

Political Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj

Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu

E. K. Santha

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E. K. Santha

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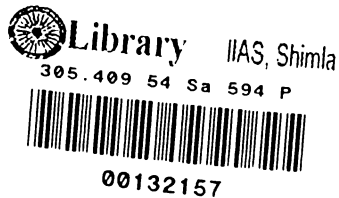
Ms. E. K. Santha, member, research faculty of the Institute of Social Sciences, stationed in Chennai, co-ordinated the study and prepared this report.

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Foreword

In May 1996, the Institute of Social Sciences took up a project to study "Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions" with special reference to the three states of Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

The passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment enabled a large number of women to enter public life in elected local bodies for the first time. It was felt that there was a need to study differences in performance of elected women to determine factors which affect the degree of their effective participation in panchayati raj institutions. Therefore, the aim of the study was to understand the performance of women elected representatives in the Panchayati Raj institutions in three states with varying characteristics in the early phase of their functioning.

The direct interaction with the women elected members helped the researcher to get an in-depth understanding of their problems and possibilities. This report will be translated into Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam for better dissemination. The report will be made available as source material for the training programmes being conducted in these states and other parts of the country.

I am grateful to the Gender Equity Fund Project of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), New Delhi, for financially supporting this study.

George Mathew
Director, ISS

1 January 1999

Introduction

No matter how noble the man is; or how good his intentions are, he cannot understand a woman's needs or adequately represent her.

- Marie Mitchell Olesen Urbanski

People's participation is the backbone of democracy. In a modern democratic system, the decision-making process virtually begins and ends with the elected representatives. In other words, people's representatives are responsible for decision-making and policy formulation and they do this on behalf of the people. However, barring one or two countries in the world, women – who constitute about one-half of any nation's population – are under-represented in the various democratically elected bodies. Their number and proportion in government, particularly in the legislatures, are abysmally low. Thus, as a general practice, half of the population, the women, is kept away from active political participation. Their role is reduced to that of mere voters as well as activists within the parameters defined and earmarked for them by the political parties, which are once again dominated by men.

Ram Manohar Lohia, one of the founders of the socialist movement in India, attacked the segregation of women in politics and equated it with segregation on the basis of caste identities. To him "the two segregations of caste and women are primarily responsible for the decline of the spirit. These two segregations have enough power to kill all capacity for adventure and joy. All those who think that by the removal of poverty through a modern economy, the segregation will automatically disappear make a big mistake. Poverty and this segregation thrive on each other's arms. All war on poverty is a sham unless it is at the same time a conscious and sustained war on these two segregations."¹

The women's question was central not only to Lohia but in the thinking of Lenin, the leader of the socialist revolution; Lenin said, "You cannot draw the masses into politics without drawing in the women as well... if we do not draw women into public activity, in the militia, into

public life, we do not tear women from the deadening atmosphere of the household and kitchen; (for they are overburdened with the drudgery of the most squalid, backbreaking and stultifying toil in the kitchen and the household) then it is impossible to build a democracy."²

As early as in 1917, the Women's Indian Association initiated a movement for women's franchise under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu. They presented a memorandum to the British Parliament demanding enfranchisement of women on the basis of equality with men. It read: "Our interests as one-half of the people are directly affected by the demand ... that the members of the Council should be elected directly by the people on as broad a franchise as possible We pray that when such franchise is drawn up, women may be recognised as 'people' and it may be added in such terms as will not disqualify our sex but allow our women the same opportunities of representation as that of our men. In agreeing with the demand of the above mentioned memorandum, that a full measure of the Local Self-Government should be immediately granted, we request that it shall include the representation of our women...."³

Referring to the role of the Indian National Congress in providing adequate political space for women, the memorandum said: "The procedure for including women in modern Indian political life has been a marked feature of the Indian National Congress in which, ever since its inception, women have voted and been delegates and speakers, and which in this year finds its climax in the election of a woman as its president. Thus the voice of India approves its women being considered responsible and acknowledged as citizens; and we urgently claim that in drawing all provisions regarding representation, our sex shall not be made a disqualification for the exercise of the franchise or for service in public life."⁴ (The woman president of the Indian National Congress referred to in this resolution was Annie Besant.)

Voting rights to women and the necessity of women entering political and public life were subjects of

discussion in India since the Karachi resolution of the Indian National Congress seeking universal adult franchise; this was at a time when the rest of the world, particularly the West would not even think on such lines. Mahatma Gandhi, an ardent supporter of this cause said, "as long as the women of India do not take part in public life there can be no salvation for the country.... I would have no use for that kind of swaraj to which such women have not made their full contribution."⁵ This aspect was integral to the strategy of the freedom struggle. The Gandhian era during the freedom struggle was marked, among other things, by the space it provided for women's participation.

The following few words from Jawaharlal Nehru show the extent of involvement of women in the freedom struggle. "Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes—peasant women, working-class women, rich women—pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police *lathi*. It was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed."⁶

This aspect of the freedom movement suffered a serious set back in post-Independence India and its adverse impact could be found if the experience of women finding a place in the various democratic institutions – elected local bodies, State Legislatures and Parliament – are any indication. Leave alone the empowerment of women through their representation in the elected arms of the state, the feudal shackles that the freedom movement sought to break are raising their heads and tightening their grip over the various walks of social and political life.

The dark clouds of post-partition violence that hovered over Independence Day on August 15, 1947 had its adverse impact on the involvement of women in the nation's political processes. The violence and bloodshed

left an indelible mark on the first general elections in 1952, and in the first Lok Sabha there were only 14 women out of a total strength of 489 – a mere 2.8 per cent. And to this day, this has been the lowest ever percentage of women in the nation's Parliament.

The scenario was no different in the following general elections, which were again held in the aftermath of the violent agitations that were witnessed across the country for reorganisation of states based on linguistic and other lines. It is important to note here that unlike the freedom struggle, whose cardinal principle was non-violence, agitations in the post-Independence phase were marked by a lot of violence; the language of these agitations was essentially male-oriented and marked by a show of machoistic tendencies. As long as damaging public property and disrupting civil life by violent means remained the *modus operandi* of these agitations, the involvement of women was restricted. This in turn had its effect on the space available for women to take part in political activity, and hence the elected institutions remained a male preserve.

The peaceful sixties, which also marked an era where the youth, particularly those in colleges and universities were filled with idealism reflecting in their concern for social causes, saw some improvement in the proportion of women entering Parliament. This improvement was only a relative one (and let it be stressed here that it was not at all the ideal level) and in the fourth Lok Sabha (1967-71) women accounted for six per cent of the total strength – a virtual doubling from what it was in the first Lok Sabha.

Once again, during the political convulsions (leading to the first Congress split) that marked the context of the next general elections with the opposition to Indira Gandhi's Congress consolidating to an extent, the percentage of women fell to 3.5 in the fifth Lok Sabha (1971-77), and in the post-Emergency elections too there was no marked improvement.

A marginal improvement in 1980 and a further rise in the number of women in the eighth Lok Sabha (1984-89) substantiate the argument that the language of political

mobilisation (agitation) was rendered into a male-oriented one, and it was only when elections were somewhat one-sided affairs (where there was hardly any major political upheaval) that the number of women in the Lok Sabha registered some increase. The story of the ninth Lok Sabha, which came into being in the context of the Bofors agitation, and the events preceding the tenth Lok Sabha, elections to which were held in the background of the fratricidal war that was let lose by the Hindutva forces, confirm this thesis.

This is the political background of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments and the radical provision in them for 33.3 per cent reservation for women in local government bodies. The concept of adequate representation for women in the political system is a widely discussed subject in national and international seminars. A serious discussion on such aspects of the issue as the direct link between women's participation in the decision-making process and ensuring sustainable development are on across the world since the seventies. Hence, political participation and representation of women in the various political institutions in India, the largest democracy in the world, assumes an added significance.

Studies on the representation of women in democratically elected bodies provide important data bases in the fight for equal access to education, information, fair wages, inheritance rights, etc. The United Nations' *Human Development Report* (1991) says that the empowerment of women has multiple benefits not only for the environment but for humanity as a whole. Ensuring sustainable development requires women's empowerment and their full, equal beneficial involvement in the decision-making process. The report stresses the need to combat "societal, cultural and religious attitudes [that] have resulted in discriminatory laws and practices which prevent women from participating as equal members of the society."⁷

Chapter 1

The Scope and Aim of the Study

The Constitution (73rd-74th Amendments) Acts, 1992, brought about radical changes in women's representation in local bodies. The method of co-option or nomination, the two procedures through which women's representation was ensured hitherto in the local bodies, has changed for good. Needless to say, under the previous system, women's representation in local bodies was abysmally low and most women nominated to these bodies could hardly perform any functions. All the states in India except Bihar had conducted elections to the local bodies in accordance with the new Act and almost one million women have been elected to the Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies. This brought about a social change in terms of the traditional role of women. A number of questions were raised on the feasibility of women's active participation and the imbalance it was going to create on the structure of the family vis-a-vis society.

1.1 Objectives

The main objective of the study on "Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions" was to understand the performance of women elected representatives in the various Panchayati Raj institutions in the light of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the new state conformity acts passed in its aftermath. In order to understand this, a survey was conducted in the summer of 1996 in three states – Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu – among the elected women representatives in local bodies. Besides collecting socio-economic data on the women representatives, the questionnaire schedule tried to elicit information on issues such as:

- * Whether the women representatives are exercising their powers without fear and interference?

- * Whether the women chairpersons are able to provide leadership without interference?
- * How far or to what extent have the statutory reservations resulted in women merely becoming proxies of the men?
- * What kind of problems do women face as elected representatives?
- * Can they cope with the double burden of domestic and public duties and responsibilities without either of these functions suffering?
- * What role do they perceive for themselves in sustainable development?
- * How far are women's representation and women's development interrelated?

The role of sociological factors like caste, class, educational status and religion on the political participation of women were also taken into consideration in the course of the study. Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu were selected for study as these states, put together, constitute a representative sample of the social, political and economic realities that prevail in the country, particularly insofar as the development of women is concerned.

1.2 Methodology

Two districts were selected for the study from each of the three states; the districts were thus chosen, keeping in mind that the sample must reflect the general trend in the respective state. Thrissur and Malappuram districts in Kerala, Coimbatore and Chengai MGR districts (Kancheepuram since May-June 1997 when the State Government decided to call districts after the names of the headquarters rather than after leaders and legendaries) in Tamil Nadu and Rohtak and Kurukshetra districts in Haryana were chosen to suit this requirement.

Malappuram, a predominantly Muslim dominated area is one of the socially backward areas in Kerala as far as women's development is concerned and Thrissur comes

under the category of 'socially developed area'. Coimbatore is an industrial area and yet caste segregation is palpable in the rural areas of the district. Women from the so-called lower castes are denied their legal and constitutional rights though they constitute a large proportion of the work force. Chengai MGR (Kancheepuram), another district selected for study in Tamil Nadu is situated near the capital of Tamil Nadu, Chennai. The impact on life and society here due to its physical proximity to the state capital in terms of its development and the participation of women in local bodies were studied.

Likewise, Rohtak, in Haryana, is on the borders of the National Capital Territory of India. Though predominantly an agrarian economy, this is also fast developing into an industrial area, particularly where the district borders Delhi. Kurukshetra, site of the mythological city of India's epic literature, presents a different social setting.

In order to look at the developments and analyse the extent to which the representation of women in local bodies have served as an effective means towards empowerment of women, seven gram panchayats, two block panchayats and the zilla panchayat of each district were selected for the study.

The selections were made in such a way so as to ensure that the study included panchayats with women chairpersons, Scheduled Caste chairpersons/vice-chairpersons at one level or the other. Similarly, care was taken to ensure that the sample included the panchayats at various levels of development, i.e., developed, developing and backward panchayats. Apart from that, it was ensured that caste related gender discrimination was treated separately and for this, women elected representatives who were from the lower castes in the respective areas were interviewed separately.

Interviews based on questionnaires were conducted at all the three levels of Panchayati Raj institutions. Apart from this, panchayat meetings at various levels – gram panchayats, block panchayats, zilla panchayats – in some selected panchayats were observed by the research co-ordinator; in most of the cases, panchayat meetings

were observed twice over a period of time. Through this, it was possible to get a clear perspective on the functioning of the panchayats and the actual "participation" of the women panchayat members.

The questionnaire, originally in English, was translated into Hindi, Malayalam and Tamil in order to facilitate better communication with the respondents.

1.3 Limitations of the study

In Kerala, the interviews and observation of meetings went on smoothly. Women, irrespective of their age, caste and educational qualifications, were very co-operative in the exercise and answered queries in a forthcoming manner. In Tamil Nadu, in the remote villages, women were very shy and hesitant and largely depended on their husbands or male relatives to answer the questions. Personal questions on their family and children were well received by these women.

In Haryana, it was very difficult to catch hold of the elected women representatives for an interview, let alone to convince them about the purpose of the study. Men were adamant that any such interviews be held in their presence and the women interviewed should not sign the questionnaire as a record. In many places in Haryana, men refused to let the interviewer even have an informal chat with the elected women. As a result, the number of samples from Haryana is much smaller than those from the other two states.

Chapter 2

An Overview of the Status of Women in India

The Country Report (India) of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, summarizing the situation of Indian women, states that "lack of education, information, lack of training and low levels of literacy aggravate the situation of deprivation" that women in many parts of the country experience. It admits that "women are thereby excluded not merely from political, social and economic power but knowledge power as well.... What makes the situation most complex is a general societal inability to be able to discern this aspect of inadequacy of the development response. Many women themselves are often conditioned and browbeaten into insensitivity and unquestioned submission to biases and discriminations which they end up viewing as socially ordained and irrevocable." ⁸

Let us look, very briefly, into the overall status of women in India. This, indeed, will explain the low level of participation of women in the political arena which is the scope of this study.

Article 15(1) of the Constitution says, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them". However, Article 15(3) says "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children." Article 42 of the Directive Principles of State Policy directs the state to take adequate "provisions for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief."

2.1 Selected Development Indicators: Sex ratio

Without underestimating the progress India has made in the past fifty years, one can tell that the development of women had been neglected by the various governments. However, as far as women's development is concerned, the nature of development is, at times, retrograde in nature. The sex ratio of women since the year 1901 is an example.

Table 1
Proportion of women for 1000 males, 1901-1991

Year	Women
1901	972
1911	964
1921	955
1931	950
1941	945
1951	946
1961	941
1971	930
1981	934
1991	927

Source: 1. Census of India 1981-series, India Part II-A, General Population Tables. Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, New Delhi.
 2. Census of India 1991 Series 1, India, Paper 2 of 1992, Final Population Totals, Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, New Delhi, cited in Fourth World Conference on Women. Beijing, Country Report, Government of India, Department of Women and Child Development, p. 11.

Table 1 clearly shows that the sex ratio is adverse to women and this is mainly due to the higher mortality rate among females as compared to males. And from the beginning of this century, despite the progress made in science and advancements in health care (this has led to a considerable increase in life expectancy and is an accepted fact), the ratio of women to men has been declining progressively. From 972 females per 1000 males in 1901, the last Census of this century shows that there are only 927 women per 1000 men in the country today. The figures speak for themselves.

The adverse sex ratio can be attributed partly to the practice of female foeticide following sex determination tests as well as to neo-natal female infanticide. It reflects and confirms the low status of women and the girl child in Indian society today.

2.2 Health

In a UNICEF report, *State of the World's Children, 1998*, India's rank is 46 on the basis of one of the health

indicators – under-five mortality rate. India is therefore not in an enviable position insofar as the statistics in this regard is concerned; our position being 46th (in descending order) out of a total number of 194 countries. With an under-five mortality rate of 111 (per 1000 live births), India ranks lower than neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh. The report of the National Family Health Survey, 1992-93 states that post-neonatal mortality is 13 per cent higher for females than for males, while between age one and five years, females experience 43 per cent higher mortality risks than males in India.

Some of the basic indicators which have a direct or indirect impact on the development of women are given in Table 2.

Table 2
Women's status: some health indicators

IMR 0-1 year	73 (male) per thousand	75 (female) per thousand
% of children with low birth weight	33%	
% of population with access to safe water	81% (rural 79%, urban 85%)	
Access to adequate sanitation	29% (rural-14, urban-70)	
Total fertility rate	3.5	
% of births attended by trained health personnel	34	
Maternal mortality rate	437	

Source: Census of India, 1991 and State of the World's Children Reports.

2.3 Work participation

Table 3
Male-female work participation rate

Year		Males	Females
1991	Total	37.50	22.27
	Rural	40.09	26.79
	Urban	30.16	9.19

Source: Census of India 1991, Series 1.

The various indicators clearly show that women are discriminated against. Though the literacy rate in general has increased substantially since 1951 (when the first national Census after Independence was conducted), the sex differentials in literacy have remained consistent throughout the post-Independence period and this is certainly not in favour of women. Fertility rates too have not been brought down to a desired level because of the high infant mortality rate which forces families to go for more children.

2.4 Representation of Women in Political Parties

Political activity, by and large, has remained a male preserve in India. The political parties are largely to be blamed for the abysmally low representation of women in elected bodies. In India, political parties, irrespective of their ideology, have failed to provide adequate representation to women in their hierarchical decision-making bodies. This, by itself, marked a shift away from the spirit of the freedom movement which had provided adequate space for women. Let us have a look at the percentage of women members at the decision-making levels of some of the important national political parties.

Table 4
**Proportion of women holding leadership positions
in the various national political parties (1998).**

Political party	Men	Women	Percentage of women
Congress(I)	17*	2	11.76
BJP	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Janata Dal	67	5	7.46
CPI(M)	63	3	4.76
CPI	29	2	6.90

Note: Congress(I) – CWC. (The party constitution was amended by All-India Congress Committee (AICC) on December 18 1998, providing for 33% of reservation for women in party posts at all levels.)

BJP--National Executive

Janata Dal --Central Office Bearers

CPI(M)--Central Committee

CPI--National Executive

This reflects the general apathy of the political parties in encouraging women to actively come up in politics. Naturally, women's representation to Parliament and State Legislatures also suffered a set back due to this very negative attitude.

2.5 Proportion of Women in the Parliament

Table 5
Proportion of women in the eleventh Lok Sabha, 1997 (party-wise)
(national parties only)

Political party	Strength in Lok Sabha	Men	Women	% of women
Congress(I)	139	127	12	8.6
BJP	161	148	13	8.0
Janata Dal*	46	42	4	8.6
CPI(M)	32	32	0	0
CPI	12	11	1	8.3
Samata	12	12	0	0

* Total strength before the party split. Of the 4 women MPs, 2 went with the RJD and the third one was declared unattached (Ms.Maneka Gandhi). Hence, the Janata Dal had only one woman MP.

The elections to the twelfth Lok Sabha, which were held after every major political party made public declarations about their commitment to amend the Constitution with a view to empowering women, were not very different. This can be seen in Table 6 below.

In this context, the low numerical strength of women in the highest decision-making bodies renders them irrelevant as a group and hence they are not in a position to exert pressure on the body. In other words, they could hardly have an independent position on issues related to women and had to echo the views of their own party. This was revealed in the course of the debate on the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament and in the way it was opposed even at the introductory stage. Of course, there were individual protests, but they could not make any difference to the final outcome of the Bill.

Table 6
Proportion of women in the twelfth Lok Sabha, 1998 (party-wise)
(national parties only)

Political Party	Strength in Lok Sabha	Men	Women	% of women
Congress(I)	141	131	10	7.0
BJP	181	166	15	8.3
Janata Dal	6	6	0	0
CPI(M)	32	29	3	9.3
CPI	9	7	2	22.2
Samata	12	12	0	0

The experience was not very different even in earlier Lok Sabhas. Women's representation in the Lok Sabha has never even reached 10 per cent of the total membership as could be seen from the following Table.

Table 7
Proportion of women in Lok Sabha 1952--1996

Year	Total strength	Men	Women	% of women
1952	489	474	14	2.8
1957	494	476	18	3.6
1962	494	464	30	6.0
1967	520	489	31	6.0
1971	520	500	20	3.8
1977	542	523	19	3.5
1980*	529	501	28	5.3
1984	542	500	42	7.7
1989**	523	500	23	4.4
1991	536	497	39	7.2
1996	543	503	40	7.3
1998	543	500	43	7.9

* Elections were not held in 12 constituencies in Assam and one in Meghalaya.

** Elections were not held in J&K and Punjab.

Source: E.K.Santha, *Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj : A Status Report*, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1995.

It is evident from the figures given above that women's representation in the Lok Sabha has been negligible. The eighth, tenth and eleventh Lok Sabhas made a breakthrough, even if it was marginal. Indeed, the twelfth Lok Sabha had the highest number of women (both in terms of number—43—and percentage points—7.9). Interestingly, this figure exceeds, even if marginally, the previous highest figures of proportion of women members of Parliament (42 women out of 542 in the eighth Lok Sabha, which in percentage terms is 7.7 per cent.)

It need not be a simple coincidence that the 1984 general elections were held in an atmosphere where the Congress(I) was riding a sympathy wave due to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Similarly, the 1998 general elections were held in an atmosphere where the BJP and its allies rode on the crest of a wave in favour of an able and stable government. The opposition to the BJP was splintered as was the case with the non-Congress forces in 1984.

Women's representation to the Rajya Sabha also presents a similar picture, though it is marginally better than that of the Lok Sabha. It went up to 15 per cent in 1991. This may be due to the structure and organisation of that body.

2.6 Performance of Women Candidates in the General Elections-1998

Table 7-A:
Performance of women candidates-1998

States	No. of seats	Women candidates	Got elected	Men candidates	Got elected
Andhra Pradesh	42	18	2	390	40
Arunachal Pradesh	2	0	0	7	2
Assam	14	3	1	101	13
Bihar	54	21	4	451	50
Goa	2	1	0	12	2
Gujarat	26	7	4	139	22
Haryana	10	6	1	140	9
Himachal Pradesh	3	0	0	17	3
J&K	5	1	0	67	5
Karnataka	28	10	0	200	28
Kerala	20	10	1	120	19
Madhya Pradesh	40	28	4	400	36
Maharashtra	48	20	2	377	46
Manipur	2	1	1	15	1
Meghalaya	2	2	0	13	2
Mizoram	1	0	0	6	1
Nagaland	1	0	0	2	1
Orissa	21	10	2	135	19
Punjab	13	9	1	102	12
Rajasthan	25	20	3	219	22
Sikkim	1	0	0	3	1
Tamil Nadu	39	13	1	296	38
Tripura	2	1	0	11	0
Uttar Pradesh	85	56	9	1037	76
West Bengal	42	21	5	272	37
Andman and Nicobar	1	0	0	6	1
Chandigarh	1	2	0	18	1
Dader & Nager	1	0	0	4	1
Daman & Diu	1	1	0	5	1
Delhi	7	10	2	132	5
Lakshadweep	1	0	0	2	2
Pondicherry	1	0	0	9	9
Total	541	271	43	4708	498

Source: *The General Elections to Lok Sabha 1998*, K. Ganesan.

The same negligible proportion of women can be seen in the various Legislative Assemblies in the states. The proportion of women was as bad if not worse in most states. It will be appropriate in this context to have a look at the experience of women's political participation and

their performance in the last general elections. It is evident from the data that women are hesitant to come forward and contest elections. For 541 Lok Sabha seats, only 271 women (just half of the total number of seats) contested, whereas, the number of men who contested for the same number of Lok Sabha seats was about nine times larger than the total number of seats. This itself shows that it is only through reservation that the entry of more women to the law-making bodies can be ensured.

While analysing the existing political atmosphere in the country, the *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* had summarised the situation in the following words: "The difficulties being experienced by obtaining representation and spokesmen for their cause in these bodies (legislatures) and the declining trend in the number of women legislators is the result of the reluctance of the political parties to sponsor women candidates. The parties reflect the established values of a male dominated society, which would be difficult to alter without certain structural changes in the socio-political set-up. The parties would continue to pay lip service to the cause of women's progress and the policy of tokenism by having a few women in the legislative and executive wings of the government whose minority and dependent status offer serious obstacles in the path of their acting as spokesmen for women's rights and opportunities." ⁹

The Committee recommended that "a system of reservation of a proportion of seats for women in these bodies would provide an impetus to both women as well as the political parties to give a fairer deal to nearly half the population in the various units of the government. If women enter these bodies in large number the present inhibitions that result from their minority position in these institutions may disappear faster and give them greater freedom to articulate their views." ¹⁰

The enormous responsibilities, the existing inequalities in the households, and an unequal access to information, appropriate opportunities and resources pose a serious threat to entry of women into politics and public life on their own. Perhaps, in the existing hierarchical order of

the society, an improvement in the proportion of women in elected bodies need not necessarily show any impact on the status of women in the immediate context. But then, only through a policy of reservations, can adequate representation of women to the elected bodies be ensured and this will certainly amount to making a beginning towards improving the status of women. Before proceeding further, it is necessary at this stage to deal with an argument that is often voiced, that women's representation through such policies as reservation will lead to membership in the Legislatures and Parliament by proxy for husbands, fathers or fathers-in-law and also that all forms of positive discrimination (reservation) breed inefficiency. Indeed, there is nothing new in this argument, including the language.

If the above arguments were true, there could not have been any progress from monarchy towards democracy based on universal adult suffrage. In one sentence, the argument about inefficiency is nothing but the language of desperation spoken by the forces of status quo; such desperation in the present context is a fallout of the experience of a large number of women entering the political arena thanks to the 33.3 per cent reservation for women in the Panchayat bodies and Nagarpalikas and, later on, of the demand for a similar reservation in Parliament and State Legislatures gaining momentum.

In this context, a study of the impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which made elected local bodies a mandatory requirement under the Constitution and within that, the very important provision to reserve one-third of the positions at all elected levels to women, will be a useful one to draw attention to the problems and prospects of political empowerment of women. "The time has not come which certainly will come when women who are practically concerned in political life will come to have a voice in making the laws which they have to obey; but every woman who can think and speak wisely and bring up her children soundly in regards to the rights and duties of society is advancing the time when the interests of women will be represented as well as those of men."¹¹

Chapter 3

Panchayati Raj and the Question of Women's Representation

The Balwantrai Mehta Study Team, set up in January, 1957, exactly a decade after independence, could be regarded as having been the first step to recognise and recreate the Panchayati Raj institutions in modern India. The Committee recommended a three-tier system of rural self-government. With the approval of their respective governments in 1958, the various states began to set up three-tier Panchayati Raj systems.

One of the salient features of the Balwantrai Mehta Report was the statutory provision that two women be co-opted in all the three tiers after the elections were completed. The Study Team also specified that the selection of these two women should be based on the interest they took in activities relating to welfare of women and children. "It is important to note at these stages too that the government of Uttar Pradesh did not provide for co-option of women, even while accepting the Balwantrai Mehta Committee's other recommendations of having a three-tier panchayati raj system." ¹²

This was indeed the first occasion when women were enabled to have a role in Panchayati Raj. Even though the provision for co-option instead of reservation of seats for women through elections diluted the spirit of the actual representation of women, it was a notable feature that the recommendations ensured women's representation to the extent it did. It may be underlined here that those who were co-opted under the provision invariably happened to be the kith and kin of the rural elite. Apart from this, while accepting the Study Team's recommendations, most states neglected the provision for co-option. Haryana is an example of this kind. The provision was flouted because there was no government body to ensure this. As a matter of fact, the Panchayati Raj system itself was

gasping for breath in Haryana as well as in many other states. The elected bodies were superseded by executive officers in several states and in others the Panchayati Raj bodies died a natural death after completion of their first term. The few women who were co-opted were virtually kept out of the day-to-day functioning of these bodies.

It was in this context in 1974, that the Committee on the Status of Women in India recommended the establishment of Statutory Women's Panchayats at village level. The objectives of the Committee's recommendation was to ensure that the social and cultural inhibitions that prevented women from taking part in and contesting the gram panchayat elections were removed by way of initiating them into the process through the exclusively women's bodies. The Committee said:

"We therefore recommend the establishment of statutory women's panchayats at the village level to ensure greater participation by women in the political process. These bodies are not meant to be parallel organisations to the gram panchayats but should form an integral part of the Panchayati Raj structure with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children. We recommend it as a transitional measure to break the traditional attitudes in rural society which inhibit most women from articulating their problems or participating actively in the existing local bodies...."¹³

However, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra were the only states where such all-women panchayats were constituted; in most other states the recommendation drew flak from many quarters. In 1995, there were 13 all-women panchayats in Andhra Pradesh and 9 in Maharashtra.¹⁴

Another committee under the chairmanship of Asoka Mehta was set up in 1977 to study the scope for strengthening the Panchayati Raj system in all its dimensions including the measures that were necessary to involve women in these bodies. The committee recommended that the two women who would get the

highest number of votes in the zilla parishad elections would be automatically co-opted to the zilla parishad even if they failed to get elected. It further suggested that in cases where no women candidates had contested the elections, two women should be co-opted from the district concerned. The committee recommended a similar provision for the mandal panchayats as well.

3.1 Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions before the 73rd Amendment

Prior to the passing of the 73rd Amendment with its reservations for women, their representation in PRIs remained low (see Table 8) and it should be noted that in most cases women entered the local bodies not through elections but by co-option or nomination. The concept of co-option or nomination is undemocratic if not anti-democratic by its very nature. This was the major

Table 8
Women's representation in Panchayati Raj institutions (1977)

States	GP	BP	ZP
Andhra Pradesh	2-4	2	2
Assam	2	1	N.A
Bihar	0	2	2
Gujarat	2	2-3	3-5
Haryana	1	2	N.A
Himachal Pradesh	1-2	2	2
Kerala	1	N.A	N.A
Karnataka	1-2	2	1
Madhya Pradesh	2	2	N.A
Maharashtra	2	1	2
Orissa	0	1	N.A
Punjab	2	2	4
Rajasthan	2	2	2
Tamil Nadu	1	3	0
Uttar Pradesh	0	5	3-5
West Bengal	2	2	2

Source: Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj institutions, 1978, New Delhi, Government of India, Department of Rural Development.

Note: GP = Gram Panchayat, BP = Block Panchayat, ZP = Zilla Panchayat

drawback of this provision. "Not merely is it undemocratic but also smacks of a protectionism as if women are weaker and incapable of fighting the elections. In practice, the system of co-option and nomination had meant sheer patronage of the dominant political or social group and the women who got nominated had practically no information on panchayats nor any experience in working for women and children. They were not expected either. The women's representation became one of tokenism and proxy and ended as a total failure".¹⁵

However, this practice continued for some time and it was mostly on paper until the 73rd Constitutional Amendment by which 33.3 per cent of the elected positions at all levels were reserved for women. Indeed, there were exceptions to this and in two states – Karnataka and Kerala – the Panchayat Acts were amended even before the 73rd Amendment and provisions for reservation for women in the local bodies were in vogue much earlier.

3.2 Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions after the 73rd Amendment.

A quantum leap in women's representation in Panchayati Raj institutions took place following amendments in state Panchayati Raj acts in conformity with the provisions of the 73rd Amendment. The percentage of women in PRIs in January 1996 in ten states are shown in Table 9.

Table 9
Women elected members in the panchayats
(as on 1-1-1996)

States	GPs	PSs	ZPs	overall percentage
Gujarat	21351(64052) (33.3)	1275(3765) (33.9)	254(764) (33.2)	33.36
Haryana	17928(54159) (33.1)	807(2418) (33.4)	101(303) (33.3)	33.12
Karnataka	37689(80627) (46.7)	1343(3340) (40.2)	335(919) (36.5)	46.38
Kerala	3954(10685) (37.0)	564(1543) (36.6)	105(300) (35.0)	36.90
Madhya Pradesh	184000(484394) (38.0)	2991(9097) (32.9)	315(942) (33.4)	37.88
Punjab	23832(78983) (30.2)	326(2441) (13.4)	89(274) (32.6)	29.68
Rajasthan	33566(103712) (32.4)	1740(5257) (33.0)	331(997) (33.1)	32.41
Tripura	1809(5427) (33.3)	67(196) (34.2)	24(70) (34.3)	33.7
Uttar Pradesh	120591(406895) (29.6)	18880(52417) (36.0)	793(2127) (37.4)	30.4
West Bengal	22014(62139) (35.4)	3202(9516) (33.7)	227(664) (34.1)	35.18

Note: Figures within horizontal brackets relate to total membership and that of vertical relate to percentages.

Source: Based on data obtained from Directorates of Panchayats of the respective states. Cited in *Panchayati Raj Development Report, 1995*, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

Chapter 4

Status of Women in Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu: An Overview

The active or passive participation of women in politics is dependent on their socio-economic and political status in society. These factors influence the quality of women's participation in various activities including the political field. This section attempts a comparative analysis of the social variables which determine the development and status of women in society vis-a-vis the three states now under study, in order to put into context the qualitative and quantitative differences in the political participation of women in the three states.

4.1 Development Indicators: Sex Ratio

Sex ratio is one of the parameters indicating women's status in society. To begin with, the sex ratio in the three states could be compared with the national average.

Table 10
**Data on sex ratio in the three states
[no. of females for 1000 males]**

	Urban	Rural	Average
India	894	939	927
Haryana	868	864	865
Kerala	1034	1037	1036
Tamil Nadu	960	981	974

Source: Census of India, 1991.

The data shown in Table 10 clearly indicate that the sex ratio in Haryana is far lower than the national average, whereas in the case of Tamil Nadu, it is slightly higher than the national average. As far as Kerala is concerned, the sex ratio is the highest in the country. The missing number of girl children itself explains the status of women in the respective societies. In a sense, this

indicates the extent to which the practice of sex determination through modern techniques is employed and consequently the extent of female foeticide and infanticide. This could be the cause for this wide gap.

4.2 Literacy

The literacy rate too is an indicator of the status of women in society. Illiteracy is considered a major hurdle in the path of social progress. In this context, it is important to note that the spread of literacy among women is lower than the general level, rendering them even more vulnerable. Illiteracy deprives them from understanding their rights – legal and civil. This is a serious challenge that any effort at empowering women is bound to face. Let us have a look at the literacy rates in these three states and the national average.

Table 11
Literacy rates in the three states.

	Percentage of Literates		Rural	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
India	64.13	39.29	57.87	30.62
Haryana	69.10	40.47	64.78	32.51
Kerala	93.62	86.17	92.91	85.12
Tamil Nadu	73.75	51.33	67.18	41.84

Source: *Education for All. A Graphic Presentation*. NIEPA, 1993

In Haryana, the female literacy rate is the lowest among the three states though it is marginally higher than the national average. While the rural literacy is 64.78 per cent, female literacy is only 32.51 per cent, just about half the male literacy rate. This trend shows the state of deprivation women face in Haryana.

Tamil Nadu, though slightly better than Haryana, has nothing to boast about insofar as its female literacy rate is concerned; almost half the women in the state are illiterate. In Kerala, the overall literacy rate is 89.81 per cent while female literacy is slightly lower than the state

average. Interestingly, the rural literacy rate for females (85.12 per cent) in Kerala is the highest in the country. The relatively low status of women in Haryana could be seen in case of the enrollment ratio too as given in the following Table.

4.3 Enrollment Rate

Table 12
Gross enrollment ratio in classes I to V and VI to VIII [1995-96]

	I to V			VI to VIII		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Haryana	86.4	84.9	85.6	70.9	56.7	64.7
Kerala	98.4	95.4	96.9	105.1	101.5	103.3
Tamil Nadu	159.3	145.6	152.6	118.2	99.5	109.1

Source: *Economic Survey*, 1996-97

The number of school dropouts is higher among girls than among boys. Here again, Haryana has the largest number of dropouts, Tamil Nadu comes second and Kerala, of course, in the third place. Singulate mean age at marriage is another device we could use to measure the development levels in a society in general and the status of women in particular. Let us have a look at the data available on this in the three states under study.

4.4 Singulate Mean Age at Marriage

Table 13
Singulate mean age at marriage

	1961		1971		1981		1993	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
India	21.1	15.9	22.6	17.2	23.5	18.4	25.3	20.4
Haryana	N.A.	N.A.	20.9	17.7	25.2	17.9	23.9	18.4
Kerala	26.6	20.2	27.0	21.3	27.5	22.1	28.1	22.1
Tamil Nadu	25.3	18.4	26.1	19.6	26.1	20.3	26.4	20.5

Source: *National Family Health Survey: 1992-93*. International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, 1995.

Once again, Haryana presents a discouraging picture not only because the singulate mean age at marriage in this state for women is lowest among the three states under study but more so because it is lower than the national average. In Haryana, tradition continues to play a major role in which the attainment of puberty determines the marriageable age. The custom of child marriage is not uncommon in Haryana even today. Moreover, the singulate mean age at marriage has risen only marginally during the two decades for which we have data.

Another indicator of the status of women in a region could be the proportion of women in the labour force. In a sense, it could be said that women engaged in the labour force, albeit silently and in a subtle manner, denote a sense of equity in their status vis-a-vis men; however, this sort of improvement in status is more a part of a process and will be manifested only in combination with various other factors acting in conjunction. Yet data on this is relevant to a marginal extent.

4.5 Work Participation

Table 14
Work participation rate
[total workers as percentage of total population]

	Work Participation Rate		
	Total	Male	Female
India	37.46	51.55	22.25
Haryana	1.00	48.51	10.76
Kerala	31.43	47.58	15.85
Tamil Nadu	43.31	56.39	29.89

Source: *Economic Survey*, 1996-97, Ministry of Finance, GOI.

It is evident from the data given above that the work participation rate is highest in Tamil Nadu among the three states; interestingly, Tamil Nadu's status on this count is higher than the national average. Both Kerala and Haryana lag behind the national average. This, as we may see later on in this report, has its impact, though

marginal, in the state of women's empowerment.

4.6 Women's Representation in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies

The experience so far with the representation of women in Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies for which elections have been held regularly, essentially because this is a Constitutional requirement, will serve as a background to assess the status of women's political empowerment.

Let us have a look at the proportion of women in the Lok Sabha from the three states under study and in the Legislative Assemblies there between 1967 and 1996. (1967 was the year when Haryana came into existence as a state while Tamil Nadu and Kerala were formed about a decade earlier.)

Table 15
**Female representation to the Lok Sabha from
 Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu 1967-1996.**

	1967		1971		1977		1980		1984		1989		1991		1996	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Haryana	9	0	9	0	9	1	10	0	10	0	10	0	9	1	9	1
Kerala	18	1	18	1	20	0	19	1	20	0	19	1	18	2	20	0
Tamil Nadu	38	1	38	1	37	2	39	0	37	2	37	2	36	2	39	0

Source: Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj: A Status Report, E.K. Santha, 1995

In the twelfth Lok Sabha, Haryana had one woman MP out of 10 MPs, Kerala had one out of 20 MPs and Tamil Nadu also sent one woman MP out of 39 MPs to the House.

Table 16
Representation of women in the Legislative Assembly: Haryana

Year	Total	Men	Women
1967-68	81	76	5
1968-72	81	73	8
1972-77	81	76	5
1977-82	90	86	4
1982-87	90	83	7
1987-90	88[*]	85	3
1990-91	90	NA	
1991-96		NA	
1996		NA	

[*] Elections were not held for two seats.

NA = Not Available

Table 17
Representation of women in the Legislative Assembly: Kerala

Year	Total	Men	Women
1957-60	127	121	6
1960-65	127	120	7
1965-67	133	130	3
1967-70	133	132	1
1970-77	133	131	2
1977-80	140	139	1
1980-82	140	135	5
1982-87	140	136	4
1987-91	140	132	8
1991-96	140	132	8
1996	140	127	13

Table 18
Representation of women in the Legislative Assembly: Tamil Nadu

Year	Total	Men	Women
1957-62	167	156	11
1962-67	206	196	10
1967-71	234	230	4
1971-77	234	228	6
1977-80	234	232	2
1980-84	234	229	5
1984-88	234	225	9
1989-91	234	224	10
1991-96	234	203	31
1996	234	223	11

Source: 1. Table 16,17,18 – *Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj: A Status Report*, E.K.Santha
 2. Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Official Report, 1990, 1995 and 1997.

It is clear from the Tables above (No.16, 17 and 18) that political activities in the three states have, by and large, remained a male preserve. Only a few women could break the social norms and find a place in the political realm. Sometimes, tokenism too was encouraged as part of the practice of showing goodwill to the widow of a political person in the locality. Surprisingly, this pattern was there everywhere – in Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu – despite the socio-economic, political and cultural differences amongst the three states.

In short, an analysis of the various socio-economic development indicators in the three states under study shows that Kerala ranks the highest insofar as indicators relating to social development such as sex ratio, literacy, enrollment at schools (primary and upper primary levels) and singulate mean age at marriage (for women) are concerned. This, in fact, has had an impact on the status of women in this state. Meanwhile, despite its proximity to the national capital, Delhi, and the fair amount of industrial development in some parts of the state, Haryana is one of the backward states insofar as empowerment of women is concerned. The women in the state are, in general, deprived of any of the effects of social

growth; this is more so in the case of the rural areas in the state. The study and the experiences during the field survey contributed much in substantiating this view.

In Haryana, women's role in politics is decided on and controlled by men. All the indicators show Haryana in a negative light while Tamil Nadu is placed in-between Haryana and Kerala. However, it is evident that the situation in Tamil Nadu, even if it is not as bad as in Haryana, certainly leaves a lot to be desired.

Chapter 5

Panchayati Raj System in Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

5.1 Panchayati Raj System in Haryana

Haryana was formed on November 1, 1966, bifurcating the state of Punjab. Initially it had a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj with gram panchayats at the bottom level, panchayat unions at the middle level and zilla parishads at the top. The first elections to these bodies were held in accordance with the provisions of the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act, 1952 and the Punjab Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads Act, 1961. However, the zilla parishads had a very short life. They were abolished in 1973. There were 5,790 gram panchayats and 102 panchayat samitis in Haryana.

Before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992, elections were held to the panchayat samitis in 1985 and to the gram panchayats in 1988, the terms of these two bodies were for five years. Even though the elections to these bodies were due in 1990 and 1993 respectively, no elections were held. Instead, the government let the local bodies be superseded by the executive and the bureaucrats took over these bodies. However, even in the elected phase of these bodies, representation of women in these bodies was neglected totally. This could be seen from the fact that out of the 5,790 gram panchayats, there were only 20 women sarpanches throughout the state after the 1988 elections. Insofar as the panchayat samitis were concerned, there was not even a single woman chairperson.

It is clear from the above figures that in Haryana even the semblance of women's representation could be achieved only through the provision for co-option or nomination of women as recommended by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee and later on by the Asoka Mehta Committee. Left to elections alone, the women constituted only 0.37 per cent of the total elected members, whereas,

after nominations, the proportion of women was raised to 15.66 per cent.

Table 19
Representation of women in the Gram Panchayats (1988)

	Total strength		Women		Percentage Elected	Women Co-opted
	Elected	Co-opted	Elected	Co-opted		
GPs	29,896	5,554	111	5,543	0.37	99.63

Source: Department of Rural Development, Government of India.

The new Haryana Panchayat Raj Act, on the lines required by the 73rd Amendment, was enacted in the state on April 22, 1994 after repealing the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act, 1952 and the Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads Act, 1961. The first elections since the coming into force of the new Act were held in 1994 and the results were as follows:

Table 20
Representation of women in PR bodies: Haryana (1994)

	Total PRIs	Elected members (total)	Women	Percentage of women
GPs	5,958	54,159	17,928	33.10
PSs	110	2,418	807	33.37
ZPs	16	303	101	33.33

Source: Directorate of Panchayats, Haryana

It is clear from the figures in Tables 19 and 20 that statutory reservations to women alone could ensure their election to the panchayat bodies in Haryana. What is noteworthy in the figures given above is the fact that even after reservations, the proportion of women is just about the statutory requirement while even this has not been achieved in the case of gram panchayats. We may be able to find an explanation to this in the section pertaining to field observations.

5.2 Panchayati Raj System in Kerala

The Kerala Panchayat Act was passed in 1960 with a single tier at the village level called grama panchayat. The last elections to the grama panchayats before the implementation of the 73rd Amendment were held in 1988 and the women's representation in this body was as follows:

Table 21
Male-female members elected to the Grama Panchayats—1988

Number of Grama Panchayats	Number of representatives			% of female representatives
	Total	Male	Female	
998	10,128	8,099	2,029	20

Source: Department of Rural Development

The Kerala District Administration Act was passed in 1979. The original text of the Act carried a provision for the nomination of two women with full voting rights in the district council. It, however, barred such nominated members from being chosen as president or vice president at the councils.

The first elections to the district councils were held in 1991. Between 1979 and 1991 the Act was subjected to several changes, the most important among them being the provision for 30 per cent reservation of seats for women; the amended portion of the Act said: "There shall be reserved in any district council, seats for women voters and the seats so reserved shall not be less than 30 per cent of the number of members."

The importance of this provision lay in the fact that this was implemented well before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

Table 22
1991 District Council election results in Kerala

Number of District Councils	Total number of seats	Male	Female	Percentage female to the total
14	477	332	145	30.39

Source: State Gazette, 1991

As a result of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Kerala also adopted a three tier system of Panchayati Raj – grama panchayats at the village level, block panchayats at the block level, and district panchayats at district level. Elections were held to the three tiers in 1994. The results in terms of women's representation were as follows:

Table 23
Representation of women in panchayats in Kerala, 1994

	Total number of panchayats	Total number of seats	Women	Percentage of female to the total
G.P	990	10,685	3,954	37
P.S	152	1,543	564	36.5
Z.P	14	300	105	35

Source: Directorate of Panchayats, Kerala

In Kerala, the proportion of women to men in all the three tiers is higher than the statutory requirement. This is a positive trend as far as the political participation of women is concerned.

5.3 Panchayati Raj System in Tamil Nadu

The Madras Panchayats Act was passed in 1958 in the state of Tamil Nadu and the first elections to a three-tier Panchayati Raj structure were held in 1960-1961 in phases. After this, regular elections were held in 1965 and 1970. The terms of the local bodies were for five years and the basis of functioning were the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. However, the initial enthusiasm vanished in course of time particularly with

the AIADMK coming on to the political scene in a big way sometime around 1972; the DMK, which until then commanded a significant support in rural areas began losing its hold with the birth of the AIADMK and this was clear even before the AIADMK captured power in the state in 1977. The most obvious casualty then were elected local bodies; it suited the party in power in the state well to supersede the elected bodies and put them under the control of its own officials and this is exactly what happened.

Indeed, the AIADMK regime was no different. After 1970, local body elections were held in 1986 after an interval of 16 years. (The AIADMK came to power in 1977). After 1986, panchayat elections were held in Tamil Nadu only in October 1996.

In the 1958 Act, there was a provision for co-option of a single woman member if there was no elected woman in the body. The Act said: "She shall be co-opted by the inspector."

In an amendment in 1981, 15 per cent of the seats to the presidentships in the grama panchayats and chairpersons in the panchayat union councils were reserved for women. Nevertheless, there was no election since 1970. So this provision remained only on paper and the same was repealed in 1985. In 1989, the Act was once again subjected to an amendment by which 30 per cent of seats were reserved for women in the local bodies. It would have been a radical step in the history of women's representation. But for various reasons, this Act was not implemented and no elections to the local bodies were held until 1996.

In the meantime, the State government had passed the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act 1994, in conformity with the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act 1992.

Let alone women's representation, Tamil Nadu does not have a tradition of successful local governance since Independence. Madras Presidency, as it was known in British days, had a functioning local government system empowered to collect taxes to finance public works, health and sanitation, and elementary education.¹⁶ Last elections

were held in 1996, as it is now a mandatory requirement under the Constitution, and the distribution of seats in terms of gender was as follows:

Table 24
Representation of women in panchayats in Tamil Nadu [1996]

Total no. of panchayats	Total members	Women	Men	Percentage of women to total
GPs 12,584	97,014	32,672	64,342	33.6
PUs 384	6,504	2,164	4,334	33.3
ZPs 28	649	217	432	33.4

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Tamil Nadu.

It is clear from the figures in Table 24 that the proportion of women in all the three tiers is just one-third, as required by the Constitution.

Chapter 6

Social and Political Backgrounds of Women Panchayat Members

This chapter presents selected demographic data on elected women Panchayati Raj representatives in the three stury areas as well as data on their educational levels, work experience, political experience and motivational factors for contesting elections. As mentioned earlier, sample attrition in Haryana occurred primarily due to the men not allowing the women respondents to be interviewed.

6.1 Demographic Characteristics: Age Factor

Table 25
Age of women panchayat members

Age	Haryana	Kerala	Tamil Nadu
21-30	6	16	29
31-40	7	23	39
41-50	11	21	11
51-60	9	10	4
61-70	7	4	1
No reply*	4	0	0
Total	45	74	84

* Women who did not reply were old and did not remember their age.

It is evident from the data that a majority of the elected women in Haryana are 40 years and above, whereas in Kerala and Tamil Nadu it is the other way round; i.e., most elected women are less than 40 years of age. This is probably due to the prevailing mind-set in Haryana that young women should not be exposed to politics or any kind of public life while it is alright in the case of older women. In Haryana, the process of nomination to the panchayats instead of elections is still in vogue in many villages. Usually, a meeting of the village elders (male members only) decides the candidature of women. Their decisions are not questionable.

6.2 Type of Family of Sample Households

Table 26

States	Joint	Single
Haryana	30	15
Kerala	22	52
Tamil Nadu	45	39

The joint family system is still widely prevalent in Haryana and this family milieu acts as a stumbling block in the empowerment of women. The purda system is strictly practiced in joint families where a woman is not supposed to show her face even to the elderly male members in the family. The stranglehold on the women of social and other customs in the joint family system seems to be acting as an obstacle for their emancipation. In Tamil Nadu, the joint family system is slowly withering away whereas in Kerala, most of the elected members come from nuclear families.

Interestingly, discussions on the merits and demerits of the joint family system were being held in Kerala at the time of the study. The extended family system known as *Tharavadu*, both patrilineal and matrilineal in origin, was one of the salient features of Kerala society earlier. It was seen as being unduly restrictive in curtailing the individual freedom of family members, especially of the young. This system is definitely on the decline due to urbanisation and the influence of modern ideas and ways of life which favour nuclear families.

6.3 Marital status

Table 27
Marital status of respondents

States	Married	Unmarried	Widow	Divorcee	Total
Haryana	42	0	3	0	45
Kerala	60	8	5	1	74
Tamil Nadu	75	6	3	0	84

In Haryana, the fact that not a single unmarried woman in the sample had made it into any of the Panchayati Raj bodies is a significant finding. This is the general trend in Haryana, where patriarchal structures still rule the roost, and this "unwritten guideline" is observed strictly. It is evident from the Table that even if the number in this category is marginal in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the very fact that some unmarried women contested and won the elections, is by itself significant in the context of certain larger ground realities that guide the status of women in society. It does indicate that unmarried women entering public/political life is not considered a taboo in these states while it is very much a fact of life in Haryana.

6.4 Educational Qualifications

Table 28
Literacy level of respondents

States	Literate	Illiterate
Haryana	14	31
Kerala	74	0
Tamil Nadu	74	10

Low literacy level is a major obstacle to social change. More than a majority of the sample of women elected representatives to Panchayati Raj bodies in Haryana are illiterate. This is the situation, despite the adult literacy campaign that continues even today in the State. This, by itself, is a fact that calls for concern and is certainly a cause of rendering the principle of reservation ineffective insofar as empowerment of women is concerned. More than anything else, this fact brings to the fore the need for imparting literacy among the women in this state so that they are made aware of their rights and duties.

In Tamil Nadu, the situation is, of course, far better than in Haryana. Still, there is need for a vigorous adult literacy campaign. The rural female literacy rate is just

41.84 which means that more than half of the rural female population is illiterate. Kerala presents a brighter side of the picture in this context: None among those interviewed were illiterate; and there are reasons to believe that the sample truly reflected the high levels of literacy in Kerala.

6.5 Levels of Education

Table 29
Educational levels

Level	Primary	Middle	Metric	Pre-degree	Graduate	Post Graduate
Haryana	7	2	3	1	1	0
Kerala	2	8	38	17	6	6
T.N.	21	14	19	10	6	0

- * In Tamil Nadu 4 women were just literate through participation in literacy mission.
- ** In Kerala among 74 literates, 24 were professionally qualified in different areas such as teaching or law.
- *** In Tamil Nadu only two women were professionally qualified and in Haryana none.

The educational levels of the elected panchayat members in the sample show the disparity in women's development in these three states. In Haryana, the number of illiterates and semi-literates (who were going back to the unlettered phase for there were no follow-up programmes for neo-literates) is higher than the number of the educated. In Tamil Nadu, the data shows that quite a large number of the women members (21 at primary level and 14 at middle level) are early school drop-outs. This is because most parents are not willing to spend on the education of the girl child for they consider it a waste of scarce resources. This is related to the practice of the dowry system. Secondly, in village homes, the girl child is required for domestic help including taking care of siblings. This trend is now changing, however, due to the various governmental programmes and schemes, and awareness created among parents, especially among mothers by the non-governmental organisations running campaigns in this area.

6.6 Reading Habits

Table 30

States	Yes	No
Haryana	6	39
Kerala	71	3
Tamil Nadu	66	18

6.7 Number of elected women holding additional responsibilities in panchayats

Table 31

States	Total interviewed	Committee member	Committee chairperson
Haryana	45	0	0
Kerala	74	18	1
Tamil Nadu	84	2	0

After being elected, women in Haryana do not seem to take part in the functioning of their panchayats. This is more than clear from the fact that none of the elected members interviewed are members of any of the sub-committees in the panchayats. Let alone be members of the various committees, in Haryana, women members do not even go the panchayat offices. Their signatures are promptly collected from them at home by their husbands who act on behalf of these women. On this count, the experience in Kerala too, though better than the other states, needs improvement. In Tamil Nadu, women are more regular in the panchayat offices while the committees are mostly "reserved for men".

6.8 Number contested in general and reserved category

Table 32

States	Reserved	General
Haryana	45	0
Kerala	70	4
Tamil Nadu	84	0

These data reveal that but for the reservations there would not have been so many women in these bodies. It is interesting to find that no women interviewed for the study had won elections in Tamil Nadu and Haryana from a non-reserved seat. In almost all the villages in Haryana and some villages in Tamil Nadu, the meeting of village elders nominated the women members to the local bodies. Hence no elections took place to these posts. This underscores the need for reservation for women.

6.9 Number who contested election on party basis

Table 33

States	Party basis	Non-party basis
Haryana	7	38
Kerala	68	6
Tamil Nadu	59	25

Barring the Haryana experience, it is clear that political parties hold the key to the election process in the country. The fact that most women could enter the Panchayati Raj bodies as candidates of political parties only suggests the major role these parties could play in the empowerment of women. In this context, the fact that reservations were necessary to force the political leadership to field women candidates is important. Even in the case of Haryana, just a little bit of inquiry revealed that the husbands/fathers/in-laws of the elected women belong to one political party or another and the women too

are considered "natural" members or affiliates of that party. In Tamil Nadu, the gram panchayat elections were held on a non-party basis. However, political affiliations of the elected members were not difficult to find out. It is another matter that the women invariably belonged to the political parties/outfits of their husbands or parents or in-laws.

6.10 Previous experience in politics

Table 34
Previous experience in politics

States	Yes	No	%
Haryana	0	45	0
Kerala	14	70	18.9
Tamil Nadu	2	82	2.3

That so many women in Tamil Nadu and Kerala had no previous political experience and yet most were candidates of one party or the other indicates that they were fielded only in place of a male relative who was a party member because the particular constituency happened to be reserved. In Haryana none of the women interviewed had any previous political experience. In Kerala the 14 women who said 'yes' to this question were active political workers for years. And among them, atleast 8 of them were active in student politics.

6.11 Participation in Social Organisations

Table 35

States	yes	no	%
Haryana	4	41	8.8
Kerala	20	54	27.0
Tamil Nadu	14	70	16.6

The fact that only four out of a total sample of 45 women in Haryana had some previous participation in public life before becoming an elected representative in the last elections clearly indicates the seclusion of women in the state. The picture in Kerala and Tamil Nadu seems to be somewhat better. However, the fact remains that most elected women were "pushed" into social/public life only because of the Constitutional Amendment.

6.12 Political Activities at School-College Level

Table 36

State	Yes	No
Haryana	0	45
Kerala	8	66
Tamil Nadu	0	84

These two sets of data (Tables 35 and 36) along with those in Tables 33 and 34 underscore the need for conscious efforts by the political leadership to involve women in their activities. The brighter side of the picture is that even though politically inexperienced, at least 27 per cent of the women Panchayati Raj members interviewed from Kerala, 16.6 per cent in Tamil Nadu and 8.8 per cent from Haryana had some experience in working in social organisations.

6.13 Who motivated them to contest elections?

Interestingly, the answers to the question as to who or what motivated them to contest the elections displayed a common trend; the first place goes to the husband (in Tamil Nadu it was the family), second family, third party, fourth friends and on their own. In Tamil Nadu, women's organisations also motivated some women (5 of them) to contest the elections. The fact that a majority of the women elected members were motivated, in the first place, by men in their family (husband, father or father-in-law) is a factor that must be considered by the political

leadership of various hues and conscious efforts undertaken to alter this pattern. This is of utmost importance in the struggle for gender equity.

Table 37
Who motivated them to contest elections?

	Haryana	Kerala	Tamil Nadu
Husband	24	29	28
Family	5	13	33
Friends	0	8	3
Party	0	17	10
Own	2	4	0
Village people	3	0	0
Community	1	0	0
Local MLA	0	0	1
Ex-president	0	0	1
Women's org.	0	0	5
No Reply	10	3	3

Kerala records the highest number of literates and this conforms with the reading habits of the elected women Panchayati Raj members. Except for three out of 74 members, the rest of them said that they read at least one newspaper and one or two magazines. In Haryana, corresponding with the number of illiterates, the reading habit is minimal. Tamil Nadu comes in-between. This is bound to have an adverse effect on the functioning of the elected members for those who are not in the habit of reading newspapers and magazines would naturally be handicapped by being less informed. The only saving grace in this regard is the spread of television and the fact that women who do not watch this medium are a rarity.

Chapter 7

Field Observations and Case Studies

7.1 Haryana

Critics of the policy of reservation for women often oppose this concept by saying that reservations will only help to bring in more proxy candidates. They give examples of the functioning of local bodies in some of the states to substantiate their point that reservations will only breed inefficiency and promote proxy leadership. Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh are some of the states whose experience in this area is taken up and presented as a case against reservation for women. The point made invariably against reservation is that it leads to non-functioning of women members as independent elected representatives in local bodies due to various socio-economic and cultural constraints. Men (mostly husbands, since a majority of the women representatives are married) act as the de facto authority on behalf of "their" women. This renders the study on the nature of women's representation in Haryana, an important and necessary one.

Despite its proximity to Delhi, the national capital, and the fair amount of industrial development in some parts of the state, Haryana is one of the backward states as far as empowerment of women is concerned. It has a sex ratio which is one of the lowest in the country. Female literacy too is abysmally low. Women in this state are in general deprived of all positive effects of social development more so in the rural areas. The study and the experiences during the field survey contributed much towards understanding and substantiating this view. Women in this state do not have any control even over their own fertility and their role in politics is decided and controlled by men. The patriarchal social set-up prohibits women from taking part in political activity. Along with this, traditional inhibitions and the cultural ethos together play a negative role when it comes to the question of empowerment of women.

It was a very difficult task to even interview the elected women members to the Panchayats. While some of them were receptive to the idea of talking to an "outsider", they were hesitant to answer even some innocuous questions. Ignorant as they were on even some basic aspects regarding their rights and duties, they were unable to answer many questions on the questionnaire. A total of 45 elected women from all the three tiers were interviewed from two districts – Rohtak and Kurukshetra.

It was strange that in many cases the husbands volunteered to answer questions without any inhibition. "*Woh unpad hai!*" (she is illiterate) was a general refrain that could be heard from many husbands with contempt while proudly revealing that they were running the show in place of their wives in the panchayats. This has been the case with a women sarpanch of a village panchayat, Daboda in Rohtak district barely 25 kilometers from Delhi. The interviewer met her in a room near the kitchen. She could not come and sit in the living room since her father-in-law was sitting there. She had not entered the panchayat "ghar" (office) even once since her election as sarpanch. Much to one's surprise, she could not even locate the panchayat office. Her husband replied to most of the queries. She could not even answer to personal questions like age and so on. Most replies were the same: "I do not know, ask my husband!" He said: "I get her signature (thumb impression) whenever it is necessary. We do not have a tradition of women going out and participating in political activities. Since this is a reserved constituency and I was the village pradhan, it was decided to give my wife's name. That is what the village elders also agreed to," he declared without batting an eyelid. He acts as the real sarpanch and the villagers treat him that way.

Another woman panchayat member was interviewed in the same village (Daboda) whose husband had worked as a senior clerk in the Home Ministry headquarters at Delhi for years before he quit the job for good. She also did not attend any of the panchayat meetings. Here too the husband replied to a large number of queries. By showing some primary readers published as part of the Literacy

Mission, he said that he was interested in teaching her but then his lament was that she does not show any interest. But he could not explain why his daughter was a school dropout even while his sons are continuing with their education. To a question as to why his wife was not attending the meeting he answered: "when the woman sarpanch herself is not attending the meeting why should I send my wife. Not only that, she has lots of work in the house as well as at the farm."

Silothy was another village selected for the study. This is an isolated village surrounded by fields. Most of the women here are illiterate. The women panchayat members were busy either in the field or in the kitchen. They were all in *purda*. At Silothy, most of the women members (Nirmala, Chandro, Ramrity) were unanimously elected. This seemed very common in Haryana. The village elders sit and decide upon the women candidates who could be fielded and they are elected unanimously. Nobody questions their authority. Rather than election, it can be called selection. No wonder they do not feel any difference in election, co-option/nomination or whatsoever. Naturally, many of them could not explain, how they became the members of the panchayats. Interestingly men do not come under this "rule".

Parvati Devi from the Mirzapur gram panchayat said that she attends all the meetings. This fifty-year old lady is an illiterate but is very active. However, the male sarpanch here feels that she is "too aggressive" and very "vocal". Another woman member, Maya Devi, said she contested the election on her own volition but is not able to attend the meetings regularly because of her household activities. However, she said she meets the president once in a while to discuss matters related to the panchayat. Guddy, another gram panchayat member in Jotisher complained that she was ill-treated by the male panchayat members because she is poor and belongs to a lower caste.

Normally, women are not invited to the panchayat meetings. Even if they come on their own, their attendance is not appreciated by the male members. On

top of this, there is no economic incentive for them to attend the meetings. When they were informed that in Kerala the GP members get an allowance of Rs.500, they were startled and said that they too will attend meetings in that case at least for the sake of getting the money. Whether the money will reach them or not is a different question altogether.

Another interesting factor observed in Haryana was that a large number of the women members were above fifty years of age. This was not the case in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This factor was explained by the women in the course of their reply to another question as to how they could send only old people (women) to the panchayat; "What? You think we will send our young women to the panchayat? We do not want to expose them to politics and other things: *hum buddi logon ko kya farak padtha hai?*" (these things do not matter for old women like us).

Around 69 per cent of the women interviewed were illiterate. Although some women had learnt to read and write thanks to the Literacy Mission and its campaign, the initial enthusiasm could not be sustained. Most of these neo-literates are reverting back to their illiterate status. None of the elected members barring some zilla panchayat members interviewed were aware of what the new Panchayati Raj Act in their state was, nor were they informed about their rights and duties.

A common refrain was that some changes had taken place with the result that some of them were asked/forced to contest elections. Hence the question of these people being proud of their new found status did not arise in many cases. And very rarely do the elected women function as panchayat members or sarpanches.

However, in the panchayat samitis and the zilla parishads, women's participation was better when compared to that of the gram panchayats. In the panchayat samitis and zilla parishads, some of the women members attended the meetings. They may not actively participate in the proceedings but their presence itself is a welcome change.

The attitude of the officials were, by and large, discouraging. The irregular elections to the local bodies and long periods when these bodies were under bureaucratic control in the past had paved the way for officials' Raj at the grassroot level and these men had developed vested interests. Men have their own way of getting things done after they have been in politics for a long time. So women members are the immediate victims of the officials. This was observed in the panchayat samiti meetings at Rohtak and Kurukshetra. The women members spoke very little in the meetings and whenever they would say something, it was blissfully ignored. It was observed that when women members requested something of the officials at Bahadurghar panchayat samiti (Rohtak district), which is just on the Delhi border and located on the National Highway between Delhi and Rohtak, they were ignored totally. The officials were busy talking with someone else who visited them. After a stage, these women were asked to wait. They appeared to be totally at the mercy of the officials.

In Taneswar panchayat samiti (Kurukshetra district), the BDO went about giving his judgment: "Most of these women are occupying the positions for the sake of record. They do not know anything and do not want to learn either..."

7.2 Kerala

Women representatives to the local bodies in Kerala were mostly politically conscious in comparison with their counterparts in the other two states of Tamil Nadu and Haryana. However, a large majority of them did not engage in electioneering or active politics till they were elected to the Panchayati Raj bodies for the first time in 1994. It was surprising that even in the interior villages, women representatives were well aware of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments and the changes it brought about in terms of their political representation. Apart from this, they could talk about the details of the functioning of the panchayats. Some of them were critical

of the limited resources allotted to the panchayats. Details of the problems in their constituency and the measures that had been taken to solve them, the attitude of the officials towards them and so on were part of their discussion.

A major part of the survey was conducted during the summer months and naturally the most important subject for discussion in the meetings was water scarcity and the urgent measures to be taken by them to tackle this problem. It appeared that they were genuinely concerned about the issue.

At the Thirunavaya grama panchayat in Malappuram district, the president, Allungal Zubaida, wanted to know whether the study will be beneficial to her village or not. "Otherwise, why should I waste my time with you?" she asked laughingly. She was one of the active women panchayat presidents. Though lack of experience was very evident in her actions while presiding over the meeting, she showed a lot of confidence. She was seen discussing matters with her elder colleagues or clarifying doubts whenever a member raised a question. She said that her male colleagues were very co-operative and helpful.

Lakshmi Amma, a sixty year old member in the same grama panchayat was elected to the local body for the first time. She was just literate. However, she could discuss the activities of the panchayat and the problems they faced while delivering their duties at length. She said: "The government's propaganda on the panchayati raj system has made people think that we are the most powerful lot at the grassroots level and that they have handed over all powers to us. But actually we are handicapped with limited funds and resources. This is causing some disappointment among the people who approach us with various problems of their locality. I cannot lay a road or dig a well overnight when my hands are almost empty. Look at the condition of the kaccha road leading to my house. (The road leading to her house was very narrow and filthy). We are the immediate representatives of the people and have to bear the brunt of their criticism". (The interview had been taken before the

implementation of the "people's planning programme". Since then, the situation has changed).

Quite a few of the women members had had previous experience in politics as well as other social activities. Some of them came up through the student movement. Women who have been active with the Kisan front, trade unions and women's organisations have been elected to the panchayats. Meera, a post graduate, who is a member of the Moorkanikara Grama Panchayat, Thrissur, said that her active participation in college politics helped her in many ways. "Meeting people and facing problems with courage, these are the two important things I learnt from my days in student politics," she said.

As a matter of fact, she was very active in the meeting while many other first timers, in general were mostly soft-spoken and looked a bit confused on the general subject.

K.R. Vijaya, who had been a Students' Federation of India leader at school and college levels, and an advocate herself was elected to the zilla panchayat, Thrissur. Being very active, she made her presence felt in the district panchayat meeting. Despite the fact that she is one among the ruling party members, at times the chairperson had to request her to remain seated and not get so agitated. In a personal conversation, she told us that her previous political experience had played a tremendous role in making her new assignment a success. Though she is very young, people recognise her for her sincere work in her constituency. She narrated a dream plan of extending water supply to the distant part of her constituency, which is a hilly area where water scarcity affects the people in general and women in particular. She was confident that within her tenure of five years as a member, this will be possible. And added: "Nobody can play a trick on me for I have seen enough of politics. I am not at the mercy of officials since I know the procedure very well."

One of the problems faced by the new comers was that they could not understand the procedures of the house for some time. It was difficult for them to understand the government circulars and various

programmes conducted by the state and central governments. However, monitoring of selected panchayats since May 1996 (for the purpose of this study) established the fact that these women representatives improved considerably in due course.

The Thrissur Zilla Panchayat president was an active woman with a strong political background. This has been her second term as president. In 1991 she was elected as president of the district council for a short period (district councils were dismissed in 1992). She has been working with the CPM for decades in various capacities. She presided over the meeting very well. Even though she was very attentive to other members, she would always put strictures on those members who tried to gain political mileage through the issues they raised. When the opposition members blamed the president for not taking effective steps to contain the flood situation in the coastal areas due to the rain, she could give an account of the measures taken by the administration. However, the opposition was not in a mood to listen to her. She just reminded them about the limitation of zilla panchayats and advised them to settle their political scores outside the house. She had proceeded to the next item in the agenda ignoring the hullabaloo raised by the opposition.

The Anthikad Block Panchayat (Thrissur district) president was a soft spoken lady. This was the first time she contested an election and got elected to a local body. This does not mean that she had kept away from political activities and that this was her first exposure to politics. Apart from the fact that her husband was a member of Parliament and her son a sitting MLA, she is quite popular in that area and active as well. Now she performs her duties independently in her capacity as the block panchayat president.

However, this does not mean that a large number of women members elected to local bodies had previous political experience or that they had been anxiously waiting for an opportunity to serve the people. There were a large number of proxy candidates who were accidentally thrown into the election fray. But for the 33 per cent

reservation they would not have thought of becoming a local body member. No sooner were the reservations of seats for women declared, then the political parties started their search for "suitable" candidates from the "party families". The daughters, wives and female relatives of local leaders were selected to contest elections. These women were otherwise "inaccessible" for any kind of political activity. During the interview, a large majority of the women members admitted that their entry into politics was accidental, only due to the 33 per cent mandatory reservation.

Lack of initiative in broaching a subject was found to be a common problem in the course of the observation of meetings among these representatives. As far as the general issues were concerned, some of them took very little interest though when it came to an issue that was related to their ward (constituency), their voice was heard in the house. This shows their direct responsibility to the people concerned. As Usha, a member of the Thavanoor grama panchayat put it, "we cannot avoid people like MPs and MLAs do. Their constituency is wider in terms of area. But in our case, the people will be right in front of your house with issues like drinking water, drainage, street-lights and even petty boundary disputes. Sometimes women come and complain about their husbands' drinking habit. Once they get an impression that you are not very keen about public activities, they do not leave you. At least in Kerala you cannot stay as a proxy for long."

Malappuram is one of the most socially backward districts in Kerala as far as women's development is concerned. The women members who were interviewed from the grama panchayats in Malappuram were very shy barring a few. During the meeting, some of them either discussed something with the colleagues who sat nearby or walked up to the chair in person with their issues. Those who stood up to talk loudly were hesitant; like one Chandrika, teacher at the Thavannoor grama panchayat, who placed only a single request in a two hour meeting. It was a demand for a wooden bridge on a small canal near a

school so that the children could cross it without getting wet. After that she left the place immediately.

Some of the women representatives interviewed for the study were not at all interested in any kind of political activity. They categorically said that they do not want to enter into something new like politics. They have enough on their hands on the domestic front and wanted to get over this term somehow. Fortunately, this section constitutes a negligible minority. A large majority of the inexperienced (newly elected) members were very receptive to the changing political scenario. While accepting the new role they have to play, they are enthralled with new challenges. As most of the members said, they were very skeptical on public life and activities initially. Evils like corruption, violence during elections and the stigma attached to the women political activists and so on made them think that politics is not their cup of tea. However, the skepticism and fear is slowly giving way to optimism and self-confidence.

The attitude of the male members was not always encouraging. A general impression that "women do not know anything" has been cultivated assiduously or otherwise. This is because most of the men had previous political experience. Some of them even had twenty to thirty years experience in the local politics and panchayat administration. On one occasion, a woman member rose and said something on the housing allotment, and soon the male members shut her up saying; "Don't be foolish; you don't know anything". In most of the panchayat bodies observed for the study where the woman president is a first timer, they were by and large controlled by the male members from the same party to which they belonged to. The Thirunavaya, Ayyanthole, Koorkancheri panchayats, all in Thrissur district, are examples of this.

For instance, in the Ayyanthole Grama Panchayat, the vice president Raman Kutty literally presided over the meeting while the woman president Gracy Teacher was merely a passive observer. Both belong to the same party and the vice-president would have been the president but for the reservation.

At the Koorkancheri Grama Panchayat, opposition members along with some locals were seen shouting at the women president, Sathyabhama on the issue of laying a pipe line. They virtually captured the panchayat office and did not allow the president to function in her capacity. She tried to calm them down by saying, "please be quiet ... some one from outside is watching the drama". (the reference was to the interviewer). They refused to listen to her. However, an hour long commotion came to an end only when the elder male members of her party entered the scene and joined the fray with equal force.

One of the positive trends visible among the women members was that they were very regular at the meetings. Kerala panchayat institutions are highly politicised bodies. So the parties always ensure the attendance of their members. Apart from this, the women members were very enthusiastic about their new role. For instance, despite the fact that her close relative was hospitalized with an acute problem, the Iringalakuda Block Panchayat vice-president came to attend the meeting since she considered this to be an important meeting.

In most of the meetings the officials were very friendly with the people's representatives though their upper hand is discernible where the president is a newcomer (this happened mostly with women presidents since they were quite new to the establishment).

Women members generally, were very emotionally involved in problems like water scarcity, sanitation, drug addiction among the youngsters, allotment of houses for widows, vulgar film posters, consumption of liquor, and so on. Water scarcity was widely discussed by almost all the women members. One of the encounters was like this: the interviewer visited Saraswathy, Arthat grama panchayat (Thrissur district) member in a place where digging of a well was in progress. She was supervising the work. While discussing the various problems she said, "scarcity of drinking water is one of the major problems we face in summer. Yet we failed to find a permanent solution to this. Drinking water is a political issue for the men to blame the ruling party. But for us (women) it is a part of

our life for we are the sufferers if water is not available. So, as a woman member, I give priority to the drinking water issue."

Lalitha Bai Prabhakaran, from the same panchayat raised a serious issue. She said: "Due to the Gulf money and the bad influence of films, our adolescent boys and girls are getting into the trap of drugs and other bad habits. The government should take measures to check this. There should be some counselling centers for the children at school. I really do not know what the panchayat can do to fight this social evil." She has three sons and all three of them are school dropouts.

Women's representation to the local bodies in Kerala brings out a positive trend altogether. The initial problems are changing in course of time to a social change through the political empowerment of women. From our observations of women's active role in panchayat bodies we concluded that Kerala's achievement in the development of women accelerated the whole process of political empowerment.

7.3 Tamil Nadu

In the interior villages, gram panchayats exist as merely a formality and it is very rare to see them as functional forums of decentralised administrative units. Village activities are totally under the control of one or two wealthy land owning families who also own small-scale industrial units. Their control over the resources makes it possible for them to decide the politics of the village too. The subjugation of the people is necessarily based on economic factors rendering the landless section in society dependent on the rural elite in all walks of life and particularly in politics.

The non-existence of elected panchayats in this state for long (elections were held to Panchayats in Tamil Nadu in 1986 and after the expiry of the three year term of these bodies they came under the control of the bureaucracy) created a situation where the bureaucracy in collusion with the land owning rural elite conducted the affairs of

these bodies without any sense of accountability. Add to this the patriarchal values that are very much in existence in rural Tamil Nadu as in many other parts of the country and the picture of the subordinate status of women is complete.

In this social set-up, the entry of women into politics is not at all welcome. The survey specifically noted certain features that were common to both the districts – Coimbatore and Chengai Anna (now Kancheepuram).

Barring a few, the majority of women panchayat members were proxies of their husbands or other male relatives. The mandatory reservation of 33 per cent of seats to the local bodies forced the local politician to find a "new brand" of representative. It is true that women are very hesitant to come out on their own and contest elections. They are very skeptical about politics and inexperienced too.

In the course of interviews with elected women members, either her husband or some other male relative was found interfering very often to impose his own views on these members. In some cases, the woman herself looked up to her husband before replying to a question. There were many who would say openly "I do not know anything. You had better ask others (any other elected member)."

There was an interesting meeting with a lady chairperson at Nelliankadi village in Coimbatore district. Her husband happened to be the former gram panchayat president of the same village; and at the time of the interview was a councillor of the panchayat union. The fact that the particular seat of chairperson was reserved for women, "forced" him to hand over "his" seat to his wife. Throughout the interview, he sat with his wife (though he was constantly looking at his wrist watch to convey the notion that he was very busy) he did not leave the place before the interview was over. He interrupted the conversation every now and then with his own remarks and the chairperson (his wife) would nod her head at whatever her husband said.

To a question on what she would like to be in future,

her husband asked her to reply that she is happy with her position as gram panchayat president and does not want to grow further. Thereafter he explained that he would not allow her to contest any elections other than to the gram panchayats. He added further, "you see, I am a politician. If she also does the same thing who is there to look after the house I do not want my family to breakup." As for the woman elected member, she said that she could cope with the work of gram panchayat as well as her family for she goes to the panchayat office only when a meeting is held.

In some villages, the candidature of a woman is decided in a meeting of village elders (invariably the male members of the particular village and that too men belonging to the upper castes). In other words, women did not have any say in their own entry into public life. It was mostly a compulsory act. Due to this, women who are genuinely interested in politics never got a chance to enter the arena even after the 33 per cent reservation. The village meetings are convened by a prominent figure who is invariably a big landlord and the majority of the villagers being landless and hence dependent on the landlord do not have any say in the matter.

Tatur village in Annamalai block in Coimbatore district is an example of this nature. "The landlord called a meeting of the villagers and proposed the names of women to the Panchayat. This was accepted and women were unanimously elected." This particular landlord's wife who is also the president of the same panchayat refused to speak to this interviewer in her husband's absence. Not only this, the landlord ensured that the other women panchayat members were interviewed only in his presence and that too in his own premises.

Similar instances were found in many other villages in this district during the field survey.

In some villages, the women panchayat members or even presidents do not stay in the village. Some of them are married off to another village and a few of them stay with a son or other relative in the adjoining villages. This naturally prevents them from attending to the day-to-day activities of the panchayats. Yet some of them manage to

attend the panchayat meetings, although at the meetings they remain silent spectators, leaving it to the male members to talk, even about the women's constituencies.

For instance, at Ardhanaripalayam gram panchayat, the woman president lives eight kilometers away from the village. The former panchayat president (who was in that position for 40 years until this came under the 33 per cent reserved seats) has taken over the powers of the president. He is no longer an elected representative in the panchayat but his son is the vice-president of the same panchayat. According to this former president, the lady "does not do anything." He added with conviction, "I take care of the gram panchayat and hold regular meetings,"

Even though the elected woman president attended meetings, her role was simply that of a passive and mute spectator. The former president holds most of the cultivable land in the village and is a "much respected man." He did not conceal his contempt for studies of this nature when he was told about it.

There were people who had served as panchayat presidents for long periods and invariably happened to be big landlords. Their hold over the decision-making process has not slackened even now. Some of the women elected members admitted that these former presidents alone were instrumental to their election to panchayat posts and that they continue to remain their mentors.

Women members belonging to the Scheduled Castes who were interviewed for the study are virtually under the surveillance of the landlords. They work in the fields of the upper caste landlords (the landed Gounders, incidentally, come under the Most Backward Castes in Tamil Nadu) and in those cases where a particular position (member of president or vice-president) was reserved for a SC women, the elected representatives were "nominated" by the landlord of the village.

One of the landlords who nominated his "serf's" daughter as the panchayat union councillor was highly critical of the Government's policy of reservation. He said, "the Government shows all these gimmicks to divert people's attention from their actual problems. These

women are useless and their place should have been in the kitchen. You see, I nominated this girl who does not know the ABC of politics. I do not think she's going to learn anything in the near future. She's supposed to work in my field instead of taking part in all this nonsense." However, when it comes to the election of SC women representatives from his ward, he insisted that he would nominate the girl.

Women members were mostly accompanied by their husbands and, in some cases, grown up sons also accompanied them whenever they visited the panchayat office. In the meetings they were very soft spoken though they were prodded to speak by the male members who would point out to the presence of this observer in the meeting. Women members from the affluent class were better off in terms of their participation in the discussion than the women members from economically backward sections.

However, this does not mean that all the elected women representatives were proxies and that they talked only on behalf of their respective mentors. Several women members, though their number is small, came up on their own to work independently. In the meetings they would argue, pursue their own topics, and fight for getting basic amenities to their ward. In most of the cases the president or the chairperson could not avoid them because they would refuse to yield before registering their problems. They complained that they had to come to the panchayat office spending their own money and even the bus fare is not provided to them. Notwithstanding these problems, they were very enthusiastic and are aware of their new found status.

One of them said, "I am answerable to my own people and not to anyone else." She wished she could read fluently so that she could understand the procedure of functioning of Panchayati Raj bodies better.

Poonkothai, an elected representative of Achupatti Gram Panchayat, in Coimbatore district, said that she did not face any problem in coping with her domestic and public work. "My daughter and husband help me in the

household work. What I feel is that public life is also as important as domestic work. Earlier, even if you were highly motivated, it was very difficult to get a berth in political institutions for very little space was provided for women in the male dominated political system. Now we have got an opportunity and I am going to make use of it completely. I attend all the meetings and I regularly visit the panchayat office. People, especially women, come to my house to talk about their problems; it could be the issue of drinking water scarcity or personal problems like a drunkard husband and so on," she said.

Her neighbour confirmed this by saying that "she even neglects her family for public work like roads, water and electricity." She is now a respected woman in the locality. The villagers are happy that they have a sincere representative like her.

Meghala is another active panchayat member at Neelankarai village in Chengai Anna (Kancheepuram) district, close to Chennai. She really wants to help the villagers in her capacity as a ward member in the gram panchayat. However, she is a victim of party politics. She belongs to the party that is in a minority in the panchayat. The president of the gram panchayat had secured very little votes from this ward during the election and now he is discriminating against her ward according to Meghala. She was roughed up by a crowd when she visited the flood affected areas in her ward because she could not ensure any relief to the people. The real reason, according to her statement, was the president's discriminatory attitude, but the people saw it as her inefficiency. She complained that the president would never listen to her in the meetings.

"If I change my party only then will he help me" she added. Though local body elections in Tamil Nadu were held on a non-party basis (this was the case in gram panchayats) party affiliations did matter and they continue to matter even now.

In Kottivakam, a village adjoining Chennai city, the women panchayat members were very active. They functioned as a unit. Four of them belong to economically

backward families and stay in thatched huts, either in the slums or in the fishermen colony. During the interview with these members, village women came to them with their problems. Some of them would want to know how to obtain a ration card (this was the time when the Government had initiated steps to issue fresh ration cards in tune with the targeted public distribution system), some to talk about drainage and others about street lights and so on.

The elected members would patiently explain the way to obtain a ration card and the problems about lack of funds with the panchayat when it came to the other civic problems. These women visit the gram panchayat office every day.

Some of the women members who were working as vegetable or fish vendors, agriculture labourers and workers in one of the small-scale industrial units had to leave their vocation after they were elected. They said, "we are now elected representatives of the people and when the local people come to visit us we cannot be away from our home. This has forced us to leave our jobs." Since they do not get any allowance as panchayat members or any other material incentive from the panchayat they know that they are losing out financially, but they respect their own position and are proud of it.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

The experience in the three states is diverse, and even within each state, the impact of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution is varied. In the case of Kerala, the 73rd Amendment seems to have had a positive impact insofar as the empowerment of women is concerned. This, however, is certainly due to the fact that Kerala had a rich tradition of social reform movements, particularly during the end of the nineteenth century and first few decades of the twentieth century, which had a direct impact on the status of women.

Even later, the land reform movement had its effect on social life in the state by breaking the shackles of feudalism and iniquitous land relations. The success of this movement differentiates Kerala's development from that of other states. It is true that this positive atmosphere was not reflected in the representation of women in various elected democratic bodies prior to the mandatory reservation. This was mainly because the early social reform movements stagnated after achieving their immediate agenda.

Other reasons are the lack of motivation within the leadership of political parties in this regard and the emergence of a new middle class whose world-view is being shaped by globalization, consumerism, political apathy and other such factors; in other words, it is essentially a problem of Kerala society entering a post-modernist phase.

However, the 73rd Amendment did act as a catalyst activating or rather triggering off the dormant reformatory spirit within the Kerala society to further the political participation of women. And a significant sign of this was that women came forward to contest local body elections in the general seats also. Signs of improvement are very much visible within the short span of one year (the study closely monitored the panchayats, especially grama panchayats, for a year). The ongoing programme in Kerala for People's Planning and Participation, has ensured the

large scale participation of panchayat members. This, indeed was a new experience for the women representatives.

As a part of the programme, workshops and training camps were organised at village, block and district levels and close interaction between officials and people's representatives was a special feature of these meetings. The experience of Kerala can be popularised and modules based on the experience will serve to propagate the message in other states, particularly where the position of women in society is inferior.

Tamil Nadu comes in-between Haryana and Kerala – here women's work participation is higher than in Kerala, but literacy, sex ratio, health and sanitation and other indicators of social development are yet to reach any desired level. Unlike Kerala, the oppressive caste system is still in vogue in Tamil Nadu and women are the victims of caste as well as societal oppression. However, it is a positive sign that women are coming out and working in the local bodies despite the negative attitude of the society. What they require immediately is intensive training and familiarisation programmes regarding the activities of panchayats featuring the importance of being a member of the local body and some material incentive like the monthly allowances given to panchayat members in Kerala.

In Tamil Nadu, women are more enterprising than their counterparts in Haryana and Kerala. They work as agricultural labourers, fish and vegetable vendors, weavers and shop-keepers, and also work in industrial units. Their earnings are an indispensable source of income in their family, and in many households they are the bread winners because male workers often waste their wages on arrack consumption.

These aspects came to light in the course of the field survey as well as during a four day orientation programme conducted for women Panchayati Raj members (16 grama panchayat presidents and 28 members from the panchayat union and grama panchayat attended the programme) at Maraimalai Nagar in Chengai Annai district

(now renamed Kancheepuram), one of the districts selected for this study. The programme was conducted by the Sathyamurthy Centre for Democratic Studies, Chennai, along with the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Noida.

The women were asked to identify three basic problems they are facing in the village. They identified consumption of arrack as one of the basic issues that they had to tackle.

The fact that they are conscious about the issues and have the determination to fight makes the task easier. They were more receptive to new ideas. What they lack is training and motivation. Unlike in Haryana, one need not start from scratch in Tamil Nadu.

This is in no way an underestimation of the level of activism among women in Haryana. Unlike the social reform movements that were witnessed in Kerala in the past (where men themselves led the movement for the emancipation of women by fighting against social evils like child marriage, isolation of widows, right to wear blouses, and so on), Haryana has witnessed in the recent past powerful movements against alcohol consumption, which at one stage forced one of the major political parties in the state – Haryana Vikas Party – to campaign for the imposition of prohibition. It is another matter that the success of this campaign was short-lived. And this only underscores the fact that there were no organised movements for the emancipation of women in Haryana. Momentary or spontaneous protests against a localised incidence of violence against women – a rape or other atrocity committed on women in the locality – were naturally bound to end within a short span. There was no strong leadership to translate these actions into social change.

The experience of Haryana regarding participation of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions is not encouraging. Certainly there is a crying need for a multi-pronged activity towards ensuring that the 33 per cent reservation for women is not vulgarized by the male dominated or feudal way of thinking. Apart from making

the women literate and "educating" the elected women on their rights and duties, it is all the more important that the executive should intervene wherever there are men (husbands/fathers-in-law) acting in place of the elected women.

The common factors that emerged from the study are summarized below:

1. The quality of performance of the elected women representatives is largely dependent upon social factors like literacy, education and the tradition of social reform movements in that region.
2. Patriarchal and feudal values are serious hurdles in the path of progress in the rural areas and constrain the political participation of women.
3. Health indicators have a direct impact on the participation of women. Lack of control over fertility, high infant mortality rate, frequent child birth, malnutrition, etc., confine women to their homes.
4. Communal violence, caste clashes and election related violence have a negative impact on the political participation of women.
5. The entry of women in the political process was essentially the fallout of the statutory reservations.
6. Though there are instances where such reservation has failed to break the dominance of men over women, there is no denial of the fact that the new arrangement has helped in introducing a radical change in perceptions and if the change is not distorted, the 73rd Amendment could lead to far reaching changes in the social power structure.
7. Reservations alone will not serve any useful purpose unless they are accompanied by an aggressive campaign for literacy, political mobilisation and action. Training camps may be organised to train the women members and

introduce them to participatory planning and action.

8. Since they already have an organisational set-up and the necessary infrastructure, the political parties are in a better position to educate and create awareness among the masses on the need for reservation. In this context, it is necessary that the parties themselves resolve to let more women into the political arena rather than restricting themselves to placing on record their support for the principle of statutory reservation and scuttling it whenever they get an opportunity.

What can be done?

It is the duty of the various women's wings in the national and regional political parties to come out openly and fight for more seats in leadership positions. No political party can afford to antagonise women as they constitute not only half of the population but half of the voters also.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) many of which are located in rural areas, can use their infrastructure and experience to train not only the elected representatives but also those women aspiring to contest elections. As it is, many NGOs are imparting training effectively for the elected women representatives in different areas. This network should be strengthened. Male members too must be sensitised to the fact that this is not at all a male versus female problem.

It has been proven that colourful posters and small documentary films are very effective educational and motivational tools for training programmes, since the trainees are mostly illiterate and semi-literate.

Literacy programmes should always have follow-up programmes to ensure that neo-literate women do not relapse into illiteracy again. Setting up village committees on literacy may solve this problem.

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One of the most radical legislations of our times was the reservation of 33 per cent of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, provided for in the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution. It enabled thousands of women to contest elections and enter local government bodies for the first time.

The Institute of Social Sciences conducted a study of panchayats in Haryana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu to assess the performance of elected women representatives and their relative independence in decision making in these local bodies. The report of the study gives a comparative overview of women's political participation in these states and describes the factors that influence the level of their participation. It also attempts to broaden our understanding of the wider impact of the 73rd Amendment on the status of women in rural India.



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