CHAPTER 7
Summary and Conclusion

7.1 Overview

The bipolar contrast between centralisation and decentralisation emerges in political discussions from many angles, as the domain of these concepts range from management of private enterprises to the organisation of a politico-economic system. Owing to the breadth and diversity of contexts to which they are applied, most of these discussions tend to be highly charged with emotion. In India, all questions related to the specific context of decentralised governance need to be understood within the broad framework of the nature of the economic system, its historic process of evolution and the level of development that it has resulted.

Post-Independence, India was suddenly thrust into a whorl of absolute as well as relative poverty and social and economic under-development. The simultaneous emergence of neo-liberal economics as the dominant development paradigm led to the viewing of market-centred economics as a historically transient phase (Kabra, 1997). The model of active state intervention and minute centralised planning was advocated with religious fervour. The failure of this type of development planning to carry through rural development has been ascribed to the failure of the instrument and methodology of planning. Since the 1960s, sporadic attempts have been made to alter this strategy by
changing the institutions and instruments of development administration. However, the last two decades have seen the growing shift in the methods and instruments adopted by the state to achieve rural development.

Although most often decentralisation is discussed with reference to decision-making regarding informational and resource allocation, in practice, only administrative devolution has been at least partially accomplished. This is true of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution and its predecessor, the Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act 1985 (with respect to reservation for women) in Karnataka. However, in significant contrast to the past, an attempt has been made to widen the base of the existing decentralised governance by including the previously excluded caste and class categories (e.g. Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Castes) and the socio-culturally excluded group of women.

Ever since the above enactments were implemented, the questions about women's empowerment have entered political discussions in a number of ways. At the national level, there are arguments both in favour and against the inclusion of a 'woman' component in various developmental programmes, especially in those making in-roads in the public sphere of politics. Irrespective of their party affiliations politicians (representing the Gram Panchayat to those representing the Parliament) are likely to have their own explanations about what they consider to be women's empowerment, the path that will eventually result in women's overall empowerment and the repercussions these moves will have on overall rural development. Further, the issue of empowerment of the
‘less’ privileged categories, especially women’s empowerment, through the process of reservation of seats for them is an extremely contentious issue.

The efficiency of women members is routinely discussed in the news media and political and bureaucratic circles with reference to either better governance and/or (in)ability to achieve rural development. Women members’ efficiency or lack of it is then routinely linked to various ‘ideational’ factors such as level of education and employment (D’lima, 1983). The contention of this thesis, however, is that an individual’s behaviour is inextricably intertwined with the politics surrounding it, and that an analysis of levels of women’s participation in public life makes sense only in the context of the cultural and socio-political climate in which she lives. In other words, women members who visibly participate in the Panchayats do so because of a combination of factors mainly concerned with a woman’s identity, the family’s social and economic status, the communities future aspirations and the male political elite’s patronage. In the specific case of women members in Kodagu, it is our contention that their selection and, to some extent, performance is a reflection of the semi-conscious strategy of the local political elite to control the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

A useful starting point in this regard is the work of Hazel D’lima (1980) and Bishaka Datta (1998), who portray women’s participation in Panchayats as a function of direct as well as indirect support of male leaders in the family and community. This support manifests itself in a variety of ways. Irrespective of their political affiliation, the women
members could not have been ‘elected’ without the patronage of the local male political elite. Datta and D’lima also found that the ‘community’ preferred educated and middle-aged women and often, the ‘chosen’ members were elected unopposed. In addition, they account for the need that the local Panchayat community feels for strengthening the power bases of dominant castes. This is accomplished by choosing women members from patron households belonging to different communities such as Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Backward Castes. Given the manner and method by which women Panchayat members are catapulted into public life, they posit that it is not surprising that the presence of women members, albeit in large numbers, makes little or no difference to the functioning of the Panchayats. Further, Datta argues that even the women members carrying the tag of being ‘efficient’ in the public eye address only those issues that a male Panchayat member would have addressed such as building of school and improving drinking water supply. Datta analyses that the patriarchal culture at the local level prevents women members’ effective participation in the Panchayats.

Taking the context of women in public life, we can raise several questions about D’lima’s and Datta’s analysis of women Panchayat members, where, despite the presence of patriarchal micro-politics, certain women members’ performance is dramatically different. In other words, their analyses fails to account for the presence of the non-conventional woman members in their Panchayat areas — be it with respect to good performance or with regard to the non-performance of young educated Panchayat members. In fact, many of the studies about women’s participation in public life — for

57 Both studies were carried out in Maharashtra. In fact, in the latter study, Datta studies women members’
instance, women in Chipko movement, reports of Mahila Samakhya members, etc. —
provide evidence of rural women, when present in large numbers, slowly breaking the
shackles of patriarchy or using 'weapons of the weak' to carve out a public space for
themselves. In sum, then, we have two sets of evidences:

i) Presenting women as passive subordinate beings used by the patriarchal system to
nullify misguided development interventions like Panchayati Raj;

ii) Using the examples of individual women with a 'public face', or exemplifying the
success of women's initiatives as a sign of their agency.

It is in this context that this study, taking decentralised governance as the main referral
point, attempts to explore the linkages between the so called 'pre-requisite' for women's
and overall empowerment in three Panchayats in Kodagu district, Karnataka. The major
objectives of the study were to provide a broad picture of the changes that have taken
place in the concept of women's role in development and examine the envisaged
strategies to achieve women's empowerment within the analytical framework of power.

The concepts that have been employed to designate the workings of power and
domination never seem to fully capture the specificity of their manifestations through
historically and contextualised forms of gender relations (Kandiyoti, 1998). Reflections
of this can be seen in our data, wherein experiences of gendered power not only differ
across caste, class and community, but also differ on the basis of the period of women's

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5 Chipko movement is an environmental movement spearheaded by women in the Himalyan hills to protect the environment. Mahila Samakhya is an autonomous body created by the state to change the
life cycles. Our data also revealed that gender identities derive their legitimacy from the social institutions, which construct, reinforce and reproduce dominating and hegemonic practices. In short, this study advocates for a conceptualisation of gender, which is based on the specificity of their multiple identities. Such a conceptualisation derives itself from a ‘social relation’ approach, which, in turn, allows for an analysis and understanding of the ways in which inequalities between men and women are reproduced at every institutional level.

The major conceptual categories used in this study are therefore gender and power. A short review in Chapter 2 reveals the ways in which the gender of power has been conceptualised and understood. The method used for the study was determined by the nature of objectives. An unstructured interview schedule was used to direct the ‘interviews’ with elected women representatives, their families and a sample of male elected members. The interviews and discussions with the researcher involved various issues concerning their everyday lives in which power play an intrinsic part. The day-to-day activities of women members were observed through participatory methods. In addition, their interaction within the household, with co-workers, with the people from their wards, with male Panchayat members and in Panchayat meetings were also observed.

Chapter 3 sketches the field area in terms of its administrative history and socio-economic travails. This is done to aid a more qualitative and contextual understanding of existing gender inequality faced by women. For an insightful discussion on women’s agency in public life,
Panchayat member's political behaviour, which is delineated in the later parts of the thesis. The study then analyses women's political empowerment using the conventional measures: attendance, involvement, awareness of the KPRA, etc. and possession of strategic skills. Two indicators, which are considered essential pre-requisites of political empowerment — education and previous public life experience — were then considered. The pre-requisites for women's political participation were cross-tabulated with the two important proxies for empowerment, attendance and involvement. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to establish the relationship between the pre-requisite indicators and the proxies for women's member's political performance. Both these statistical measures established a positive relationship between them. In spite of the clarity of the quantitative analyses, there were issues, which the interpretations of these correlations could not explain. In other words, beyond establishing a relationship between the variables, the statistical measures were unable to explain the visible differences between the performance levels of men and women Panchayat members and the intra-group differences between performance levels of women Panchayat members. The study, therefore, delves deeper to explore and analyse the missing links, which can explain the differential political participation of women members.

An attempt was then made to examine alternate arenas for women's empowerment such as marriage arrangements, duration of marriage, post-marital residential arrangements, control over economic resources and finally other mediations derived from caste, class and community status. These indicators were then clubbed together with performance

see Brinda Rao (1999).
levels of men and women members. It was found that they have a significant influence in moulding women’s public life behaviour.

The study first examines the two dominant explanatory frameworks — socialisation and agency — which have been utilised to explain women’s political dis-empowerment. Using the qualitative field data from the three researched Panchayats in Kodagu district, the study exposes the inadequacies of these frameworks to explain women’s differential participation. In addition, there is a discussion on the problems associated with the use of these frameworks for policy-making.

Following this, a case is made for looking at an alternate analytical framework, which can go beyond identifying empowering and dis-empowering factors to deciphering women’s differential levels of performance in Panchayats. In other words, the study advocates for the use of an alternate frame of analysis, which will desist from elevating individual indicators as essential for political empowerment. Using the frameworks of power developed by Steve Lukes and Anthony Giddens, this study veers towards the belief that empowerment can only be contextual and relational. Further, it argues that gender transformation is a process involving subtle changes in gender relationships and takes place over long stretches of time, often remaining relatively unnoticed. The study also demonstrates the subtlety of this process, which often results in the mis-interpretation as either a lack of awareness amongst members or is exaggerated to be ‘women’s empowerment’.
7.2 Findings and Some Policy Implications

The study, therefore, concludes that the agenda of enhancing the status of women is a complex process. It requires the state to go beyond mere ‘inclusion’ to a more broader and useful strategy that will take into consideration women’s multiple identities. Although heeding this and to facilitate political empowerment, the state has reserved one-third of all seats across categories for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, women’s visible poor performance in Panchayats is proof of the lack of a supportive framework. In fact, beyond ensuring that critical masses of women avail of the political space that is created for them, the state has done little to ensure their survival in this newly created space.

The anticipated perfect functional relationship between ‘domestic’ and ‘public’ sphere has resulted in an emphasis on short-term objectives such as imparting knowledge of the Panchayati Raj Act and know-how of administrative machinery through training programmes.

Women’s poor performance in the Panchayats can be traced to the inability of the state to acknowledge the discordant relationship between the identity women derive from their private sphere and the public identity that it is being thrust upon them.
Further, 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 derive from their private spheres.

Taking the specific context of Kodagu, here too, differences in women member’s participation levels need to be explained. In looking at whether enabling factors such as education, previous public life experience and presence of a critical mass of women play a part in explaining the differences between performance levels of women members, we shall first consider the reasons for the differential performance of women members. For, the reasons for women member’s differential performance are much more in need of explanation than identifying why certain women members participate or factors that cause women’s non-participation in Panchayats. More importantly, there are many ways in which Kodagu is not a typical South Indian district in terms of the overt differences in the profile of Panchayat members. We shall discuss these differences with a view to understand if these differences play a part in making Panchayats in Kodagu ‘unique’ and unfit for generalisations. We shall finally argue that women’s empowerment, especially economic and political, needs to be contextualised within the social processes that structure knowledge in each individual community and understood in relational terms in social institutions like the Panchayats.

7.3 Conclusion
In the context of the objectives with which we began the study, it is evident that there have been major shifts in women's inclusion in rural development in India. From being passive bodies on whom the State bestowed benefits through development programmes targeted at men, women are increasingly seen as active agents and are now being burdened with the responsibility of extending and stretching their familial boundaries to the local community.

From our field study, it is possible to deduce that women have very definitive opinions on empowerment, especially their empowerment and articulate it to some extent in everyday life, but more often in their future aspirations for themselves and their daughters. Women, however temper their expectations in a reality check. Thus, portraying a different image of empowerment than that which is given by the State. In it is in this context that we see women asserting their agency and carving out a role for themselves in the local community. As we have demonstrated, women's agency is often rooted in their private sphere. It is important to understand this before attempting to assess women's disempowerment in everyday life.

While power and agency play an intrinsic role in women's life, they often contribute to women's seeming disempowerment. An external understanding of empowerment further exacerbates the divide between women's/community's understanding of participation and status and the eurocentric, urban reading of empowerment. Thus, while economic and political factors contribute to women members' empowerment, women members'
participation in the panchayat needs to be linked and situated in women's past and present, as this will shape their future interaction in public sphere.