CHAPTER – 7

WOMEN AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
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Rural development has been one of the priority areas of the Government ever since independence. The focus has been on bringing total transformation in rural set up, creating a good and domestic leadership at the grass root level and promotion of communal harmony by establishing local self government. However, experiences showed that many of the development programmes failed due to lack of proper coordination among the various departments involved, the target oriented approach, implementation of service oriented programmes instead of development or self employment oriented programmes. Many schemes do not make progress beyond the process of implementation and some survive to be abandoned later on. This has necessitated the policy makers, bureaucrats and intellectuals to think of alternative strategies of rural development.

Rural development is a holistic concept, encompassing both natural and human resource development in an integrated manner. It aims at (I) increasing the opportunities of all rural people in respect of health, knowledge and skill development, income and participation in decision making. It also aims at creating a conducive environment in reducing social and economic inequalities and conflicts and thus bringing all present and potential natural resources to most optimal use, conservation and development.

The famous economist Amartya Sen (1997) cautions that economic growth is important to eradicate deprivation but the human capabilities are instrumental in generation of more economic and social progress. The quality of human life has its intrinsic value. Thus there arises the need to strengthen human capabilities in order to bring out all round rural development. Men and women both constitute the two pillars of society and both should be given equal status in order to make the society healthy and prosperous. Women constitute one half of the segment of
pluralism in India. The census counted million females against a total population
of million, in which million live in the rural areas and the 27 per cent of the rural
women live below the poverty line. It was the UN Decade for women which led to
belated recognition of the multiplicity of women's contributions to development as
main producers of food, providers of drinking water and firewood and having a
major responsibility in health care, nutrition and hygiene. It also draw attention to
their activities as entrepreneurs in the informal sector and their key role in the
management of natural resources, not to mention their critical influence on fertility
rates and the education of children.

For long it was assumed that the socio economic environment acted
equally upon people irrespective of their gender. In reality the situation of women
in exacerbated because their status is different to that of men in terms of their
roles in both the household and the economy. The cultural environment, social
values and legal systems are often biased against women and impede their
access to key resources of services such as land, credit, education, training and
technology.

Improving the situation of women requires strategies that take gender
differences fully into account. If development programmes for women are to
succeed, they must, however, not only be gender aware but must also be based
on women's own clearly expressed demands and priorities. Women's extensive
workload forces them to stay away from many occasions where formal decisions
are made. The democratisation of participation often passes them when they do
not speak out their feelings. Furthermore, lack of education and information, they
may not be able to understand. So unless ways are found at the operational level
to secure the active participation of women in projects and programmes, policy
intentions will remain idle, resources be wasted and harmful in intended effects
persists.

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Ever since independence a number of innovative programmes and schemes have been launched for the upliftment of women particularly the rural women in our country. There has been a perceptible shift from viewing women as critical agent for socio economic development. Thus, the emphasis has been shifted from development to empowerment. (It was against this background that the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution was made).

The State has over the years been the main player in the area of developmental work, with greater resources at its disposal, an implementing authority (and mandate) and an administrative machinery unmatched by any other agent. For the first 25 years of development planning in India, it was assumed that the general progress made by the population as a whole, would ultimately be shared by all sections, and that whatever benefits accrued to the men (or to the family as a reckoning unit) would also percolate to the women and result in better status and gender equality. This however, turned out to be a faulty assumption. A minimum needs programme was therefore, incorporated into the Fifth Plan design. Since the household continued to be targeted as the beneficiary, the approach itself continued on the concept of patriarchy. There was no mention of women's specific needs in the areas listed for priority attention under the programme.

A chapter on women and development was included for the first time, in the Sixth Plan document. Targeting rural poor women in particular, the plan declared that 'a fair share of employment opportunities would have to be created through poverty alleviation programmes'. The assumption continued to be that employment and income generation would automatically lead to improvement in the status of women. The belief, as the policy makers themselves were to concede subsequently, was simplistic. The two plans that followed, noted that the results of developmental efforts in terms of both poverty alleviation and improvements in the status of women had not been commensurate with the inputs made.
A separate ministry for women and children was created in 1984. Issues pertaining to rural women’s advancement were identified by three planning groups of the Government of India:

1. The core group on Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), 1976;
2. The working group on the development of village level organisation of rural women; and
3. The National Committee on the role and participation of rural women in agriculture and rural development.

Rural women’s development thus received priority for the first time during the Sixth Plan period. The emphasis however, continued to be on the economic front, through programmes such as IRDP, Development of women and children of Rural Areas (DWCRA), and the Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM). Even if such programmes have been taken up by the state, yet it was conceded that none of these projects had delivered the expected results in the form of overall betterment of women’s status in these communities. The reasons are lack of identification with the spirit of projects among the officials entrusted with the implementation, procedural hassles and most important, failure to involve the beneficiary population as participants.

Besides the economic programmes, various non economic programmes have been initiated in order to improve the status of women in rural areas. Article 15 of the constitution empowers the state to enact legislation to protect women and promote the welfare and progress of SC/ST. Accordingly several laws are made by the Parliament of India after independence. Fifteen of such laws are listed in the India country Report presented at the Beijing Conference of 1995 includes, the maternity Benefits Act of 1961 (amended in 1976 to cover women who do not fall within the purview of the Employees State Insurance Act), the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, of 1976, the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the
Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, the Rape Law Amendment 1983, the Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989 and the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955. These Acts were aimed at giving the weaker sections greater clout in asserting and claiming their legitimate entitlements as citizens, irrespective of sex or caste.

Even if such Acts and various other non-economic measures were initiated by the Government from time to time, yet the fate of rural poor including the rural women remained the same. The rural poor have nonetheless remained largely untouched by legislation because they have neither the information, nor the machinery to claim their privileges or dues under the various laws. According to the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000), lack of comprehension of the relevance of women's development to national development along with half-heartedness of implementation is the major reasons for the chasm between what the statute books promise and what happens in actuality.

The planners, the policy makers and the political authority by the time have realized that the economic and the non-economic measures will not be able to uplift the women of our society. Rather some other provisions should be made to give women their due share in the governance of the country. If women will be given a share in the decision making process itself that may in long term lead to all round rural development. Keeping these objectives in view the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India is made in the year 1992-93. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India thus provides for one-third reservation of seats for women at the local government level. This has been hailed as a watershed achievement in the empowerment of women and around one million women have acquired their respective seats as decision makers in the Panchayats.

Orissa is one of the pioneer states of the Indian union to make provisions for the empowerment of women of rural areas according to the constitutional
amendment. But the most important thing is that even before the 73rd constitution amendment, the Government of Orissa had already reserved thirty per cent of the seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions of the state. And after the amendment of the Constitution, the former Panchayati Raj laws of Orissa are amended in order to keep conformity with the central laws. The first election to the Panchayati Raj Institutions was held in the year 1997 and the second Panchayati Raj election took place in the year 2002. Accordingly, more than thirty five thousand women have been elected to different posts of the Panchayati Raj Institutions of the State. Planning is a process whereby the ascribed objectives are achieved. The Panchayati Raj Institutions were thus established in order to achieve the planned objectives. The entry of women into the Panchayati Raj Institutions of the state accelerated the planning process starting from the grass root level. The gram Panchayats which constitutes the basic tier of decentralised governance were given the power to make planning and implementation of their plans taking into account their needs and necessities. The women members of the Panchayats were very much aware about the problems facing the community and thus need based programmes could be undertaken in order to ameliorate their conditions of living.

Primary education, rural health, water supply and sanitation, family welfare, welfare of women and children, improvement of roads and bridges, forestry, cattle farming, soil and water conservation, minor small irrigation, nutritious food and other aspects constitutes the vistas of rural development. When women came to assume the reigns of power in the grass root democracies, it was necessary to know from them how far they are aware about the development planning and programmes which has been transferred to the Panchayats after the 73rd amendment to the constitution of India.

It was found from the study that majority of the women members were aware about development programmes. When it was asked about their role in the implementation of the development programmes, the women members answered
that the development programmes are meant for the village and beneficiaries identified in the Palli Sabha and then in the Gram Sabha meetings. One Panchayat Samiti member has an answer that in accordance with the needs and some political pressure also works for the implementation of the programmes. One Ward Member told that her husband manages all these things and Sarpanchs voice will work in selecting the beneficiaries. And they did not have any power in this regard. Another women ward member told me that she did not have any influence although she participates in the meetings. According to her it is totally political and known person gets work in this programme. Few of the women ward members did not participate in meeting except signing in the final decision draft. It was observed that a compromise usually takes place like giving some projects to each village in the current year and postpone others to a future date and even fixing the quota of beneficiaries to each of the members. The members feel that this is the only way of meeting people’s needs and aspirations. The women members had a say in the above matter because they had to fulfill their obligation to people.

When I enquired about money transaction in this programme, all except one ward member have a uniform reply that ‘it is the business of Sarpanch, we do not know anything about money transaction’. Describing her role in this money transaction, a laughing Sarpanch confessed that she got some percentage from the work holder with their wishes, which she told it as ‘with the pleasure they are paying it’. But the procedure is that they got cheques from block office and there is no provision of direct money transactions through Panchayat body.

To a question as ‘to what extent the people had benefited, the women members were of the view that many programmes are being implemented and the people have benefited under one programme or the other. It is not that a particular category of people have benefited, because the programmes are such that there is fairly good distribution of resources like there are development works,
which are specifically directed at certain group, such as women, SCs/STs and farmers.

When I enquired about beneficiary Panchayat relations and Panchayat follow up help, except one Sarpanch, all other women leaders have nothing to say. She told me that she sometimes tour to the place to investigate the work and the Panchayat assists her in this regard. Another important question to them is that, have they seen any change after getting power in particular to implementation of the development works like JRY, IAY etc. in their village Panchayat. Answers from them were very much natural as all told that definitely there increases some awareness and confidence among women leaders. The works were also transparent as they demanded it.

Implementation and Monitoring: A Few Cases Probed Into

Participation and development includes implementation of the plans. Effective implementation of the plan programmes can be ensured by continuously monitoring progress. For this purpose, monthly meetings of people’s representatives and departmental heads at the Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat level held regularly. At the Panchayat Samiti level, the meeting is chaired by Chairman of the Panchayat Samiti and the members as well as govt. officials associated with the Samiti attend the meetings. At the level of Gram Panchayat, the Sarpanch chaired the meeting with the presence of other elected members of Panchayat and concerned officials.

In those meetings, the minutes of the previous meeting were confirmed and the progress achieved during the past month is assessed and recorded. In case there is any problem relating to the implementation, then appropriate suggestions are made and recorded. This arrangement provides a mechanism for coordinating the activities of the various departments who have been provided with the responsibility of implementing development works. If anything regarding
misappropriation of funds, bad work etc. is there, then those things are discussed in those meetings and suggestions are made how to eradicate the problems.

In one case, the lady members had questioned about the lower quality of the construction of rural road in the Panchayat meeting and wanted that remedial measures must be taken into account and those who were guilty of such works must be punished.

In another instance, one woman Sarpanch Mrs. Meena Rani Behera, from the Scheduled Caste community quickly undertook action in order to check and stop the irregularities in the distribution of money for low cost houses. The Secretary of the Panchayat was found responsible for the irregularities. The Sarpanch went to the land record office to acquire a piece of land to build a community-cum-cyclone shelter in the super cyclone area with the help of a NGO.

Another woman Sarpanch Mrs. Deeptimayee Pradhan also resorted to hunger strike with other members of the Panchayat before the block office in order to construct the village school building in a proper place to which some other people were opposing. Finally she broke her strike and was promised by the officials to construct the school building in its proper place. Incidentally, she was one among various women representatives who have been elected twice for the same post.

It is interesting to note that many Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been formed in different parts of the rural areas. It is worthwhile to note that the Central Government has given a lot of emphasis on the formation of SHGs in the year of Women’s Empowerment (2001). It was also found that in the formation of SHGs, the women representatives are mobilising the women folk of the villages to take part in these institutions. Through these SHGs, a good beginning has been made towards the economic empowerment of women.
It was also found that women not only take up issues relating to basic needs—drinking water, availability of doctors and teachers in the village, which is dear to them, but also general development activities. One example is installing irrigation facilities for the paddy fields to augment the income of the Panchayats. Another women representative is Ms. Shailabala Samantray, the chief of the Block Panchayat who not only supervised the eye camps, where eye problems were treated, but also demanded more money for her cyclone hit block to rehabilitate the victims.

During my observation, it was also found that since the poverty eradication schemes are routed through the Panchayats and involves the distribution of money to build low cost houses, widow pension, old age pension and to start small business, the women members of the Panchayats came to know about these very soon. The women of the neighbourhood act as the “watch dog” compelling the representatives to deliver at least some of the goods. The same thing happened regarding the distribution of food grains at a subsidized rate through the Panchayats. Women of the villages can easily approach the women elected members and can buy rice at any time. From the views of most of the women representatives, it was inferred that they were conscious about the poor people living in their villages and it is their responsibility to help those families through the poverty eradication programmes sponsored by the government.

In one Gram Panchayat, the women Ward Members revolted and showed their dissatisfaction over the selection of beneficiaries of various programmes. They also questioned the integrity of Sarpanch over the issue. According to them, while selecting the beneficiaries, care must be taken to help those needy and must be done through an impartial Gram Sabha meeting. Thus it marked a significant change on the attitude of the representatives of the people regarding poverty eradication and rural development.
Misuse of funds was brought to the notice of the authorities by the people's representatives. In a particular case, the nominees of the Samiti demanded that the practice of helping as well as allotting the works to some influential people of the area must be stopped in order to stop corruption at that level. In another case, it was found that the Sarpanch had distributed the works to his near and dear relatives and this resulted in the poor construction of rural road.

Not only this, one male Sarpanch and the Panchayat Secretary, jointly misappropriated funds by making a false list of beneficiaries in the BPL survey. Because of this, the women Naib Sarpanch and Ward Members as well as the general people of the village went on strike before the concerned block office. From this observation, it is thus inferred that not only the women representatives of the Panchayat, but also the common people of the villages have come forward to stop the corrupt practice of misappropriation of money. Henceforth, democracy has become more participatory because of the Panchayati Raj institutions.

An attempt is made to analyse the implementation process and its effectiveness with reference to some schemes which are administered by the Samitis. In this regard, a question posed to the women members was, "what is your role in helping people to make use of the programmes? The responses were:

<table>
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<th>Responses</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>40</td>
<td>39.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Satisfactory</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>8.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>100</td>
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There are many programmes which are being implemented but in the study, few programmes have been selected. The reason is that under these
programmes, the rural women have been benefited directly, which have helped them to improve the standard of living. The women members had helped the people in getting loan under one or the other programmes. To name and discuss a few development programmes where the women members had played an important role in helping the people, i.e., rural women as well as men to benefit from the development programmes are:-

**Swarna Jayanti Gram Sworojgar Yojana (SGSY)**

Programme for self employment of the poor has been an important component of the anti poverty programmes implemented through government initiatives in the rural areas of India. At present, the Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) is the major ongoing programme for self employment of the rural poor through promotion of micro enterprises. The programme was started with effect from 1.4.1999 after reviewing and restructuring of the erstwhile programmes namely IRDP and its allied programmes like TRYSEM, DWCRA, SITRA, GRY and MWS. The earlier programmes are no longer in operation with the launching of the SGSY. The basic objective of the SGSY is to bring the assisted poor families (Swarozgaris) above the poverty line by providing them income generating assets through a mix of Bank credit and Government subsidy.

The SGSY is different from earlier programmes, because of its emphasis on social mobilisation. Families below poverty line (BPL) in rural areas constitute the target group of SGSY. Within the target group special safeguards have been provided to vulnerable sections, by way of reserving 50% benefits for SC/STs, 40% for women and 3% for disabled persons. Assistance under SGSY, to individual Swarogaris or Self Help Groups is given primarily to the women engaged in income generation activity for mobilisation of the poor at grass root level through a process of social mobilisation for poverty eradication. Social mobilisation enables the poor to build their own organisations (Self Help Groups, SHGs) in which they directly participate to the fullest extent and take decisions on all issues that will help them in bringing above the poverty line. One
SHG may consist of 10-20 persons belonging to families below the poverty line. Efforts are to be made to involve more women members and 50% of SHGs in each block should be exclusively women groups.

The programme is being implemented by the District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) with the active involvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Banks, Line Departments and the Non Government organisations (NGOs). For the selection of beneficiaries in order to form Self Help Groups, the Panchayats played an important role,

When the women representatives of the PRIs were asked about this programme, they replied that, "They were aware about the SGSY programme and it is to be welcomed because through this programme more women will be benefited by the provision of 40% of benefit will go to the women. Not only this through this programme the women are earning some amount of money and they are also come to know about various things happening around them".

While it was asked to the women respondents about the proper functioning of self help groups, they were of the opinion that the SHGs are doing well in the villages and really the poorest of the poor women are benefited by it. It was also found that the women of SHGs are taking up the activities like food grain processing, poultry, vegetable cultivation, dairy, pisciculture etc to which they are acquainted as well as have some experience.

The women representatives of the Panchayat Samitis are taking care for the formation of more SHGs in their villages in order to bring all round rural development. It is to be noted here that under the Panchayati Raj Department of Government of Orissa, Orissa Rural Development and Marketing Society (ORMAS) is established to address the problems faced by the rural producers/Artisans under different poverty alleviation programmes of the
government in adopting the right technology, product diversification with the accepted designs, packaging, branding and sales through different channels.

**Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY)**

The Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) was launched on 25th September, 2001. The SGRY has two objectives, primary and secondary objectives. The primary objective of the scheme is to provide additional wage employment in all rural areas and thereby to provide food security and improve nutritional level of the rural poor. The secondary objective is the creation of durable community, social and economic assets and infrastructural development in rural areas.

In Orissa there are two streams of SGRY. Stream-I caters to the needs of the Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti and Stream-II caters to the needs of Gram Panchayat exclusively. Further, in order to mitigate the miseries of people during natural calamities like flood and drought, a special component of SGRY has been introduced since 2000-2003. Under the 3rd stream only food grains are made available by Government of India on free of cost and no cash component is provided to the state. The SGRY is open to all rural poor who are in need of wage employment and desire to do manual and unskilled work in and around the village habitat. While providing wage employment, preference is given to agricultural wage earners, non agricultural unskilled wage earners, marginal farmers, women, members of SCs and STs and parents of child labour withdrawn from hazardous occupations, parents of handicapped children or adult children of handicapped parents who are desirous of working for wage employment.

From the SGRY programme, it was found that 50% of the funds and food grains are earmarked for the Gram Panchayats which is distributed among them through the DRDAs. The Panchayati Raj Institutions and especially, the Gram Panchayat has been given a key note to play in the SGRY scheme in selecting
the beneficiaries for wage employment and in distribution of food grains on free of cost to the beneficiaries.

When the women members of Gram Panchayat were asked about the SGRY programmes, it was found that majority of them are aware about the programme and according to them through this programme, the poorest of the poor will be benefited. The beneficiaries are selected in the ‘Palli Sabha’ and ‘Gram Sabha’ meetings taking into account the BPL list. Because of the presence of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions, it was observed that they are taking every care in selecting the beneficiaries. In the distribution of food grains to the poorest of the poor, the women Sarpanchs are taking due care and the women beneficiaries are easily approaching them in order to take the food grains. The general poor women of the village are confiding on the women Sarpanch about their problems and accordingly decisions are made in the Gram Sabha meetings.

Rural housing

Housing is one of the basic requirements for human survival. For a normal citizen owning a house provides significant economic security and status in society. For shelter less persons, a house brings about a profound social change in their existence, endowing them with an identity, thus integrating them with their immediate social milieu. In the above perspective the programme of rural housing in Orissa has assumed a greater importance and even greater in a district of Jagatsinghpur which was devastated in the super cyclone of the year 1999. Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) is one of the rural housing schemes sponsored by the Government of India and it is implemented through the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) was a sub scheme of erstwhile JRY scheme and it became an independent scheme w.e.f. 1.1.96. The ceiling on construction assistance under the IAY currently is Rs.25, 000 per unit for plain areas and Rs.27, 500 for hilly/difficult areas. On the basis of the allocations made and
targets fixed, the DRDAs and Zilla Parishads shall decide Panchayat wise number of houses to be constructed under IAY during a particular financial year and will intimate the same to the Gram Panchayat. Thereafter, the Gram Sabha will select the beneficiaries restricting its number to the target allotted from the list of eligible households according to the guidelines and as per priorities fixed. No approval of the Panchayat Samiti will be required and the Panchayat Samiti will be sent a list of selected beneficiaries for their information.

The most important aspect of IAY is that the allotment of dwelling units should be in the name of a female member of the beneficiary household. Alternatively, it can be allotted in the name of both husband and wife. Thus the rural women are the ultimate target in the IAY scheme and accordingly the Gram Panchayats were given lead role in the selection of beneficiaries.

The women representatives of the PRIs are aware about this IAY being implemented for the rural poor. The majority of the Sarpanchs are aware about the IAY scheme and thus taking active part in the selection of the beneficiaries. In my study area, the women representatives are well versed on the method of selection of beneficiaries. Since the selection is made through the 'Palli Sabhas' and 'Gram Sabhas', the selection is made by all the members of the Gram Sabha. It was also found that some of the Ward Members of my study area also are themselves the beneficiaries of IAY scheme.

In all the Panchayats of the study area, the rural women/households have benefited from this programme. After the super cyclone 1999, Govt. of India has sanctioned 2 lakh additional houses in 1st and 2nd phases and 4 lakh additional houses in 3rd phases in the cyclone affected districts. Jagatsinghpur being one of those districts, it had also received more funds in this regard.

Government of India has launched the Samagra Awas Yojana in the year 1999-2000. To implement this scheme in our state, three Blocks have been
selected and Ersama block of Jagatsinghpur district is one among them. The Block was selected because this block was the worst affected one after super cyclone in the whole district in the year 1999. In Jagatsinghpur district it is implemented through the DRDA and a sum of Rs.12.78 lakh has been utilised till date.

The women representatives of my study area are very much aware about most of the programmes launched by the Government in order to ameliorate the condition of the rural poor. While some of the programmes are finalised (implemented) through the Zilla Parishads and the Panchayat samitis, some other programmes are also solely implemented through the Gram Panchayats. Some of the women ward members were not aware about the programmes of poverty eradication. But majority of them are aware about such programmes.

It was also observed that the programmes like SGSY, SGRY, IAY and others are basically targeted to provide food, shelter and work (wage) for the poorest of the poor living in the villages. Thus the objective of rural development will be achieved through the successful implementation of the programmes. The women representatives are aware about the rural development/anti poverty programmes, their implementation, eligible beneficiaries, agencies and their prospects. Further, some of them suggested that intensive formal capacity building training programmes should be provided for ensuring effective implementation by enlarging the scope for their empowerment, skill building and awareness.

While interviewing with the women nominees of Panchayat Samitis, who possesses more formal education and economic status than the Ward Members of the Gram Panchayats, it was revealed that because of their higher socio economic background they were very much concerned about the general development of rural poor and in particular development of rural women.
Majority of the women respondents reported that some amount of training intervention about women related development programmes could raise their capabilities to participate in the discussions and deliberations in the Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings. Although a few of them reported to have realised gender bias in decisions in the Panchayat meetings due to their ignorance of women specific provisions in the Panchayati Raj Act. But majority of them believe in greater transparency, honesty, efficiency in administering the functions and responsibilities (under their leadership) in Panchayat administration owing to their advantage of being women in selecting genuine beneficiaries, honest approach and greater sincerity in implementing developmental programmes/schemes. About the successful functions/programmes in their respective GPs, which have not only strengthened their moral strength to act, but more importantly, have empowered people and women in particular. They have attached importance to rural water supply, construction of community halls, IAY houses etc. since these are crucial community as well as family needs with which the livelihood of rural people are closely associated.

One active Chairperson of the Panchayat Samiti was of the opinion that there should be ‘women palli sabhas’ as a sub part of the ‘Palli Sabha’, because the women folk of the village are really not attending these sabhas. The reason behind her suggestion was that if there will be ‘women Palli Sabhas’ then more women will participate in the sabhas and they will put forward their demands, problems, and other things before the Sabha without any hesitation.

Another woman respondent belonging to the Panchayat Samiti opined that the women respondent should possess a minimum educational qualification, so that they will be able to comprehend various things at their disposal. Her argument was that educational qualification will make them powerful because they will be able to know the pros and cons of the Panchayat Act, government circulars etc. and that will empower them truly.
The female members of my study area admitted that they could not have contested the Panchayat election, if the electorate would not have been reserved for women. All of them were excited while contesting the Panchayat election. Thus reservation provision is a blessing in disguise for enabling them to participate in the self governance process. In their cases, however, election based assistance from the family members especially husband, father were of great help. The Jagatsinghpur district is the smallest district of Orissa in terms of geography, yet it is always prone to natural calamities like flood, draught, cyclone etc. The super cyclone of 1999 had devastated the district. In such a context, the role of women representatives for the reconstruction of villages needs to be mentioned.

The first Panchayat elections after constitution amendment were held in the district in the year 1997 (The Super cyclone hit the district in the year 1999). And in the first election a total number of 1316 women representatives were elected to various Panchayati Raj Institutions of the district. Out of them 1307 belonged to the Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis of the district. After the super cyclone, the Panchayat representatives of the district were need to do more work and more responsibility towards the people of their villages. Selection of beneficiaries for various schemes like JRY, IAY, food for work, construction of rural roads and bridges, construction of school buildings and community halls, cyclone shelters, distribution of food grains free of cost to the poor, wage employment, formation of self help groups were the various challenges before them. It was found from the study that in one Panchayat JRY work to construct rural road was undertaken by the women representatives, the work was completed within the stipulated time as well as the quality of road was very good. I found that everything was according to the norms provided by the government and general people are happy with the work. So from this it was clear that women are not only for women’s development but they are really putting their interest in general matter and getting success also. So the concept that women cannot lead in developmental process is found wrong in this study. With greatest effort the
women leaders performed their work and files were maintained perfectly and the government instructions were followed with greatest care.

In the sphere of distribution of IAY to the poor below poverty line, greatest care was taken in the selection of beneficiaries. The women Ward Members of one GP expressed their dissatisfaction over the selection of beneficiaries by the Sarpanch himself to which they objected that real beneficiaries were not selected. Since the super cyclone had almost devastated the district and most of the houses of the villages are fully damaged, the Panchayat respondents took great care in providing monetary help to the people according to the government instructions. The women representatives in particular are taking great care in maintaining transparency and honesty in the selection of beneficiaries of the rural development programmes.

Another important aspect to be noticed in the district as a whole as well in the study area itself is that women particularly in the rural areas have become restless and desire to get engaged in certain economically gainful activities. It is encouraging to note that many Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been formed in different parts of the rural areas of the district. The women representatives are encouraging the women to participate in the gainful activities in order to mitigate their problems. Thus a good beginning has been made towards the economic empowerment of women in rural areas. The women in general showed their enthusiasm to participate in such activities.

Along with the elected women representatives, the vocabulary of the village women in general has also increased and they get familiar with the words like the Block Development Office, District Magistrate, etc. So a ground has been created to mobilize the women of rural Orissa in particular of the Jagatsinghpur district to seek gender justice in a more vigorous way. The entry of women itself leads to a change in the nature of politics.
Observations show that women representatives are invisibly dependent on their husbands and relatives in their decision-making activities. Their inherent weakness, illiteracy, ignorance, social as well as family bondages make them vulnerable in decision making in the male dominated society. It cannot be denied that subordination of women in society act as a structural constraint to their participation in social, political, economic and cultural activities. Such constraints indeed operate more or less in all cases of all classes and communities of women. In a traditional society like ours, the socio economic barriers, cultural taboos hinder women in varieties of ways to participate and deliberate in PRIs. The anti women attitudes and lack of transparency also sum to have accentuated the situation in a big way. Besides, the common people of the villages of Orissa are circumscribed by different kinds of bonds and obligations that are inherent in their socio economic customs, traditions and conventions.

Needless to say, access to the public sphere is a critical prerequisite of women's political empowerment. Indeed, seat reservations in Panchayat bodies have provided many rural women access to the realm of formal politics. Higher proportion of women in local councils has begun to raise the eligibility of women's concerns in order to translate into gender sensitive policies. The entries of large number of women in the formal political sphere however, have marked a difference despite their illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and vulnerability.

In a point of fact, under the new paradigm of rural development, socio economic, socio cultural and local peculiarities have been attached due importance in self governance institutions. Accordingly, structural changes in such institutions have been brought through necessary provisions in the Act in the form of 73rd amendment, to ensure an effective as well as qualitative change in the rural society.

It is increasingly realized by the planners, politicians and policy makers that rural development is the key to national progress since bulk of the population live
in the rural areas. Rural development is concerned with agricultural development and accordingly the PRIs became the institutions for accelerating rural development in terms of agricultural research, know how etc. Since most of the women of rural areas works in farms, fields, it is imperative on their part to contribute towards such activities being a member of PRIs. As regards agricultural development programmes majority of them reported discussions on agricultural credit, input, extension services, marketing etc. in GPs which could benefit the small/marginal farmers in a big way. 50 percent of the respondents supported the two child norm qualification for the elected posts in PRIs and majority of the elected representatives expressed their view that the relatives of PRI office bearers, MLA/MPs should not contest in elections. The elected representatives consider Gram Panchayat (GP) as a catalytic agent of rural development and a vibrant institution of self governance. The presence of women in large numbers in such institutions makes them vibrant and institutions of self government whereby Gandhiji’s dream of ‘RamRajya’ could only be achieved.

The elected members are involved in the process of planning and implementation of the development programme. It was observed that the members took more interest in the work undertaken in their areas. This is natural because most of them wanted to contest the elections again, so they have to prove themselves effective as members. The local needs are also taken into consideration to a great extent when a programme is being implemented.

Thus with the introduction of the new Panchayati Raj Institutions, the people in the villages of the district and the villages in total have been getting much more infrastructural facilities and benefits than under the earlier dispensation.

The Panchayati Raj Institutions are considered to be good training ground for women to emerge as good and capable leaders and also to cope with responsibilities that usually come along with higher political positions. It has
been observed that among the elected women members, a few were passive, inactive, inert, docile and silent spectators while there were others who demonstrated activeness, assertiveness and dynamism. Keeping this in view, a few cases of select women members are presented in the following pages to which the PRIs have been instrumental for their success.

A Few Cases of Select Women Members

For an intimate understanding of the working of women respondents a few women were selected in order to find out their perceived sphere of empowerment. Do they fill better equipped now? Do they visualize their potential capabilities? Do they enjoy being inside the political institutions? These are some of the questions, which were posed before the women members in a rather informal atmosphere. I had selected 8 women from the study area, 4 from each block and these are the women who seemed to be more active as well as involved in the functioning of the Panchayats. The women were visited several times and the discussions usually held inside their homes. Some times they were accompanied by their husbands and sometimes alone when their husbands are away from home to look after their day to day work. Although these six women does not really represent all the women present in the PRIs, yet, they give a good indication about what happens to the women of the PRIs to a certain extent.

(I) The first women member of my case study is Smt. Deeptimayee Pradhan, who is the Sarpanch of Paida G.P of Ersama block. She is thirty two years old having two children. She is khandayat by caste, and her husband by occupation is a cultivator as well as doing some business.

Because of the reservation of seats in the PRI, her gram panchayat became reserved for women and that is the turning point of her life. Her husband had some connection with a political party, the party people asked her to contest for the post of Sarpanch. Not only party people but also the village people asked her to contest. Although reluctant in the beginning, she signed the papers and her
nomination was filed. Then she contested in the election and finally get elected to become the Sarpanch of the Panchayat and assumed the office. She was attending the meetings regularly and also tried to know in detail the intricacies of politics. During her tenure she tried to get various projects of the government for her Panchayat and for that matter, she often visited the block office. When I met her in her house she told me about how the problems she is facing in the block office because of political reasons. During her tenure, the super cyclone hit the coastal Orissa and the study area was the worst affected one. That made her more active in implementing various relief measures of the government and in selecting the beneficiaries of various schemes announced by the government.

She was helped by her husband as well as family members and also encouraged by them. She is happy to be a member of PRI and holding a position also elevated her status in the family as well as in the village. She wants to continue in office and she attributes her success to the people of her constituency.

(II) Smt. Kishoribala Dash, Sarpanch, mallasahi Gram Panchayat is a very active representative of the Panchayati Raj institution. She is 52 years old and had studied up to intermediate. She has two daughters and one is married. She belongs to a Jamindari family and her family owns vast amount of landed property. Her husband and her father in law were the landlords of the area.

In the 1997 election, her Panchayat was reserved for the women seat and with the persuasion from family members as well as the political party; she contested the election and won. Before elected as the Sarpanch, she was busy in social service activities, and when she assumed office, she wanted to fulfill her dreams of serving the people of her area.

When I first met her, she was at the block office and was talking with the additional B.D.O regarding some of her unfinished work. We talked about various
things and she had a long tale to tell before me. She is very much conscious
about her own power as well as responsibilities and before the additional B.D.O
she described in detail various things which had harassed her in performing her
duties as Sarpanch.

She is a very daring, confident as well as straightforward lady who knows
her own limitations. But when I asked her about her desire to continue in office,
she told me that she does not want to continue as a Sarpanch, rather she would
like to contest for some higher post. She described before me how a Sarpanch
and that too a women Sarpanch lacks power while participating at the Samiti
meetings where the P.S. chairman as well as the local M.L.As does not care
about the views of the Sarpanchs.

She owes her success to her family, husband and above all to the people
of her G.P who supported her throughout the year. Although she is not happy
being a Sarpanch, yet she fulfils all the requisite qualities needed for a women to
work effectively at the grass root institution.

(III) Smt. Alokprava Swain, Naib Sarpanch of Ersama Gram Panchayat. She is
30 years old and has two children. She is a graduate as well as she has obtained
a certificate from the ITI in stenography. Her husband is a petty businessman and
is also involved in the politics of the area. When the seat is reserved for women,
her husband as well as party men asked her to contest as ward member. Being
educated and articulate, people of her ward supported her and she filed her
nominations. Then she is elected as the Naib Sarpanch of the Panchayat, the
Sarpanch being a male member.

When I met her at her home, she was busy with her mother-in-law in some
household chores. We sat at her home and talked about various issues, at that
time, her husband was not present rather her in laws were around us.
She seemed to be a very confident lady and said that she is attending all the meetings of the Panchayat although her husband accompanies her every time. She said that her husband supported her as well as made her understand anything, which she is no table to understand. She is happy to be the Naib Sarpanch of the Panchayat and is looking forward to became the Sarpanch of the Panchayat is the coming election.

Although she is educated yet she is not much conversant about various Panchayat rules and regulations. Yet she manages everything because she belongs to the party which is in power in the state, and her husband is rather active in politics. I asked her about what she really likes to do for the people of her ward. She has a soft voice and said that she will implement all the schemes which are meant for the people in her ward. She owes her success to her husband as well as the people of her ward.

(IV) Smt. Sailabala Rout, Sarpanch, Goda Panchayat, comes from a middle class family. She is around 28 years of age. Her husband is a contractor and also possesses cultivable land. She is a graduate having two children. Her husband’s brother was the former Sarpanch of her Panchayat and when the seat falls under reserved category, she was mainly asked by her family members to contest in the election. Although she was reluctant because she does not want to involve herself in politics, yet she was pressurized by her husband as well as family members to file nominations and finally she got elected.

I met her for the first time at the block office where she came with her husband to inquire about some Panchayat matter with the BDO and the GPEO. Because the BDO was not present at that time we talked a while about her work inside the Panchayat. Later we also had several discussions regarding various aspects concerning the people and Panchayat.
She attends the meetings regularly and also learning various things. She is a quiet lady but speaks when asked for or if situation demands. The rural women approach her if they have any problem. She does not know in detail about the Panchayat Act but is being helped by her husband and family members whenever the situation wants.

As traditional Oriya women, although educated, she is always escorted by her husband to the Panchayat office and any where she needs to go. She never moves alone and has to depend on her husband for every act. Yet she is learning and comprehending things very slowly, when I asked her about her retaining the seat in the coming election, she nodded negatively. She said it is very difficult on the part of a woman of rural Orissa to work as well as bear the burden of Panchayat work. She does not like the politics of the present day, where one has to obey the orders of her political party men.

Being a member of PRI she is not much happy with the things around her although participating and performing all the expected roles on her part. Attending meetings of her G.P and also attending the P.S meetings and other committee meetings regarding the functioning of Panchayats was the various acts which she is performing well. She takes interest as well as regular in her working.

(V) Smt. Meenarani Behera, Sarpanch, Gandakipur Panchayat of Kujanga block. She belongs to the scheduled caste category. She is thirty two years old and has three children, two sons and one daughter. She is a matriculate and is a housewife. Her husband and family members as well as villagers asked her to contest in the election for which she filed nomination and finally won.

In the beginning, she was not very active and does not possess any idea about Panchayats. But gradually she learned things and acquired confidence in dealing with her Panchayat matters. When I asked her about her priority being a
representative of the people she said her aim is to end corruption from the society.

Development of women and children, construction and repairing of village roads, old age pension, improvement of the health of the people and disbursement of loan to the poor people of the area are the other works which she has undertaken as her priority areas.

When I asked her desire to continue in office, she expressed her readiness to contest in the coming election. She contested the election from the opposition party and won.

(VI) Smt Reena Das, Member Ersama Panchayat Samiti belonged to the scheduled caste category. She is 30 years old and had studied up to intermediate. She has two children and her second child was born when she was a member of the Panchayat Samiti. She belonged to the lower middle class family and her husband supported her throughout the year. Her husband works with a NGO and is a small cultivator also.

When the seat was reserved for women of SC category, it was the party men who asked her to contest in the election. Because her husband had interest in politics, he asked her to file nomination and get elected at the beginning.

Although a novice she had taken interest in her work and came to understand the intricacies of politics being a nominee. When I talked to her she told me about various issues which she wants to undertake for the people who supported and voted her during the election.

As a young woman having small children, she had a lot of household work to finish before reaching for the office. She wishes to continue in office as well as she wants to contest in the coming election.
Her main supporter is her husband although her father-in-law also supported her. According to her the social setup of rural Orissa is very conservative and it hinders the working of women representatives of the Panchayati Raj institutions. She wished to do something concrete for the welfare of the women.

(VII) Sabitri Behera, Ward Member, GandakiPur Panchayat. She is forty eight years old and is married having three children. She belonged to the scheduled caste category and won the seat because majority population of her area belonged to her community.

She belonged to a very poor family and sometimes works in the field as a casual labourer. When the seat became reserved under SC (women) category, the village people as well as the party men asked her to contest in the election and finally she won. She dedicated her success to the political party. She is educated up to class five and is not articulate or confident. Yet she is cooperative, finds time to attend Panchayat meetings as well as able to understand the various problems faced by the people of rural area. She is a gaanjhia (daughter of the same village) and because of this she enjoys more mobility and freedom inside the village. She used to visit people of her ward and tried to understand their problem and also placed these at the meetings of Gram Panchayat.

Even if she is not much educated, yet she is a brave lady and being the daughter of the village she wanted to give her best as the representative of the people. She expressed her desire to continue in office as well as want to contest in the coming Panchayat election. She is a traditional house wife of rural oriya family and wants to do anything for the people within her capacity. She owes her success to the political party as well as the people of her village. Her main aim of life is to end corruption from the village atmosphere as far as possible.

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(VIII) Smt Satyabhama Biswal, nominee of Ersama Panchayat Samiti. She is 54 Years old and is a widow. She had studied up to class five and having three children. Her husband was the former Sarpanch of the Panchayat and after his death, when the seat became reserved for women, she was asked by the party men as well as villagers to contest and she obliged. Being an elderly lady of the village and also belonging to a political family, she got the support of the people and won in the election. She attends the meetings regularly and her son who is very active in politics accompanied her to every meeting and to the Panchayat office. Although not much active, yet she always participates in the discussion and wants to do something for the women of her constituency.

When I asked her about her priority areas, before mentioning any thing she expressed her anguish towards the dirty politics of the present day. Due to political rivalry, development works were hampered and thus the people suffered. Although she is happy being a member, she wishes her son to get a ticket and elected in the coming election.

Thus rural development received the attention of the women representatives from the very beginning of their membership. The women representatives are the contributors as well as the beneficiaries of development. They have accepted their new position and status as the crusader of rural development. From the present study it is clear that the women representatives are aware about their role in making rural development.