveness and decision making capabilities.}
If we make her study more, we will have to pay a lot of dowry. Parents must educate the girls according to their ability.”

(Cauveryamma studied up to class III and belongs to a middle income group in Siddapur Panchayat.)

The perception that women’s education is a major factor in the marriage market cuts across caste and class groups. However, a household’s caste and class position determines the levels of education for girls. Though all admit the advantages of education (again tailored to meet the expectations of the marriage market), hardly any one recognises the possibility that schooling might make girls more outspoken, assertive or think independently. This may reflect their experiential understanding of schooling, wherein it merely imparts literacy and numeracy. The evidence presented by a major set of writings substantiates the experience of Kodagu parents with schooling. These studies have criticised the curricula and teaching methods employed in Indian schools (Sarangapani, 1999; Bhattacharjee, 1999). The common criticisms raised against the educational system are its inability to imbibe independent thinking in students; instead imparting gendered learning and disciplining children to be passive receptacles of established knowledge systems.

Returning to the main focus of this study, all political parties and Panchayat members in Maldare, Siddapur and Chennayana Kote share the belief that women who have been to school will function as better Panchayat members. Also, commonplace discussions about
life cycle), class, caste and regional affiliations. These identities are mainly derived from
the traditional patrilineal and caste institutions. Women's affiliation to a particular
cultural group thus performs the twin functions of moulding and providing their other
identities with legitimacy.

In the context of Kodagu, wherein economic prosperity is accompanied by high rates of
in-migration of people from neighbouring states and regions, the task of identifying
factors that can account for the continuum of women's position in society and in
particular, participation in Panchayats is difficult. In other words, women in Kodagu are
not identically placed. They derive power and control from their identities, which, in turn,
is structured by their community and regional affiliations. Though all rural women in
Kodagu experience varying degrees of lack of control, there are differences in the content
of control that they possess. We have now seen that autonomous performance attributed
to women members is largely shaped by the positioning of caste, class and regional
identities in the social and economic hierarchy prevailing in the district. The perceived
differences in the content and nature of control are important, as it is the decisive factor,
which determines the public image of the performance levels of women Panchayat
members.

For example, in the three studied Panchayats, the descriptions of women members who
carry public images of good performance invariably begin with their class positions.
Though there is a strong nexus of caste-class operating in the district as in any other rural
areas, a member's economic status does not necessarily ensure the corresponding
enhancement in his/her own class status. This is more so in the case of women wherein the community and the regional positions of the women’s family determine her social status. This results in a complex process of merging of caste and class positions in constructing the identities of performing women Panchayat members. For Muthamma, her public image as an efficient member emanates primarily from her status as a retired school principal and belonging to a rich Kodava family in the locality. There is thus a subtle gradation of identities that constitute the descriptions of efficient women members. This gradation of identities is important in understanding the public persona of women members. In the case of Yamuna, the adhyaksha of Siddapur Panchayat, the people’s understanding follows a hierarchical descriptive path: an active CPM member, now in Janata Dal; belonging to a Scheduled Caste family\textsuperscript{54}; efficiently managing her party position and presidential responsibilities. On the other hand, Chinamma (Maldare Panchayat) is described as a casual plantation worker, an unwed mother, and with a thorough knowledge of the geographical specificities of the Panchayat as well as the institutional mechanisms of state. In the public eye, the observed ascending status of identities is first coalesced and then from this collage of identities a single dominant identity is projected as the most significant. For women Panchayat members, thus, an evaluation of performance invariably causes an extrapolation of the single dominant identity as the significant determinant of participation.

Apart from familial and class positions, women’s identity is also a function of their caste and regional affiliations. The perceived differences in the content and nature of control

\textsuperscript{54} The SC identity, though in normal social life may be found to be low in status, here assumes political
are important, as they are the decisive factors that determine the public image of the
performance levels of women Panchayat members. In Kodagu, a district that has seen
large-scale permanent in-migration for more than a century, the Kodavas have subtly
maintained a hierarchical scale in ranking communities: the landholding Kodava
population at one end and the migrants from the state of Kerala and Tamil Nadu at the
other end. The ranking of a community is once again based on perceived notions of
their social status in the home states, and their present position in the spectrum of
economic activities relating to plantation. At one end of the spectrum, there are the
planters and traders, while at the other are the plantation workers. The middle comprises
of service providers. Migrant communities in the middle rungs of social hierarchy aspire
for higher social and political space. Their aspiration is reflected in the active promotion
of their women in public life. Such a promotion of women comes from the communities
need to establish and climb the social and economic ladder. Women’s visibility in politics
is, thus, mainly a manifestation of a community’s needs. The promotion from the
community and support from the family do not involve any remedial or revolutionary
elements towards the positioning of women within the family or community. Instead, as
has been observed in the foregoing sections, in the domestic fronts as well as decisions
concerning the community’s multitude of interests, women are as marginalised as in the
past or in other communities.

importance: the reservation of seat for SC gives that importance contextually.
55 Neither of these groups – the Kodavas or the people from Kerala and Tamil Nadu — are homogeneous. They, too, as in other parts of the country, comprise of a motley group of people.
6.7 Towards a Theory of Relationships

An attempt was made in the previous sections to understand the meanings given by women to the exchanges occurring in the context of everyday interactions that arise from various relationships.

These interpretations highlight the continuities between women’s multiple identities derived from their various relationships within the family and household. Further, the factors emerging from the cultural (caste, class and regional) background of the members define the specificity of the relationships, which, in turn, structure the varied patterns of practice. In addition, each individual woman member’s gendered social experience is constantly legitimised through established everyday practices. In spite of this, many of them have attempted — in varying degrees and at different points of time — to identify with voices that have been created by development interventions towards a more gender-equitable society. However, it is evident that when these voices are placed within the larger framework of gender relations reigning in Kodagu society, the voices of ‘dissent’ are also shaped by the accepted frames of reference. In other words, resistance is configured mainly by the existing gendered societal contracts. Besides, in the members’ narratives, one can discern the overlapping of the personal with the social, and the cultural with the political. The underlying discourses in the various relationships between men and women are thus framed. Therefore, our understanding of the patterns of practice within the Panchayati Raj Institution needs to look at the complex ways in which
gendered discourses mediate and construct a member’s understanding of his/her position in society.

Deviating from the issue of the contextual and relational aspect of relationships that shape an individual’s worldview, we now need to recapitulate the ways in which an individual member’s political performance has been understood. This recalling is necessary for two reasons: One, as we have seen in Chapter 4, easily quantifiable indicators of women members’ participation in Panchayats such as attendance reveal only the visible and obvious conflicts that exist in an institution. Two, the attempt by political scientists to use alternate indicators such as levels of awareness and women member’s levels of involvement in issues concerning the Panchayat barely skim the surface of the complex and subtle ways in which power operates. Although the underpinning ideology behind these indicators are genuine in that they attempt to understand the methods and strategies used by society to restrict women’s involvement in public sphere, they nevertheless suffer from what Lukes calls the one-dimensional and two-dimensional views of power respectively. However, as we observed in the above sections, the manner in which power operates in the life of an individual member is often ‘cordial’, although there are strictures which regulate the interactions between sexes, whether in the personal or in the public sphere. Categorising women’s political performance in Panchayats, however unwittingly through the use of simplistic indicators, at best can result in the identification of points of dis-juncture in women’s lives. In other words, we are still left with a highly unsatisfactory tautological response that power operates in a stratified and
hierarchical manner and for any change in the gender of power, it is necessary for us to act at the points of dis-junctures.

In the preceding sections of this chapter, the women members stressed the structured and unequal distribution of resources in their social and institutional precincts. Although the encounters between men and women in formal settings (e.g. Panchayat meetings), in informal social interactions (e.g. in the market) and within households between different family members are structured by previously agreed upon frames of reference, seldom do we observe overt and authoritarian forms of control. In fact, quite surprisingly, interactions between the opposite sexes were often conducted in a benevolent fashion. For instance, in the household sphere, consider the interactions between the father-in-law and daughter-in-law, between the father and daughter and to some extent between husbands and wives; in the Panchayats, between individual men and women members. On the contrary, in the interactions between individual women (i.e. members of the same sex), we often discern authoritative behaviour. However, it is important to note that this authoritative behaviour gains its legitimacy from the patriarchal social mores. In other words, ‘women’ as a single category were not hapless and helpless individuals dancing to the tune set by the patriarch in the household or the powerful upper caste, upper class male member in the Panchayat. Though this has been said often, it was still alarming to see that some women were much more powerful than other women were. Not only do women Panchayat members as a group seldom exhibit overt authoritarian behaviour, they often give the impression of having received social skills training to ‘perform civilly’ in private and public life. Women’s own accounts of their lives reinforce this opinion that
the operation of power in social interactions is subtle and embedded in everyday patterns of practice.

Given that power operates insidiously in social interactions, it of little surprise that at different points of time we find the spectrum of acceptance, resistance and negotiation, all occurring in average and typical situations. For the purpose of illustration, let us consider the 'normal' commonplace interactions that occur between women and male Panchayat members. Although we witnessed the operation of the underlying male domination and forces of institutional authority amongst Panchayat members, it is equally true that women Panchayat members as a group were not passive and helpless.

Further, though women members did not 'win' most interactional power struggles, they often put up resistance. It was a resistance, but not sufficient to overcome the established structures. In fact, given the process of exercising control in meetings, it is the male Panchayat members who exuded an aura of calm and almost benevolent command. Women Panchayat members seemed reluctant at worst or rebellious at best. It can also be inferred from the behavioural patterns of women Panchayat members that as a matter of course they exercise power in sneaky and unorthodox ways. (See, for example, the episode in Chennayana Kote Panchayat between M.M. Ponappa, a male Kodava Panchayat member, the Panchayat attendant and Baby, a female Panchayat member). Such a sneaky and unorthodox exhibition of power may be compared to what James Scott refers to as everyday forms of resistance.

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It is thus an undeniable fact that all social interactions involve an element of power, either concealed or overt. Feminist scholars have used various social and institutional contexts to specifically examine the relationship between men and women. The social interactions between sexes have been most extensively studied in schools and universities (Bhattacharjee, 1999), medical settings such as hospitals, between doctors and patients (Davis, 1991) and of course, in households (Ganesh, 1999). Though many studies have been conducted in the arena of political institutions such as parliament, legislature, trade union and panchayats, it is frustrating to note that they fail to locate women’s performance in their multitude of social interactions. By using proxies for levels of performance, they have mostly detected that women and men do not have equal access to resources, which, in turn, enables them to perform as political beings. Such studies have also invariably resulted in gender being catapulted to the centre stage as a primary analytical concept. Although there is an underlying assumption that gender and power are inextricably inter-linked, these scholars have repeatedly failed to explicitly unmask the patterns through which the evidently asymmetrical power relations between men and women are constructed and modified. A failure to do so has resulted in their overlooking the patterns of practice through which the asymmetrical power relations are formed in the first instance. Such neglect has meant that both academicians and policy makers have attempted to correct the existing iniquitous situation by intervening simultaneously at a multitude of points. In other words, the state hopes to make major changes in the

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56 Giddens recognises that power is an integral part and present in all social interactions, be they at the level of global cultures and ideologies ... to the most mundane levels of everyday interactions.
prevailing repressive model of power and gender relations through development interventions that are aimed at through education, legislation and reservation.

The problems associated with development interventions have been well documented, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to deal with the various problems associated with them or the manifold ‘gender sensitive’ development interventions. Instead, we shall limit ourselves to such dimensions of the problem that are directly associated with the ideology underlying the development interventions, which hope to make inroads into the existing inequities between men and women. It is in this context that a theory that uses relationships as a central focus would be relevant, for it will deflect the discussion away from the ever-present question of structural discrimination of women that the above studies have invariably addressed. At this point, it is also important to remember that we are not attempting to choose a theory that is most suitable to investigating power relations between sexes. Rather, we shall use the framework of power delineated by Lukes and Giddens. This is because their framework proves to be the most felicitous choice for the study of gender and power in the multitude social relationships that characterise an individual Panchayat member.

It may be recalled that the power processes that characterise the gendered social relationships between men and women Panchayat members seem to lack use of any overt force. Nevertheless, over a period of time, in relatively unnoticed and subtle ways, they begin to cause changes in women’s access to crucial resources and decision-making within households. The extent and ‘openness’ with which this takes place depends on the
extent to which women become an agency of their own in playing the ‘political’ roles. However, in explaining data, Lukes’s analysis of power seemed to be handy in that it allowed for the easy disintegration of the myriad causes which change women’s access to and thereby control of resources and decision-making. Without seeming to relegate control to a mere empirical fact (as in the Webberian tradition), Lukes attempts to shed light on some aspects of the operation of power by providing a framework to look beyond the observable and concrete realities of everyday life. Lukes’s frame of analysis allows for the assimilation of the empirical ‘sections’ of power with the not-so-subtle manners in which power operates. For instance, Lukes’s stratification of power into ‘three-dimensions’ readily allows for the measurement of concrete instances of freedom of choice (e.g. attendance and involvement in meetings). It also provides a suitably broad framework to examine the more elusive and subtle ways in which power operates between sexes (e.g. in social interactions between members, in familial interactions, etc.).

Repeated examination of the data revealed that one crucial problem remained unsolved. It is observed that at both the micro and macro levels, gender transformations were taking place, though unwittingly. The overall outcome of these transformations may, in the long run, cause subtle changes in women’s position within the household and in the larger society. For instance, the presence in Kodagu of a relatively large number of women Panchayat members from Kerala and Tamil Nadu seemed to indicate that a major gender transformation had taken place amongst these immigrant communities. Although Lukes’s reading of power can lead to a superficial explanation of gender disparity in social interactions, it is unable to satisfactorily explain the reasons for the above phenomenon.
We are thus left with a paradoxical situation in that Lukes first exhorts us to go beyond
the obvious and concrete into the realm of the ‘unsaid’ and ‘unarticulated’. But then,
Lukes offers little by methodological explanation to unearth the undercurrents in the
relationships between individual actors and in the whole interactional process in various
social relationships. It is in this context that Giddens’s conception of power offers a way
out by moving beyond the inevitability of theorising power inadequately in terms of
consensus against coercion and agency against structural discrimination. In contrast,
Giddens’s conception of power rises beyond the immediate past and present of power
relations. His framework helps to explain the extent to which a person has freedom of
choice; the extent to which this choice moulded by the past; and is it better for a society
or community to be characterised by overt or covert demonstrations of power in resolving
these dilemmas by treating power as an everyday phenomenon essential to make any
relationship meaningful? Taking the day-to-day patterns of practice as a starting point,
Giddens asks us to stop visualising social structure and human agency as inimical to each
other (Giddens, 1984). By recognising this complementarity, Giddens offers a way out of
the tautological impasse of providing reasons for performance by some and non-
performance by others. Our analysis pertains to women members’ non-performance and
male members’ performance. The whole spectra of acceptance, resistance, rejection and
negotiation that we see with women members in their everyday interactions with men in
the household as well as in Panchayats is now easily understood. Further, in view of the
fact that the underlying discourses in the various relationships between men and women
are framed from a perspective of relationships, it is then relevant to ask to what extent a relationship is characterised by conflicting or mutual interests.

Reflections of this can be seen in the contemporary Kodagu society, wherein at the micro-level, there are subtle shifts in the boundaries that delineate women’s relationship with men. There are processes by which relations involving domination and subordination are produced, reproduced and transformed (Davis, 1991). This entails us to look out for methods and tools that women use to exercise control in spite of having limited access to resources and despite being unable to change the course of the unfolding events. However, at a point of time, the circumference of these boundaries is finite and it is within the confines of these boundaries that relations between men and women are established. For instance, external factors like education aim at causing gender transformation in traditional familial relationships by attempting to widen the existing boundaries, which shape men’s relation with women. However, the process of transformation is subtle and complex and moves through the gamut of reinforcing traditional ‘norms’ and ‘rules’ to slowly mutating the rules into a new complex of norms and rules. Correspondingly, at the macro-level, development interventions such as the Panchayati Raj result in the emergence of forces that modify and redefine the space allotted by the traditional patrilineal system.

It is thus evident that gender transformation cannot and will not occur abruptly. We have demonstrated, using both structural and individual approaches to explain power, that women are active subjects who are specifically located in situations and relations. Their
involvement covers not only the ground of production and sustenance but also of undermining and transforming existing relations. By incorporating Giddens's notions of power, one is able to explain women's contribution without having to blame them for structured inequities.

In the preceding chapters, an attempt has been made to adapt and apply the already existing theories of power to the analysis of gender relations in a specific context. The choice of suitable theoretical framework for analysing the data was made on the basis of the empirical problems that arose in the course of inquiry. It is our contention that considering the complexity of social life, any solution that we look for either in the realms of theory or in practice through development intervention needs to be anchored in concrete social practices of the men and women we are studying. Further, since women are characterised by intra-group differences, it becomes imperative that these differences should form the basis of formulating public action. Our discussion so far also veers towards arguing against making snap judgements, either negative or positive, about the usefulness of development interventions such as Panchayati Raj in empowering women, since gender transformations essentially occur over a long period of time. The gestation period of the subtle changes has to constantly negotiate the pre-existing structures and their boundaries.

The length of time involved for even the simplest of gender transformations to occur can be unravelled through women's experiences in various private arenas of family life. A constant in their life experiences is the duration of time taken for changes in gender
relations to occur. This is true for issues ranging from autonomy in explicitly sexual matters (like choosing a marriage partner), to freedom to decide on post-marital residential arrangements, to the circumstances resulting in access and relative control over economic resources. Although the present Panchayat Raj Institution provided the space for women to participate in large numbers in the public sphere, it does not consider the time that is need for transformations in gender relations to occur. In other words, the short duration of their presence in public life, due to the practice of rotation of reserved seats, prevents women from nurturing, experimenting and eventually developing a public identity that can combat the dominant identity that they have cultivated and learnt from their experiences in private spheres. Consequently, women use the methods and strategies that the dominant identity endows them with to perform as Panchayat members. Thus, women’s poor performance in the Panchayats can be traced to the failure of the state to acknowledge the discordant relationship between the identity women derive from their private sphere and the public identity that it is attempted to be thrust upon them.

In conclusion, there is a need to understand the differential strategies used by men and women members to perform in Panchayats. The existing frames of analysis are unable to comprehend the reasons behind the modus operandi that women employ to participate as Panchayat members. As is evident from the field data, the tactics women members employ covers not only the ground of production and sustenance but also of undermining and transforming existing relations. The use of the relational analytical framework clearly places women’s methods into the realm of the commonplace and ordinary. Following this, we can conclude that unlike in the case of their male counterparts, women Panchayat
member’s public identity is a mere extension of the identities that they derive from other specific cultural and socio-economic contexts that dominate their lives. Further, the data reveals that though the state, through the Panchayati Raj Institutions, has provided women an opportunity to occupy public space, at the local level, the select group of women who are elected as Panchayat members owe it to their dominant caste-class-community identities. In short, such an understanding facilitates us to see women as rational beings, neither empowered nor dis-empowered, but as members performing in the Panchayats with the identity that they are most comfortable with — an identity that entitles them to see the Panchayat as a macrocosm of the familial setting.