CHAPTER-3
WOMEN IN POLITICS – AN OVERVIEW

The tradition of having Panchayats has been one of the fundamental concepts of Indian culture. As per historical context of Panchayati Raj system, it is found that the system has been existing in India since the ancient Vedic periods. In the Vedic age, the village was looked after by a person who is known as Gramini.

Likewise in the periods of Mouryas and Guptas references are found of a village and a district respectively. The Mouryan and Gupta administrations provided a systematic base to the Panchayati Raj system. Even during the Mughal administration, Panchayats used to perform work relating to administration and social and economic development. By the time of British rule in India, Panchayats had practically lost their importance and identity. The first attempt made by the British Government to establish Local Self Government was in 1800.

The true spirit of local government can first be traced, to Lord Morley’s Resolution of 1870. Later, Lord Ripon’s resolution of 1882 stressed importance of Local Government. The next important piece of legislation was the Bombay Village Panchayat Act, 1920. Under this Act, the Panchayats were constituted through an elected body. In due course of time, the Hatch committee was
appointed in 1925 to consider the position of Village Panchayats. As a result of the recommendations of the Hatch Committee, the Bombay Village Panchayat Act 1930 empowered the village Panchayats to take up various activities. Gandhiji had dreams of democracy commencing from the villages. He believed that democratic freedom have to be founded in institutions of Panchayats in every village of India. Jawaharlal Nehru preferred the term Panchayati Raj to democratic decentralization because it conveyed the essential message to the people of rural areas. He established the institutions of Panchayati Raj as the primary instrument for brining development to the doorsteps of rural India.

When India attained independence, our political leadership was eager to have effective decentralization of power through Panchayati Raj Institutions so that the people at large could effectively participate in nation building. After independence several developments have taken place in the field of Panchayati Raj. Village was conceived as an economic as well as administrative unit at the grass-root level.

Panchayati Raj Institutions are established in accordance with Article 40 of the Indian Constitution under the Directive Principles of State Policy which states that “The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers as may be necessary to enable them to function as units

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of local self-government”\textsuperscript{2}. Approximately thirty percent of the rural population is estimated to live below the poverty line\textsuperscript{3} as against a much lower percentage in urban areas. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were established in India with a lot of excitement and euphoria in 1959 based on the recommendations of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report.

Here, it is essential to discuss about the scene of acceptance of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report since it has political domination and the impact of leadership. The political elite, under the dynamic leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, extended its support to the concept of democratic decentralization. The administrative elite came under the influence of Nehruvian Vision, and played a constructive role in formulating proactive strategy to implement Balwant Roy Mehta committee Report. As a result, the Panchayati Raj system saw a glorious era. The State Governments were quick enough to equip the Panchayati Raj system with statutory and executive measures to provide sound authority base, satisfactory working conditions and a good package of financial resources.

The political developments of post-Nehruvian era have brought the downward trend. Willful neglect, deliberate efforts to weaken the Panchayati Raj system became a common feature of all the states. The national as well as state leadership did not want to accord constitutional status to PRIs and they

\textsuperscript{2} Article 40 of Directive Principles of State Policy, Constitution of India.
\textsuperscript{3} Government of India : \textit{Draft Five Year Plan (1978-83) (Revised)}, New Delhi, Planning Commission, 1978, p.3.
are against the emergence of political leadership at grass-roots levels. Powers were withdrawn and functions of Panchayati Raj institutions were reduced. A new crop of bureaucratic organizations emerged on the rural scene. As a result the Panchayati Raj system got a de-emphasized role. During post 1970s era the Panchayati became an object of raw deal.

At a later stage, the Ashok Mehta Committee has tried to strengthen the system of Panchayati Raj\(^4\). It suggested two tier structures in place of three-tier structure. They were seen as political institutions with a goal to ensure local self-government. However, its concept and its scheme of restructuring failed to create any impact.

3.1 **73\(^{rd}\) Constitutional Amendment – Constitutional support of Panchayats**

The 73\(^{rd}\) Amendment to the Constitution was adopted by Parliament in 1991 as the previous committees and programmes were unable to yield desired results. The Amendment was a revolutionary step in the political history of the country as it provided constitutional support to lakhs of Panchayats all over the country, including several other things. The amendment has provided stability to the structure of Panchayati Raj that in case of super-session the local bodies should be reconstituted within six months. All the three-tier of Panchayats System (Gram Panchayat, Mandal Parishad and Zilla Parishad) have a five year fixed term. The Act has made provision for the direct election of members to

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Panchayats while the Chairpersons of the higher two-tiers would be indirectly
elected. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has introduced New Panchayati
Raj System in India to cope up with global changes.

3.2 New Panchayati Raj System

New Panchayati Raj system is the outcome of the World-wide
movement to liberate the people from the clutches of the ‘big-brother’
government and the total state system. It is also one of the new policy options
of Rajiv Gandhi to integrate our system of political and economic activities
with the activities of the developed societies. The new arrangement of
decentralization of power or devolution of power or empowerment of people is
equated to that of a developing resourcefulness of the people or entrustment of
more responsibilities to the people and to turn the government from the role of
a provider to facilitator and by which the role and function of the government
will be reduced and the role of the government in the present context has to be
redefined.

The new system envisages more responsibilities rather than powers and
authority apart from the emergence of political leadership at the village level.
The new arrangement of new Panchayati Raj system is to administer
development activity by involving people\(^5\) in every stage of the development
process, utilizing the skills available with them, and using the natural resources

\(^5\) Palanithurai, G. *New Panchayati Raj System at Work – An evaluation*, Concept Publishing
available in their areas. It is not only for growth but also for equality and social justice. Under the new system, State Election Commission and State Finance Commission were established. Provision of Reservations to all backward/down trodden communities and women is the main feature of this system. All these aspects help in the emergence of local leadership at grass-root level. The reservations provided for Dalits would help to emerge of Dalit leadership at village level.

3.3 Importance of Leadership in Rural Local Bodies

The dynamics of leadership, its socio-economic origins, and social consequences have always fascinated social scientists. But there is no unanimity on the precise meaning of the term “Leadership” among the social scientists. Leadership has undergone certain radical changes from its inception. “As social scientists have learnt to probe beneath the manifest aspects of leadership and have become correspondingly more sensitive to the relevance of numerous and complex latent facts, they have found it more difficult to agree on what leadership is and does”⁶. This statement indicates how difficult the problem of arriving at some general agreement about the precise definition of the term leadership. This becomes more difficult when one’s objective is to construct a view of leadership which will encompass many different types of leaders and varying leader-follower situations. As a result the term of

leadership is variously defined by social scientists. Leadership is “the act of organizing and directing the interests and activities of a group of persons as associated in some project or enterprise, by a person who develops their cooperation through securing and maintaining their more or less voluntary approval of the ends and methods proposed and adopted in their association”\(^7\).

Social scientists usually define leadership in terms of power or the capacity of any actor in a social system to influence the behaviour of others. Davis\(^8\) views power as “the determination of the behaviour of others in accordance with one’s ends”. According to Merton\(^9\) interpersonal influence “refers to the direct interaction of persons in so far as this affects the future behaviour of participants.

Leadership plays an important role in moulding the social, political and economic life of village communities, leadership plays an important role. In fact, this is a universal phenomenon. Since man is a social being and interacts in a group situation, he needs constant guidance and direction. These aspects are generally taken care of by the leaders. The structure, content and place of development in the Indian Political Landscape have undergone numerous changes since Independence. The introduction of universal adult franchise and new forces of socio-economic and political change unleashed by the implementation of several programmes of development and social change in

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the rural areas have not only undermined traditional leadership, but also generated new values and vision.

This necessitated a replacement of the old order based on a descriptive social attributes of leadership by the new secular leadership tempered with democratic urges. The introduction of the Panchayati Raj System in 1959 made a tremendous impact on villages in India as it brought about a new political awakening among the masses. The rural masses for the first time realized that democracy has traveled down to the village level and that they too have an opportunity of participating actively in the process of socio-economic development.

It may be inferred that with the introduction of the Panchayati Raj System, the rural leadership has come to occupy an important place in the Indian political system. The Panchayati Raj soon became popular and gained roots in the countryside. The social power structure has gradually developed a close nexus with its counterpart at the state level. The state leadership controls its vote bank through Panchayati Raj leadership. There is strong linkage between the grass root level of leadership with the leadership at the state level. Apart from this, the decision of the government to involve the PRIs actively in the planning and implementation of state sponsored anti-poverty programmes gave a new fillip to these bodies for increasing their sphere of influence.

The socio-economic development of any rural community depends to a great extent on the quality of leadership. Unless the leaders play an active role
progress in this direction would be impossible. Hence the Panchayati Raj leadership which aims at the development of community through its active involvement becomes the ‘gap closer’ between the bureaucracy and the masses and thereby filling-up a vast organizational gap.

Further, the Panchayati Raj Leadership mediates the interaction between tradition and modernity and plays an educative role through broadening the range and deepening the reach of participatory processes by accelerating the pace of modernization. Furthermore, by effective planning and implementation, it can utilize the available resources by taking into account the local interests. The rural leadership can help mobilize local resources in the delivery of inputs and services. The leadership can communicate the requirements of the people in voicing their concern to the higher ranges of administration. This sort of communication and interaction would positively facilitate in strengthening the administrative accountability and responsiveness in the sphere of socio-economic development in the rural areas.

In view of its significance, it becomes imperative to examine the nature and functioning of emerging rural leadership over time. As can be made out from the new dispensation i.e., the constitution (73rd Amendment Act) 1992, the role of local leadership has a great responsibility in translating various policy measures into pulsating reality. Besides, it is germane to identity the segment that constitutes the rural leadership in the changing social milieu with new reservations coming to force for SCs/STs and Women.
The importance of leadership in every walk of organized social life and needs no explanation. It is much more important in relation of rural local bodies. The very success of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends largely on the quality of leadership available at the grass-roots level. Socio-economic and political developments as well as growth of healthy democracy depends on the quality of local leadership and its effective and dynamic functioning in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The survival of state as well as national leaders depends on the existence of basic, local leadership. Without the support of local elite leaders the top level could not continue their activities\textsuperscript{10}.

The phenomenon of leadership in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has perhaps been discussed much more extensively and vehemently than that of leadership at the state level or the national level of the Indian polity after Independence\textsuperscript{11}. This is mainly due to the fact that the tasks and functions of the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been associated with the complex uncertainties arising out of the ground factors of caste, class, kinship and other societal and physical variables in the Indian rural society\textsuperscript{12}. The state and national level leadership is not so categorically identified with the societal and physical variables playing an indomitable role in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Moreover the leadership at state and national level has structural


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p.561.
and functional directives contained in the Indian Constitution, whereas the leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions lacks all these structural, functional and constitutional arrangements\(^{13}\). They have to work with different situations in different state governments. So the study of the concept and importance of leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions has been recognized to be the most crucial variable determining the quality and level of realization of the tasks and functions vested in them by the status of the State Governments\(^{14}\). It is so in the areas of the state and national governments also. But it is much more so in respect of the Panchayati Raj Institutions because they are new institutions, they are constitutionally insecure and their fortunes fluctuate more significantly with the environmental contexts surrounding them\(^{15}\). The effective functioning of the leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions would also depend on various factors such as the attitude of the respective state governments towards the health and progress of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, their functional, financial and personnel competence and the autonomy offered to them in their day to day governance.

### 3.4 Importance of reservations in inculcating leadership

The Panchayati Raj Institutions have developed over the years not only as units of self-government but also media for development activities. The legislations governing the PRIs in the states and Union Territories have


\(^{14}\) Ibid., p.562.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p.562.
included sufficient safeguards to protect the interests of the Scheduled Castes / Scheduled Tribes. Their leadership and involvement in the democratic processes and in decision-making for development activities has been marginal owing to their vulnerable position in the socio-economic hierarchy in the rural areas.

Reservations play a crucial role in breaking the strong hold of the traditionally dominant sections on the PRI Leadership which is no longer confined to a particular class, caste or gender. Thus, there is no doubt that it reflects the strength over democratic structure and political processes. The new system has given scope for the vulnerable sections of society to enter politics and it has been responsible for the emergence of a new leadership. In other words with reservations to SCs, STs, BCs and Women, under the 73rd Amendment Act, major changes have occurred since its implementation. In the overall leadership, the prominence of dominant castes in local bodies has considerably declined over the years. Also, it is evident that the leadership of SCs, STs and Women has shown keen interest in managing their affairs at the grass root level.

Reservations for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Classes and Women have been built into the system to ensure equitable participation of all sections of society. Despite certain limitations this will help the lower caste leadership to move up in the ladder to look after their own affairs in the rural areas. The shift of power to the poor and weaker
sections of society may be rather slow, but it is taking place. In a way the mandatory elections of SCs, STs and Women candidates is likely to change socio-economic dynamics in the countryside. How the emerging power structure is to be shared by the advantaged and disadvantaged must be agreed to by society and how the new leadership coming through the medium of reservations will accept the challenge of the new roles by anybody is guess. It is not merely a question of getting into the growth process but also to become more assertive, responsible and responsive\textsuperscript{16}.

3.5 Community development programmes instilling leadership traits in women

Since the introduction of community developmental programmes, establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions at the grass root level, and adult franchise, the old leadership structure is gradually giving way to a new leadership structure in the rural communities. The pattern of leadership is undergoing transformation from hereditary to the elective, from formal to informal and descriptive to functional type\textsuperscript{17}. That is why the roles of the leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions are undergoing many changes. Further, the concepts of decentralization and welfare state have given new approaches to leadership patterns in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

\textsuperscript{16} Suresh Mishra and Chiranjeev Singh, Rural Leadership in Haryana : Changing Profile, Kurukshetra, April, 1998, p.43.
\textsuperscript{17}Sugan Chand Jain, Community Development and Panchayati Raj in India, Allied Publishers, Calcutta, 1967, p.607.
The leadership of Panchayati Raj has to address itself to the challenges of meeting the developmental urge of the masses. Before that it must be realize that masses cannot be fed on agitation alone, last such agitation is to recoil upon itself, nor an external assistance can be relied upon perpetually. It must prepare the citizens to assume obligations relating to taxes, savings, voluntary efforts and the like. It must give up the distrust and negative attitudes towards the officials in enlisting their enthusiasm and cooperation for achieving the developmental goals. The discipline of collective deliberation has to be learnt and the process of controlling the execution mastered. This is no superfluous achievement. To the people, Panchayati Raj is a means for recognizing such constructive leadership from the adventurous type. They have to distinguish the true representatives of the people from narrow and selfish interests masquerading as popular representatives.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{3.6 Emergence of Women Leadership in PRIs}

According to the Census of 2001, the sex ratio (females per thousand males) is 924 and has been declining since 1901\textsuperscript{19}, with a marginal increase in 1981 and 1991. Since the beginning of the planned development era, women have been viewed as a deprived section requiring welfare measures. It was only in 1975 that a UN’s declaration compelled the government to shift the emphasis of the women’s programmes from welfare to development. More


attention was given to health, education and employment. In 1985, after the women World Congress at Nairobi, a National document was prepared laying down forward looking strategies for women’s development. In this document the question of their political participation was highlighted and it was recommended that 35 per cent of the total seats should be reserved for women and the document was known as the National Perspective Plan (1988). It was also recommended in the plan that some posts should be reserved for women at the block and village level bureaucracy. On the economic front a number of income generating schemes targeting women such as Development of Women and Child in Rural Areas (DWACRA) were introduced. In addition, provisions were also made to keep certain proportion of women as beneficiaries in all the developmental schemes like IRDP, JRY, NRY, TRYSEM, thus, national and international events coupled with the complex social and economic factors influencing the decisions and calumniating in the reservation of 33.3 per cent of the total seats for them at the Panchayati Raj level.

Since women do not have much social and economic power hither to, they are also unable to exercise political power. Evidence from Parliament, State legislatures and trade unions clearly shows that women’s representation in them is insignificant. In political parties, important posts are also not given to women. In fact, the New Delhi document on women in development (1985) was aware of this problem and remarked that despite the rapid growth of informal political activity by women, their role in the formal political structure
had virtually remained unchanged. Even after a decade, not much perceptible change has taken place on the national scene except the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution. If it is implemented, around one million women would come into national politics from both Panchayats and municipalities. But not all states have been enthusiastic about holding elections to the local self-government bodies.

Panchayati Raj Institutions, the grass root units of local self-government have been proclaimed as the vehicles of socio-economic transformation of India. Article 243(e), 11<sup>th</sup> schedule lists 29 subjects which are to be looked after by Panchayati Raj Institutions. These are developmental in nature ranging from education, health, sanitation and communication to agriculture, minor irrigation and small scale industries.<sup>20</sup>

Empowerment of women for effective participation at various levels in PRIs has been discussed and debated in different forums, particularly from 1957 onwards. But the first concrete measure to give constitutional sanction on it was taken by Rajiv Gandhi’s Government by introducing the 64<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill on Local Government on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1989. The bill aimed at revitalizing Panchayati Raj Institutions by brining changes in their powers, structure and functions. It was defeated by a small margin in Rajya Sabha. The Narsimha Rao government has been successful in enacting the

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<sup>20</sup> Anupama Shah Dr. and Susan Jaeds, <i>Social Welfare</i>, Central Social Welfare Board, New Delhi, November 1995, pp.3-4.
Constitution (seventy third) Amendment Act, 1992 which includes various provisions for strengthening panchayats at all levels. The Act is extremely important for political empowerment of women, scheduled castes and schedule tribes. Not less than one third of the total membership of Panchayati bodies have been reserved for women including that of S.Cs and S.Ts and these seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in Panchayats. The idea behind this move is to enable more women to enter the political stream and create a critical mass of women leaders. If applied in letter and spirit as many as eight lakh women including those belonging to the S.Cs and S.Ts will become panchas and Sarpanchas.

India is perhaps the first country to recognize this social fact and to have taken concrete measures to draw women into leadership positions and thereby into politics by giving them one third reservations. This will have far reaching consequences in Indian political and social life. We cannot make democracy meaningful in a traditional society like ours without the full involvement of women. The constitutional provision is only a necessary step which should be followed by effective measures of women upliftment in the country.

The inhibiting factors for effective women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions are many and diverse. Understanding of such factors will help us to suggest practical ways to overcome some of the limitations in evoking women’s participation. Various studies relating to women’s participatory role in the Panchayati bodies have revealed that these bodies being male dominated
could not recognize the importance of women in the local bodies. Moreover, in
the traditional rural society politics is regarded as unwomanly and the
traditional attitude prevents women from taking an active role in the body
politic. Unaware of their fundamental rights and being exploited at home and
outside, women are facing a gender bias and this does not allow them space
enough for independent thought and action in Panchayati Raj in its existing
rural scenario. Hence, the women may not be properly motivated and / or are
able to undertake additional work load, may be such that they can hardly find
time to do justice to Panchayati work.

Effective and meaningful functioning of the grass-roots units of self-
government would depend on active involvement, contribution and
participation of its citizens both male and female. For any such activities,
initiation and action should come from the people and for such a change there
should be positive attitude towards gender equality\textsuperscript{21}.

The 73\textsuperscript{rd} Constitutional Amendment Act came into force in April, 1993
and accordingly all the states have amended their laws relating to local self-
government. Since it is for the first time in the political history of India that one
third of the total seats in its local self-government institutions have been
statutorily reserved for women, the legislation has several important
implications, for the empowerment of women. It has created a silent \textit{revolution}

\textsuperscript{21}Anupama Shah Dr. and Susan Jaeds, \textit{Social Welfare}, Central Social Welfare Board, New
Delhi, November 1995, p.4.
in the country. It is necessary to create proper social, economic and also political conditions to enable women to participate effectively in the local government institutions without endangering the positive values of the prevailing family systems. In so far as the empowerment is concerned the act has provided that at least one-third of the total seats at all levels shall be reserved for women out of which one third shall be from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. In this context it is important to note that at least one-third of the total posts of the office bearers at all levels should also be reserved for women.

There are several other factors which explain low participation of women in the political process. These factors are criminalization and factionism at a macro level and lack of awareness regarding legal and economic aspects of the society, which prevent women from taking part in the public sphere. This indicates that the reservation of seats is a necessary condition for women but not sufficient to take part in the political process in an effective manner.

Again, the role of the family also needs to be considered in respect of women’s active participation in the political process. The family as an institution cutting across the caste and class line as well as regions, allocates power, authority and resources in a biased manner. It is not favourable to

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women and children in general and girl child in particular. They are always undeservedly under valued and their work is invisible.

Finally, the role of caste panchayats needs to be highlighted. These Panchayats consist of the older members of the caste who would like to preserve their caste traditions. Thus, the caste Panchayats would not like women to come out publicly and to take part in political meetings since it would go against the tradition. Similarly, the village elders may harass women Panchayat members if they raise their voices against social evils such as child marriage and sati.

Administrators do not take much interest in the specific problems of women. Of course, over the years, a number of schemes specially for the benefit of women have been devised, but administrators have been giving only lip-service to them. Since the elected women representatives would not immediately be in a position to grasp the significance of the schemes, administrators would have many opportunities to bypass them completely. Very often there is no transparency about the decisions. Further, there are not many women officials available; if available all women officers are not sensitive to the women problems. Many women officers think that having attained a certain status, they belong to a superior category and can deride village women. Widespread red tapism robs the schemes of their dynamism. For all these reasons, women should be made aware of the deficiencies of the bureaucracy and the bureaucrats should be made more sensitive to the needs of
women. In sum, it seems that women have to cross many hurdles before becoming effective partners in the decision making process. One important way for empowering women is by ensuring them a share in decision-making at the local level.

The question of women’s participation in panchayats merited attention of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974). It favoured establishment of statutory all-women panchayts at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of women and children development programmes. It was conceived as a transitional measure to break through the traditional attitudes that inhibited most women in articulating their problems or participating actively in the local bodies. Like other members of panchayats, women would be directly elected to these bodies, and should have the right to send their representatives to the panchayat samitis and / or zilla parishads. To ensure viable relationship between existing gramapanchayats and the proposed women’s panchayats the chairman and secretary of both these bodies should be ex-officio members. The idea of all women panchayats, as Sushila Kaushik observes, is no longer projected as a statutory provision. “While its emergence so far has been only coincidental, and not always too complimentary, it may also lead to marginalization of women”\(^{24}\). She argues that this recommendation brings out

the deficiencies in the working of panchayats, their patriarchal domination and negligence of issues concerning women.

The Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions headed by Asoka Mehta (1978) laid stress on the need for recognising and strengthening women’s role in the decision-making processes of panchayats. To quote it ‘Greater representation of women in the panchayati raj bodies and participation in the elective process are in a way related’. This measure is likely to influence both the directional and the implementation level. The committee recommended reservation of two seats for women in panchayats and co-opt women, in case they did not come through elections. With regard to women’s participation in elections the committee felt that part of the idea in the Punjab Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishads Act, 1961 would be relevant. The Act provides that two women securing the highest number of votes amongst the women candidates in the election, will take the seats reserved for them. This is a method of co-option by election. The committee suggested that these seats would be in addition to the general seats which they might win by a majority in the normal course. The committee had also felt the need for an institutional arrangement in the form of a committee with all women members of the mandal panchayat represented on it25. It would ensure that decisions were taken by ‘women themselves on priorities and choices in welfare and development programmes specially meant for women and children’. The committee

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recommended the promotion of women’s role in rural industrialization as a means of providing employment for women. It laid stress on effective organization of Mahila Mandals as important component in the rural development programmes. The rural women should have full access to development resources and services. The Asoka Mehta Committee had acknowledged the need for associating women with the processes of decision-making, but could not give a clear direction. This had resulted in a cumbersome proposal about the participation of women in panchayats. But the fact remains that it set the ball rolling.

3.7 The National Perspective Plan

The National Perspective Plan (1988) for women dwelt on the question of political participation of women at the grass-roots democratic institutions. The core group set up by the Government of India pointed out that political power and access to position of decision making and authority are critical prerequisites for women’s equality in the process of nation building. The recommendations of the committee were as follow:

(a) There should be reservation of 30 per cent of seats for women in all rural local self-governing bodies at all levels from the village panchayats to the zilla parishads;

(b) There should also be reservation of 30 percent of the executive heads of all bodies from gram panchayats to zilla parishads for women; and
(c) A more effective step would be to declare a certain percentage of constituencies in the lower tiers of panchayats as exclusively women’s constituencies and all executive positions in a certain number of territorial jurisdictions reserved for women candidates.

One of the members of the National Committee for Perspective Plan for Women, Nirmala Deshpande refused to accept reservation as an appropriate method for tackling the problem of women’s participation in panchayats\(^\text{26}\). She argued that reservation implied that women were inferior and needed some kind of protection. She suggested:

General awareness should be strengthened and spiritual and moral values of our country should be highlighted. An atmosphere has to be created where these values are given due importance. Then women will naturally come up.

In rural areas they get socialized in such a way that they feel that the household work is their principal and often only work. Added test is the unfavourable attitude of males. Such a situation calls for special provision like reservation of seats.

3.8 Reservation of Seats and Practices

Many states had introduced reservation of seats for women through legislative changes before the Seventy-Third Constitution Amendment Act

came into being although the percentage varies from state to state, the range of variation being 10 percent as in Madhya Pradesh to $33 \frac{1}{3}$ percent as in West Bengal. After the 73rd constitutional amendment came into being the states have started changing their legislations to meet requirements of the amendment. Elections have also been held in some states. The reservation of seats for women in panchayats is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end, the end being more and more involvement of women who constitute nearly 50 percent of the total population in the country, with the decision-making processes in rural India and political empowerment of women.

It is evident that the question of effective and genuine participation of women in panchayats in India cannot be ensured simply by amending the Constitution of India. The constitutional amendment will definitely bring in stipulated percentage of women in the panchayats. The amendment of the Constitution providing reservation of seats is a step forward, and needs to be followed up by necessary changes in the living conditions, through land reforms, progressive women’s movement and creation of a new culture in tune with democracy at the grassroots level.

It needs to be stressed that women empowerment through panchayats would largely depend on the breaking of the hegemony of the rural rich over villagers or in other words feudalism. Gupta writes “With reservation of seats for women becoming statutory the affluent landowners cannot directly resist the entry of women in politics. But there is little doubt that they will go to great
lengths to retain their control over villages"\textsuperscript{27}. The feudal-patriarchal structure has to be attached. And for this purpose land reform should receive the highest priority. Women empowerment through panchayat requires to be supported by a sustained campaign and vigorous efforts for creating awareness about their rights and duties for organizing women and for increasing educational facilities for women. Reservation of seats in local bodies has given opportunity to women to play an important role in the decision-making processes. This is a challenge to women. It is to be always remembered that reservation is not an end in itself but a means to an end-end being women empowerment.

3.9 Parliamentary Initiatives for women empowerment

The Parliament of India over the decades has grown increasingly sensitive to the issue to empowerment of women and has been working towards a strategy for the increasing representation of women in the legislative bodies. In fact, on March 8, 1996, that is, on the International Women’s Day, a Resolution was adopted unanimously by the House wherein the need for providing adequate reservation of seats for women in the State Legislatures and Parliament was stated. Further, to achieve the objective and to monitor the progress and also to suggest ways and means to implement the policies and projects meant for improving the status of women, constitution of a Standing Committee of both Houses was suggested. In pursuance of this resolution a Joint Standing Committee for improving the status of women was constituted.

\textsuperscript{27} Tilak D.Gupta, \textit{“Breaking into a Male Stronghold”}, The Telegraph, 9 July, 1994, pp.15-17.
It was inaugurated on May 6, 1997. While speaking at the inaugural meeting of the Committee Najma Heptulla said:

In order to secure for women equality, status and dignity in all fields there is an urgent and continuing need for changing societal attitude and elimination of all forms of gender based discrimination in the mind of men and women in the society. Unless women acquire equal status and dignity in all spheres, the development and advancement of any society or country cannot be considered complete. No society can progress without women’s equality, status and development. To achieve the broader objective of equality, there is a need for translation of a *jure* equality or women into *de facto* equality, participation of women in all spheres of life, sharing of responsibilities between women and men, affirmative action wherever necessary.

The Committee on Empowerment of Women has the mandate to examine among others, the measures taken by the Union Government to secure for women’s equality of status and dignity in all matters. It also examines policies for their comprehensive education and adequate representation in legislative bodies and other fields. Till date the Committee has presented nine reports on varied issues like developmental schemes for rural women, functioning of National and State Commissions for women violence against women during riots and training and empowerment of women in local bodies. To further deepen and broaden the participation of women in panchayat bodies the Committee in its 8th Report strongly recommended for expanding the
opportunities for women’s participation in the executive committee and other committees of the local representative bodies. It is well known that under the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts of the Constitution one-third of the seats in the panchayat bodies have been reserved for women. However, it has been noticed that in the executive committees and other committees which carry out the functions of panchayats, the representation of women is not sufficient. Therefore, the Committee on Empowerment of Women recommended that women representation in those Committees should be at least one-third, i.e., it is proportion to their strength in the local bodies. The Committee felt that would encourage women and inculcate a sense of responsibility if provision is made to appoint a woman as the vice-chairperson if the chairperson is the man and vice-versa. It is apparent that Parliament through its Committee is making in-depth analysis of the issue and giving valuable suggestions for women’s empowerment.

On the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Independence in August 1997 Parliament held a special session in which a resolution was adopted by Rajya Sabha wherein also the issue of empowerment of women features. It was stated in the resolution “that gender justice be established in the spirit of the Declaration and Platform for Action of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and be practiced as a way of life”.

On the occasion of the International Women’s Day in 1999, a Resolution was proposed which was adopted unanimously by the House. While
referring to similar Resolutions adopted earlier it was suggested that attention may be focused on the following issues:

(i) Adequate reservation for women in both the Houses of Parliament to be made so as to give representation to all sections of society.

(ii) Given the vital role that parliamentarians can play in the process of social change and the critical importance attached to accountability to legislature in Platform for Action, it is important to build their capacities, strengthen their networks and equip them with resources.

(iii) Women’s voices should be promoted in decision-making process including the macro planning processes.

(iv) The fulfillment of the Ninth Plan objective of Empowerment of Women and the strategy of sectoral women’s component plans needs to be closely monitored and women’s voices and perspective should be a part of this monitoring.

(v) There should be an ongoing process of gender mainstreaming including the strengthening of the government machinery and the National Commission for Women.

(vi) Gender sensitization of enforcement mechanisms, judiciary and central and state ministries are to be a priority and need to be matched with resources.
(vii) The reform of laws to address issues of gender based violence should be closely monitored.

(viii) Additional resources both financial and technical need to be committed to combat increasing gender-based violence, to provide legal literacy and to correct media portrayal of women.

(ix) The engendering of census and data gathering systems should be a priority.

(x) There is need for enhanced UN system support for efforts at securing gender equality and development.

It is important to note that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development is currently focusing attention on the issue of making our budgetary processes more sensitive to women’s issues. In this context, the Committee is aiming to stress on the need for greater availability of micro-credit facilities to the women’s Self-Help Groups spread over large parts of the country for their economic well being and empowerment.

3.10 Gender Perspective in Five Year Plans

In India, a value encouraging political participation of women co-exists with the notions of traditional role of women vis-à-vis the family and society. The Five-Year Plans of the executive reflected this notion in the first Five Plans. The issue of women and their development was viewed primarily from the welfare point of view. The First Five Year Plan set up Central Social
Welfare Board in 1953 to undertake welfare activities through voluntary sector. The Second Five Year Plan hoped for development from grassroots through Mahila Mandals and the third, fourth and the interim plans planned for education of women, material and child care services, etc. In the Fifth Plan there was a shift from the welfare to the developmental approach and it was only in the Sixth Plan that women’s upliftment and their role as agents of development received priority attention. In fact, in the Sixth Plan document a separate Chapter on Women and Development was incorporated. Multi-disciplinary approach with three-pronged thrust on health, education and employment was suggested. In the Seventh Plan, the objective was clearly stated to bring the women into the mainstream of national development. And in the eighth Plan for the first time the shift was made from development to empowerment and the need for flow of benefits to women in the core sectors of education, health and employment. The Ninth Plan states empowerment of women as a strategic objective. The Approach Paper called for women’s component plan as a part of the plan of each sector to identify the impact of plans and programmes on women. The Plan assures that at least 30 percent of funds/benefits from all development sector flow to women. The Tenth Plan approach aims at empowering women by translating the recently adopted National Policy for Empowerment of Women (2001) into action.

The strain of lamentation about insufficient representation of women in our legislatures continues to agitate the conscience of our leaders even after 50
years of the functioning of our Parliament. It found articulation on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Parliament when the Chairman of Rajya Sabha Shri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat while addressing the International Parliamentary Conference expressed concern that many deprived and neglected sections of society, particularly women, do not have enough space in political life. Taking note of the fact, that share of women in representative bodies in the world has not gone beyond 14 per cent he recalled the profound statement made by Mahatma Gandhi in 1925 that, “As long as women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country”. Stating that the “Indian experience in this regard could be relevant” he referred to the provision in our Constitution under which 33 per cent of the seats for women at the grassroots representative bodies like panchayats and municipalities have been reserved. Mentioning that such steps have enabled about a million women to occupy seats in such bodies, he drew attention to the Bill pending before Parliament for providing 33 percent reservation for women at the national and state levels. Possibly affirmative action at the grassroots level democratic institutions constitutes exemplary action for women’s empowerment which can be replicated at the national level. Movements launched by women themselves for greater access to public life and decision-making bodies are distinguishing features of the larger trend for deepening democracy and regenerating our inclusive society and polity. Attempts to reserve 33 percent of seats for women
in legislative bodies at the national and state levels and the wider acceptability of this idea by people generate hope for their empowerment.

3.11 Political Empowerment of Rural Women

With the grant of constitutional gender-equality in free India came legal support through a series of legislations. While dealing with gender issues, it is important to mention that the Constitution of India has guaranteed equality before law and equal protection of law (Article 14 and prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex alone and it has empowered the State to make special provisions for women and children in Article 15). It has made provisions to prohibit traffic in human beings and to provide for just and humane conditions of work along with maternity relief (Article 23 and Article 42). It is a constitutional duty of every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51A). In this respect, India’s Constitution has a place of distinction among the comity of nations.

The Indian constitution made a deliberate radical departure from the age-old poor social status of women by granting them equal, social and political status. Constitutional equal status means that every adult female, whatever be her social position or accomplishments, has now the opportunity to function as a citizen and individual partner in the task of nation building.

In view of the constitutional obligations, during the post-independent era, women have been recognised as a separate target group and the
government has directed its efforts towards mainstreaming of women into the national developmental process. This period has witnessed far-reaching changes in almost all spheres-political, economic and social. In terms of constitutional, legal and administrative measures, many commendable initiatives have been taken. Prominent among them are the Constitutional provisions for gender equality and justice, enactment of new laws and amendment of existing laws to protect and promote the interests of women, setting up of women-specific administrative and economic structures, such as Women and Child Development Department at the Union and State Government levels, formation of National Commission for women in several states, State Women Development Corporations, orienting plan strategy to include women specific and women related programmes, launching of special schemes like Rashtriya Mahila Kosh and Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Indira Mahila Yojana, etc.

3.12 Strategies for Enhancing Political Participation of Women

Women participation in different levels have the following obstacles: (1) Relatively short historical tradition of women’s political participation (especially during the freedom struggle); (2) Prevailing negative attitudes towards women’s active participation in public life; (3) Difficulty in combining a poonjugal role of women; (4) Economic dependency on male or lack of financial means; (5) Poor female education and lack of awareness of their rights. Illiteracy happens to be an important stumbling block towards
empowerment; and (6) Women’s reluctance for power games or indifference to political participation due to the system of purdah.

Political empowerment of women is not to be viewed in isolation. Structural changes in the formal power institution, economic, independence, increasing awareness through education and gender equality in the social and cultural ethos are important prerequisites for political empowerment of women. The political participation of women generally suffers on two counts; first, because the society as a whole is impoverished, and second, because they are women.

The strategy should be to empower a greater number of women in the decision-making process. Governments, political parties and other organisations should encourage women’s participation in politics and in the exercise of political responsibilities. The women’s organizations should exert pressure on political parties to open up opportunities to women as candidates for elections and encourage female functionaries in political parties.

In addition, political parties need to express clearly their commitment to end discriminations against women and to ensure women’s development as an integral component of their policies of national development and as their party ideology. As a supplementary measure, political parties need to encourage women at all decision-making levels, if necessary, by providing affirmative measures to strengthen and consolidate women’s presence at various organizational and decision-making levels. Alternatively, they can also form
Lack of education and political awareness partly accounts for deprivation of women. In such a situation, the main objective of women’s education should be on mainstream gender issues and strengthening the capability of women to make them aware of their rights so that they are able to face the challenges in securing gender equality.

3.13 Women’s Bill and Political Empowerment

There is nothing wrong with increasing political participation of women, but the moot questions are: Is the passing of pending bill for reservation for women in legislative bodies most essential at this juncture? Is it the only effective opinion for empowerment of women in the India context at the moment? If the purpose of empowerment is to attain equality with men or to cope with gender-based discriminations, there is, in fact, some other effective option too. The protagonists of women liberation movement should also think other option, in fact more seriously, than mere reservation of seats in state legislatures and parliament.

Female protagonists of reservation of seats for women in Parliament and State Assemblies are terribly worried over such a fate of the bill. Making a
strong reaction to it, they often say that the bill is pending because it is against the established values of a male dominated society. However, the charge is frivolous because the bill was not moved by a female-headed or dominated government. It is also said that the low female representation in the decision-making organizations is because the political parties harbour very conservative view about women. Different parties champion the cause of women in their manifestos, but during election time they give tickets mostly to men. All political parties do have a women’s wing, but the access to the inner ring of the party, which is the core of the power structure of the party, is not very easy for women for various reasons. Increasing lumpenisation and use of muscle power in political game keep the women away. The criterion for political parties for their selection of contestants in the ‘win ability factor’ rather than their identity in the constituency. Some political parties deny tickets to women on the ground of non-win ability factor.

There is strong apprehension about the necessity of reservation for women in the highest legislative body at this juncture. Many people, even those who are strong votary of gender equality, feel that it would be premature to initiate affirmative action for women through passing the women’s bill. The level of literacy for women is quite low and the country is way behind in matters of development compared to most developing countries, leave the developed world aside, India democracy has not really come to the stage for such an action. There is no need to caricature or emulate blindly what is seen in
some developed countries. India should wait and watch for some more time and assess the effectiveness or success of reservation for women at the local level government.

Different political parties, however, are opposed to the passing of the bill for some other reasons. The political parties, which stand for the cause of backwards, minorities and other socially and economically under-privileged sections of society, apprehend that through reservation for women the political interests of the under-privileged would suffer. At that time, the journalist Rajshekhari rightly held that the bid to introduce the women’s bill on gender quota was an upper caste ploy to stem the rising tide of lower caste men in legislative bodies. This was one of the important reasons why most leaders of the Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal (U), Samata Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajvadi Party and other parties and politicians with socialist leaning opposed introduction of the bill in the Lok Sabha. In a similar vein, on the contrary, the feminists outside the Parliament support the bill in no uncertain terms because they mostly belong to the elite sections of upper castes with strong vested interests in their political career.

Due to low level of political awareness and education and widespread poverty, these women from disadvantaged sections of society would not match the relatively developed women from upper castes and upper echelons of

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society in electoral race and thus the causes of *dalits* and Other Backward Classes along with those of minorities would ultimately suffer because of consequent decline in representation in legislative bodies. The issue of reservation for women is supported quite vociferously, mostly by those who belong to the cities from upper castes, because they know that they would instantly benefit from the women’s bill. This would not help larger sections, of women from lower strata of society, who are mostly illiterate and hard-pressed from poverty. This would also help those women whose husbands or other close kind are in politics. Thus, in ultimate analysis the political gains of women community in general would result in redundancy of the bill. Furthermore, the Indian politics has become so dirty that women’s involvement in politics would merely make them corrupt and criminal along with their husbands.

The feminists, who are critical of men’s attitude towards women in politics, believe that women’s increased involvement would help improve the lot of women in general. Such scholars should try to assess the performance of Mrs. Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, who ruled the country for about 17 years – a period longer than that of any male Prime Minister, including her own father, Jawaharlal Nehru. Similarly how far female Chief Ministers, like Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu and Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh did for women or what Rabri Devi was able to do for the women in Bihar as a Chief Minister also
deserve analysis by feminist scholars, especially when they feel that male politicians are biased against women.

Most middle class urban women are virtually crazy about the ideas put forth by intellectual Marxist women from the Western world. What they see the women doing in the US, Germany, Norway, UK or some other Western countries through media or through personal experience, they try to emulate the same in India, without giving any thought to their necessity or relevance in the Indian context. They fail to recognize that India is ahead of most developed countries in granting equal rights and privileges to women in politics. To be objective, the level of economic development of India is comparable to the 19th Century Western world, and the position of women in the 19th Century Western world was relatively much worse in many respects. Spain, for instance, being a developed country, gave equal civil rights to women as late as 1978.

Indisputably, India is committed to the cause of empowerment of women. However, the journey towards progress is long and arduous. In a world of challenge and competition, both the State and the society have to constantly attune themselves to the changing needs. It is recognised that the development of the country is not possible if women, comprising half of the human resource, as labour force and citizens, stay away from the national development process. Women’s participation in the political process of development is of crucial importance from the consideration of both equity and development.
India has witnessed great changes in the last two decades. Age-old prejudices and gender-based biases are giving way to gender equality and harmonious development. Women of today are no longer content to remain peripheral actors, and want to play their rightful role in all spheres of life. Political emancipation and social empowerment will act as main catalytic in achieving the empowerment of women to a large extent. However, in the present circumstances, empowerment of women is possible more effectively through economic empowerment rather than through reservation or some seats in Parliament or state legislatures.

At the broad societal level, both sexes share a common humanity, which is the basis for the notion of equal human rights and freedom if any section of society—men, women, children, caste or class—is denied dignity and respect than this must be restored to them. India has heralded the new millennium by pronouncing the year 2001 as Women’s Empowerment Year. In terms of political empowerment, nearly seven lakh women occupy positions as members and chairpersons of grassroots democratic institutions in India following reservation of one-third seats at village and municipal level for women. In fact, right from the days of freedom struggle the Indian women have been consistently encouraged to take part in active politics. But due to the vitiated political milieu, resulting from increasing politicization and criminalization of politics, the level of political participation of women has been adversely
affected despite the fact that there has been a marked increase in the level of literacy and political awareness of women.

3.14 Measures to improve women empowerment

The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) in 2011 called for strong, practical actions that will support women's economic empowerment globally. The Conference highlighted the need to:

- Transform institutional, legal and policy environments to generate a macro model that is more conducive to women's economic empowerment;
- Adopt an integrated approach that addresses different categories of constraints, including gender-specific, institutional and attitude barriers, to overcome challenges to women's economic empowerment;
- Recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid work and to reinforce rights of domestic workers;
- Increase women's economic security as a prerequisite to create the conditions for women to move away from low-risk, low return sectors and for asset building and accumulation;
- Support women's organizations, including women business networks, to have greater voice in policy decision-making and policies on women's economic empowerment.
In Indian context, large numbers of rural women are illiterate, ignorant and poorly informed about ongoing issues debates and reforms concerning the society in general and women in particular. Therefore, the first strategy should aim at striking at ignorance by dissemination of information and raising general as well as political awareness among the toiling rural women. They should be helped to attain knowledge and awareness of their own self personal needs, health issues, legal right and society at large. The realization of their capabilities, potentialities and the role in society would strengthen their self-image and would foster them with confidence to take action in life. Besides general awareness, women need to be enlightened politically, not only about their rights and duties, but also the nature of our Constitution, democratic processes and values, working of democratic institutions, concept and relevance of Panchayati Raj particularly the message of present Panchayati Raj Act and one-third of reservation of seats for women, various poverty alleviation programmes and policies for women and weaker sections.

The Government should take the lead in this matter by introducing a component of political awareness in all the ongoing programmes like National Literacy Mission, Department of Women and Child in Rural Area (DWCRA) Training Programme, the Mahila Samakhya Programme, Centre for Social Welfare Board (CSWB) Awareness Generation camps, legal literacy camps, sponsored by Department of Women and Children, CAPARTOB Programme, Rajasthan’s Women and Development Programme, etc.
NGOs, women’s organisations and movements can adopt various strategies for educating women on issues and problems concerning women and need to participate in grass roots democracy. Mock Panchayats, puppetry, songs, street poster exhibitions, informal group discussion, canvassing and other indigenous cultural forums like Haridatha would go a long way in awareness generation. Already many women’s organisations like Stree Adhar Kendra (Bombay), Sampark Samiti (Maharashtra) Vimochna (Bangalore), The Forum for Women and Politics (Delhi), Aware (Andhra Pradesh), Samta (Mysore), etc., are working in this direction. Many groups in Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Pune have prepared women’s manifestos and have conducted voters’ education campaign and exposure programmes on vote fearlessly and consciously for those candidates who would place women’s issues and problems at centre while formulating various programmes and policies. Such kinds of exposure programmes not only educate the women but also make them realize the value of their vote which they must exercise to make election a reality by participating in it in sizeable number. It also capacitates them to be a part of wider, articulate and powerful movement. It also enables them to create a platform for making their voices heard and give direction and visibility to women specific issues. But considering the size of the Nation and the number of ignorant and illiterate women their number is too small. More over they are confined primarily to the metropolitan cities and not to remote rural areas where the need for such organisations is more acute.
Mass media can play a vital role in awareness generation. Women can be motivated and inspired to think, discuss and act politically with the help of documentaries, television and radio sports on women’s rights, achievements of All Women Panchayats in Maharashtra like transfer of land rights to women in Vitner Village (Jalgaon District), reduction in working hours of women by providing facilities like installation of taps for drinking water, gobar gas plants in Metikheda Village (Yavatmal District), construction of toilets for women, health centres, schools, etc., advantages of participation of women in PRIs, facilitation and depiction of successful stories of women members of Panchayat bodies in different parts of the country. Audio, visual and print media can help in formulating positive public opinion and creating a sympathetic atmosphere by dissemination of information on women’s issues which in the long run may result in society’s recognition of women’s equality with men.

There is a need for comprehensive and meaningful training programme for rural women for performing their Constitutional duties and responsibilities as members of PRIs. They are ill-informed about powers, procedures and functioning of these bodies, the kind of role they have to play and the problems they are likely to face in a male dominated political institution. In Maharashtra, in Vidharba and most of the remote rural areas women did demand a training programme for effective participation in these bodies.

There cannot be a centralized training programme. Module and content of training programme should be specific to the needs of a State. Besides, it
should be different for different levels, i.e., Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Village Panchayati. Women members in Zilla Parishad are more aware, enlightened and articulate as compared to women in Panchayat Samities and Village Panchayats. Therefore, same training programme cannot be suitable for all the levels.

Training should aim at bringing about hidden qualities, generating self-confidence, self-pride, development of communication skills and effective convicting power for public interaction, forming opinion and articulating the same, raising an issue, use of data and above all the leadership qualities to deal with powerful forces and vested interests.

A training programme must bring within its fold both men and women to change the patriarchal orientation in men and male institutions. Awareness generation that is women specific will at best have limited impact and may even run the risk of gender conflict. Various studies have confirmed that elected / nominated or co-opted women members to institution of Panchayati Raj usually belong to dominant classes and castes. They have rarely been able to articulate, represent or project the interest of their gender. In view of family responsibilities women in rural areas – particularly from weaker section – cannot take time off to attend training programmes. Moreover, their participation in training programmes is usually at the cost of daily wage and not attending to their daily chores in their house-holds. There is need to think of creative ways of training these women who work under time constraints. If
they are not enabled to participate, there is every livelihood of these positions in Panchayati bodies to be cornered by rural elite. The very purpose of one-third reservation of total seats for women will be defeated.

Departments of Rural Development and the Women and Child Development should allocate funds for undertaking political awareness and training camps on the lines of awareness generation and legal literacy camps. Additional allocations should be provided for spreading political literacy and for preparing and developing training modules and manuals. It is heartening to note that the Rural Development Ministry has been asked to draw up a Plan in consultation with the Information and Broadcasting Ministry for publicity, spread of awareness and dissemination of information on Panchayati Raj.

Women do not constitute a homogeneous group. They are divided among different economic classes, castes, religions and regions. The need of the hour is to organize women particularly from poorer households for breaking the barriers of inequality, invisibility and powerlessness on the one hand and broadening the base for participatory development at grass roots level on the other hand. Local women’s groups are the basic units where they get an opportunity to interact with each other, articulate their views and form opinion on various issues, policies and development perspectives for change. They provide training ground for meetings, discussions, public speaking, voicing organized demands for their development. Small group-meetings are ideal forums for their development. Small group-meetings are ideal forums not only
for developing collective strength, unity, bargaining capacity, support and confidence but also for socio-economic, political and legal advancement of rural poor women through women’s efforts. All kinds of women’s organisations like Mahila Mandals, Mahila Sangams, Mahila Samajams should be promoted at grass roots level. The GOs, NGOs, Women’s Studies Centre, the Agriculture Extension Institutions, Agricultural Universities should act as facilitators and catalysts and play an active and positive role in providing information skill and resources for evolving and establishing grass roots women’s organisations.

But, for enabling women to become an effective pressure group and leveler of power networking and pooling of resources of different women’s organisation is of crucial importance. Mahila Milap, Sampark Samiti, Forum for Women in Politics, Samakaya in Gujarat, Women and Development in Rajasthan are successful examples of networking. A network helps the process of strengthening women’s influence on development policy, enhancing political participation of women and highlighting women’s concern in decision-making bodies and strengthening women’s movement.

In addition to these, it is necessary to provide certain support services to women members of Panchayats for strengthening their political empowerment. In the existing political milieu money and muscle power plays a very vital role over local electoral politics making elections extremely expensive, violent and corrupt. Women being most numerous of deprived and weakest groups, will
require greater assistance for canvassing, traveling to different villages and mobilizing political support for themselves. As PRIs elections are being increasingly fought on party lines, political parties should create a special fund for women, candidates. Alternatively, local Mahila Mandal,s Women’s organisations should raise resources to enable women candidates to contest and win elections.

Information and access to information underpins the process of empowerment. There is an urgent need for resource centre which should be equipped with educative and informative material on various issues. It will not only be a common meeting place for women for interaction and articulation of their views on women specific issues and problems but will also add to general awareness, sustained political education and training for exercising political empowerment effectively.

3.15 Summing Up

The dynamics of leadership, its socio-economic origins, and social consequences have always fascinated social scientists. Social scientists usually define leadership in terms of power or the capacity of any actor in a social system to influence the behaviour of others. Leadership plays an important role in moulding the social, political and economic life of village communities. The socio-economic development of any rural community depends to a great extent on the quality of leadership. Unless the leaders play an active role progress in this direction would be impossible. Hence the Panchayati Raj leadership which
Aims at the development of community through its active involvement becomes the ‘gap closer’ between the bureaucracy and the masses and thereby filling-up a vast organizational gap. In view of its significance, it becomes imperative to examine the nature and functioning of emerging rural leadership over time. As can be made out from the new dispensation i.e., the constitution (73rd Amendment Act) 1992, the role of local leadership has a great responsibility in translating various policy measures into pulsating reality.

Reservations play a crucial role in breaking the strong hold of the traditionally dominant sections on the PRI Leadership which is no longer confined to a particular class, caste or gender. Despite certain limitations this will help the lower caste leadership to move up in the ladder to look after their own affairs in the rural areas. The shift of power to the poor and weaker sections of society may be rather slow, but it is taking place. In a way the mandatory elections of SCs, STs and Women candidates is likely to change socio-economic dynamics in the countryside. Since women do not have much social and economic power hither to, they are also unable to exercise political power. Evidence from Parliament, State legislatures and trade unions clearly shows that women’s representation in them is insignificant. India is perhaps the first country to recognize this social fact and to have taken concrete measures to draw women into leadership positions and thereby into politics by giving them one third reservations. The National Perspective Plan (1988) for women dwelt on the question of political participation of women at the grass-roots democratic institutions. The core group set up by the Government of India pointed out that political power and access to position of
decision making and authority are critical prerequisites for women’s equality in the process of nation building.

Various policies, bills and notes on women empowerment and reservations, after being reviewed, reveal that women do have an important role to play in politics but there are some socio cultural challenges which need to be overcome. The government has provided various legislations and policies to implement and encourage women participation in politics and play an important in rural as well as urban politics. As this study intends to study the role of women in PRIs, the following chapter will especially focus on the theme of women’s role in PRI and various challenges they are facing while carrying out their primary roles and responsibilities.