

Diffusion of Power: Gender as a factor for women leaders at the Grassroots Democratic Institutions of Rural India: A Study from an Indian State

Dr Asima Sahu,
Reader in Political Science
Ravenshaw University
Cuttack, Odisha, India

Abstract:

Even before 73rd Amendment of the Indian constitution democracy at the grassroots level had been attempted giving limited power to the people at the local level, both rural and urban, but not on a very regular basis. But this landmark amendment besides institutionalizing democracy at the grassroots, made women representation mandatory reserving 33% of seats for them in the elected bodies. Women representatives at the grassroots (panchayat levels) are said to outnumber even the population of some small countries like the Scandinavian ones. However, they suffer from the charge that they do just proxies for the male folks (their husbands, brothers or other male relations). Almost all power structures in India have been patriarchal in nature. How the women induction into Grassroot Democratic bodies have transformed politics is a subject matter of query and curiosity. Do women face handicaps for being women when they sit or work face to face with men in institutions where power and policies matter? How much effective they have been in policymaking or influencing policies? The paper seeks to study changing nature of gender in the power structures of village democracies (Panchayat systems) while giving a picture of gender relations in the state (Odisha) in general and the rural society in particular.

Keywords: Gender, Grassroots Democracy, Participation, Impediments, Power

Introduction

Gender inequality is ubiquitous throughout the world (perhaps with exception to the Scandinavian countries) in so far as power-positions are concerned. Women are severely underrepresented in political leadership positions. Surveys have repeatedly revealed that even in countries where women are active professionally, their level of responsibility as policy planners (has been) low (Handelman 2006).

However, across the world women are struggling to break the shackles that bind them and challenging the unequal distribution of power in the society. Transforming the existing inegalitarian pattern of gender relationships necessitates leadership in the key centres of power. It is imperative for women to be in the corridors of power and have the power to negotiate a better deal for themselves, if they are to

influence policy decisions which have an impact upon them (Rajput 2001). Empowerment of women in all spheres, in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and the foundation of a gender-equal society.

The question of women's political participation has been on the international agenda for quite some time, and permeating many regional and national plans of action. Much hope has been invested in the United Nations and it has consistently been the engine for keeping the gender issue on the global agenda. The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952.

The issue of women's political empowerment, while attracting significant attention earlier, actually came to the forefront of the global debate for women's rights at the time of the Fourth World

Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995. Henceforth, the issue continued to hold centre-stage of all discussions on gender justice and equality. Women's equal access to, and full participation in decision-making was emphasized in the Platform for Action, as one of the critical areas of action.

The Beijing Platform for Action addressed the great disparity in power between women and men in public affairs. It urges governments, the international community and civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to take action to reach the following objectives:

- a) Ensure women's equal access to, and full participation in, power structures and decision-making
- b) Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership

The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) reflect the global acknowledgement that empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality are parameters of human rights and social justice. Today gender disparity and empowerment have come to occupy the centerstage of development debate.

Objective of Study

This paper is a modest attempt to explore whether diffusion of power to the women at the grassroots level self-governing institutions is taking place in India in general and in Odisha, the Indian state in particular especially in the context of gender engineering sought to be achieved by the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution.

Methodology

The methodology that has been used in this paper include the following: direct observations, interviews, indirect observations and textual analysis. My methodology has been influenced by feminist methods that stem from a concern of bringing women at the center of the

research. I posit that an intensive case study approach is best suited as it allows for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of women's situations. For the purpose of the study five panchayats of Cuttack district in Odisha was purposefully selected. The principal reason behind my selection of the panchayats for the study is that in these Panchayats women from backward class won important posts like Sarapanch and Nominee. In 2012 PR election 32 women members were elected from these five panchayats. I took all the elected women members of those Gram Panchayats as my samples. I also talked to selected villagers (both male and female), officials to assess the extent of the diffusion of power to the grassroots women leaders.

Though India enjoys the distinction of being the world's largest democracy, the overwhelming majority of Indians and particularly the 833.1 million people, the inhabitants of rural India are condemned to suffer at the hands of an unresponsive government machinery historically marked by pre-ponderance of bureaucracy, corruption and absence of transparency.

The Indian Background :

Many parts of rural India have been characterized by a hiatus between the masses and the governmental machinery. Rural people are mostly in the dark about the policies and programmes of the government. They don't have the wherewithal to influence public policies or resource allocations for developmental purposes. However, no one can deny that the critical needs of communities pertaining to health, sanitation, potable water, education, family planning, income generation et al can only be satisfactorily looked after locally through local responsibility, accountability and action utilizing local resources to the optimum level.

One cannot but agree with the statement of economist Amartya Sen,

“Democracy is not only the goal of development, it is the primary means of development.” Only when every individual enjoys greater freedom, voice and opportunity, she or he will channelise the energy and the creative ability to solve the problems of the community.

Though the Indian freedom movement placed villages and their self-governing systems at its core, the Constitution of free India did not place it in its main body. Only a reference in the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPS) which is non-justiciable was made.

Due to vigorous campaign by political personalities, intellectuals and civil society organizations, the Parliament of India enacted in 1992 the 73rd Constitution Amendment for rural local bodies (panchayats) making them “institutions of self-government.” As a result of this, India has progressed towards ‘multi-level federalism’ and the democratic base of the country’s political system has been expanded. Indeed it represents a historic opportunity to transform the face of rural India. The panchayats have a five year tenure, and they are assigned 29 subjects to manage ranging from agriculture, forestry, fisheries to family planning, health and education. The panchayats, in particular, implement schemes under poverty eradication programmes. It identifies beneficiaries to receive financial assistance for constructing low-cost houses, old age and widow pensions, to create sanitation facilities, digging of tube-wells etc.

Although the constitution of India did guarantee women equal rights, Indian women continue to remain oppressed and struggle over everything from survival to resources. There exists in India a strong legal environment and a movement to protect women’s rights. However, the social status of the majority of Indian women remains unchanged. They continue to be

subjected to the influence of the existing patriarchal attitudes in Indian society. The dilemma for Indian women today is that despite the liberal provisions of the constitution and various laws, serious inequalities remain. This is very clearly manifested in the access to political power on the part of women.

Perception of Women in Political Activity

Politics is an exercise of power and denotes the functioning of a whole array of policies of public institutions and forms which are involved in moulding the lives of people by way of decisions. Politics throughout the ages has been constructed and moulded on the basis of those norms which have been identified though loosely as masculine. The result is the distancing of women from everything political-women are perceived as part of the social structure and not as part of power phenomenon. The male-public and female-private dichotomy in social perception has been found to be the greatest hindrance in the way of women’s access to power and political decision-making. Political activity seems to remain outside the boundaries of social norms and socially acceptable activities for women. Low level of political participation by women can be explained in part by traditional public-private societal divides in which politics is considered public (therefore, male) and familial matters are private (therefore, female).

The popular perception that politics is ‘dirty’ and therefore not a proper forum for female participation makes matter for the women more difficult. It is more true in a country like India where cultural norms and traditions restrict women to the private sphere of action. Politics is not for them. It is strictly ‘public’ and the male dominated sphere of action.

It is now a well recognized proposition in women’s movement that all spheres of lives involving any relationship

is political; that many women are silently waging a struggle against the patriarchal and feudal forces that seek to confine them. This struggle against patriarchy is a prolonged and complex one. It needs effective participation in politics in a visible and appreciable number at effective levels and in meaningful positions.

Women constitute 11 percent of India's 15th Lok Sabha (Lower House) and 10.26 percent of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) of the Indian Parliament. In comparison, only five percent of MPs in the first Lok Sabha were women. The increase is substantial, but hardly adequate.

According to UNDP's Human Development Report 2013, India ranks 132 out of 186 countries on the Gender Inequality Index(GII). Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, which are poorer than India and have lower HDIs, all do comparatively better than India when it comes to gender equality. Only 26.6 percent of Indian girls complete their secondary education. In terms of health, the National Family Health Survey (2005-06) notes that 56.2 percent of married women between the ages of 15 and 49 are anaemic and nutritional anaemia caused by iron deficiency contributes to 19 percent of maternal deaths. These continuing gender inequalities can partly be explained by the dearth of female political participation and the resultant differences in power and decision-making authority (Dreze and Sen, 2002).

As Azza Karam (1998) puts it, democracy, by definition, cannot afford to be gender-blind, but it must strive towards the equal representation of men and women in the decision-making process. Three arguments support an expanded role for women in politics (Dahlerup): first, as full citizens constituting at least half the population, women have the right to proportional representation; second, women's views should influence politics since women's

living conditions and experiences are not identical to those of men; third, men cannot reliably represent women's interests since men and women have some contradictory interests on certain issues.

Positive Discrimination and Grassroots Democracy (73rd Amendment)

The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was not taken up in a systematic and serious way until the creation of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, which published its report in 1976. The CSWI report recommended that women's representation in political institutions, especially at the grass-roots level, should be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women (IPU 1997). In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for women suggested that a 30% quota for women be introduced at all levels of elective bodies. However, women's groups insisted that reservations be pursued first at the local level to encourage grassroots participation (IPU 1997). The idea behind such a strategy was that reservations would move up to the state and federal level, ultimately resulting in increase in women's representation at all levels.

The enactment of 73rd Constitutional Amendment known as 'Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 1992' was a major step towards women's empowerment. It is an attempt in social engineering to engender the political process and institutions, and issues that are critical to this process. Through this provision, political power is sought to be diffused to women at the grassroots. It has had very important implications for women's political participation. It made possible the transfer of decision-making power to thousands and thousands of women elected as representatives to local government bodies. These women are not only the beneficiaries of change—they are the key agents of change.

Presence of 33 per cent women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) influence the political processes of decision-making and policy formulations at this level. It enables them to give a women's angle to the decision and policy formulation activity. It awakens them to the problems facing the community as a whole. It facilitates a journey from the private to the public sphere of activity. Total sharing and equality in decision making may not happen for years to come but PRIs show a path towards that goal.

Demographic and gender profile of Odisha state

The population of Odisha (a state in the eastern part of India) ,according to the 2011 Census, stands at about 41 million (4.1crores), making it the 11th most populated state in India. The state makes up about 3.4% of the country's population. The literacy rate in Odisha is 73.45 percent, of which male literacy is 82.40 and female is 64.36.The sex ratio in the state stands at 978.The child sex ratio at 934 is causing a lot of concern. The state is pre-dominantly rural in character. About 83.32 percent live in the villages of Odisha while 16.68 percentage of the state's population live in urban areas. In the rural regions of Odisha female sex ratio is 988 while the same for the child is 939 girls per 1000 boys.The average literacy rate in Odisha for rural areas is 70.78 percent. The literacy rate for male stands at 80.41 while for the females it is 61.10 percent.

Women in Grassroots politics in Odisha

The present Panchayati Raj structure of Odisha includes 30 Zilla Parishads with 854 elected Zilla Parishad members, 314 Panchayat Samitis with 6,235 elected Panchayat Samiti members,6236 Gram Panchayats including 6,236 elected Sarpanchs and 87,551 elected Ward Members out of which 46,643 are women. Thus, in Odisha at present, there are

1,00,876 elected representatives out of which 50% are women.

The operationalisation of the 73rd Amendment in Odisha has again put to test certain myths about Indian women. These include

- Women are passive, submissive and do not exhibit any interest in the working of political institutions.
- The reservation opportunity will only be availed by the upper echelons of the categories for whom it is intended.
- The relatives of the entrenched political class only will find entry into the Panchayats.
- Women act only as proxy members and are incapable of making any worthwhile contribution to the functioning of the Panchayats.

Impediments

The impediments to the transformative potential of the Grassroots Democratic Institutions through the presence of the 'critical mass' of women are many. There have been many cynics guided by forces of patriarchy and feudalism who oppose women's assumptions of political leadership at the grassroots level. Consequently they are subjected to physical violence, rape, murder, humiliation and manipulation. In a case study a woman Sarpanch (Head of the Panchayat) I interacted with lamented the humiliation and indignities hurled at her owing to her backward caste identity. The women representatives are also ridiculed and taunted as 'puppets' or 'proxies' of men. There continues to be a resistance to meaningful devolution of power and funds from the centers of (male) power to the periphery. Women still confront powerful handicaps to their involvement in politics; for example, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, family responsibilities, absence of an enabling environment, lack of experience,

low level as well as absence of self-confidence and a strong opposition of entrenched cultural and religious biases. However, as some studies are showing, there is the encouraging sign of women representatives increasingly asserting themselves and autonomously exercising power (Palanithurai, 2005).

Braving all odds, women representatives in Panchayati Raj are making differences in domains of immediate concern to their families and their villages. These issues range from health and sanitation to campaign against alcoholism and domestic violence. Women are transforming the development agenda to address issues crucial to rural life. My study has shown that female political representatives are more concerned with social issues such as health, poverty alleviation, community development and family welfare. They also tend to work out the details and strive for consensus on specific policies and programmes rather than debate political issues. Local women representatives have mobilized support at the grassroots level for their development policies by building alliances with non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and Self Help Groups (SHGs).

ISSUES TAKEN UP BY WOMEN

Prior to the provision of quota, statistics regarding women's participation in village councils were significantly lower (between 4 and 5 percent). Today about 50% of the elected representatives of the panchayati raj are women. These women are faced with basic developmental issues such as poverty, illiteracy, and lack of health care. A quick review of women leaders' performance have shown mixed results regarding their participation.

According to several micro-studies including my own observations from the field, more than 90 percent women attend

the panchayat meetings regularly. Considering this large numerical women participation, there is the view that democracy has become more participatory than before at least at the grassroots level (Mohanty 2003). Another dimension that strengthens this proposition is that the majority of these women hail from lower income group particularly at the village panchayat level.

The micro-studies also indicate that the working milieu of the panchayats has altered owing to the presence of the women. The level of civility and discipline has definitely has gone up.

Women—who are more often than not afflicted with poor health are trying hard to have access to better nutrition, sanitation facilities, clean drinking water and availability of reproductive health care essential for healthy families and communities. Women representatives are organizing literacy programmes for other women in the community. They are making sure that there are schools for children, they also stress on children's attendance in these schools and the accountability of their teachers. They are putting special stress on girl children's education. The increase in the literacy rate of the females can partly be explained due to the increasing women representation in the panchayat institutions.

Women organize Self-Help Groups and credit organizations among themselves to generate and enhance family income. These Self-Help Groups also provide the poor and marginalized women in the rural areas with intangible resources like information, social networks and associations, which in turn increase their self-confidence and strengthen their ability to articulate their interests. The Self-Help Group (SHGs) are an effective interface for disadvantaged women to constructively deal with the Panchayats. They have the potential to provide a basis for collective action

around both wider community and gender needs in Panchayats. They also lobby for inclusion of women's interest in Panchayats. Women leaders are organizing skills training for the women.

Women representatives in PRIs are also taking enough care to address crucial social problems such as domestic violence, child marriages, child labour and dowry. They ensure that women are conscious of their rights and have access to information. Women are also changing the quality and nature of leadership, emphasizing on values such as honesty, openness, patience, inclusion, collective action and accountability. Even in backward villages of Odisha, women's leadership is initiating and facilitating a process of change for the whole community. These leaders are encouraging and inspiring other women to come out of the four walls of their homes and contribute to the well-being of the community.

Impact on family Dynamics

The power equations between the woman leader and the male family members such as the husband, father-in-law, father, brother etc is definitely witnessing a shift. Through the wife the husband gets a chance to get involved in the public sphere. Consequently in many low-income families the husband-wife relationship hasn't gone sour. The husband and the other family members assist in the domestic chores. The patriarchy no longer remains monolithic.

Though total sharing and equality in decision-making may not yet be a complete reality, but PRIs show a path towards that goal. When women armed with physical presence of a sizeable proportion reach the position of a critical mass, their voices cannot be ignored. It has its fall-out in other areas also. Women in the rural areas are getting restless and expressing their desire to get engaged in certain gainful activities. Consequently, many Self Help

Groups(SHG) have been formed in different parts of the rural areas. This is a crucial step in the direction towards the economic empowerment of women.

The Survey :

The women representatives including women Sarapanchs were interviewed with a structured open-ended questionnaire and the responses obtained are given below. There were also in-depth discussion with these grass -root political actors and certain things emerged which were not covered in the scope of the structured questionnaire. The questions and the general responses are discussed below.

1. Who motivated you to join the Panchayat elections?

About 60% of women representatives told it was either the husband or other family members. 20% are saying it was the villagers who motivated them to contest. 10% felt it was their inner voice.

2. Why did you decide to contest in the elections to the Panchayats?

Majority of the respondents told that for the development of the village, they wanted to contest

3. Are you associated with any political party?

90% of them are saying they have some linkages with one political party or the other. Their relatives be it their father, brother, brother-in-law, father-in-law are associated different political parties.

10% are independent. They do not have any truck with any political party.

4. Are you aware of 73rd Constitutional Amendment to the Indian Constitution?

98% of them do not know about this game changing Amendment though they are the beneficiaries of the same.

5. Did you contest elections to the Panchayat ever earlier?

More than 90% of the women interviewed mentioned that they had contested the elections for the first time.

6.How do you feel after getting elected?

All of them had said they felt elevated because they got the opportunity to work for the people. Their sense of self-worth got heightened.

7.Did you face any difficulty during your election campaign?

70% of the women did not encounter any problem during their election campaign.

However,30% of the women replied in affirmative.The hostile attitude they had to face was due to the entrenched patriarchal mindset and opposition from different political parties.

8.Do you attend Panchayat meetings regularly?

99% of the representatives attend the meetings regularly.

However one caveat is to be used. These women are escorted by their male relatives.

9.What are the major issues raised by you in the Panchayat meetings?

Drinking water(Borewell, Tubewell),Sanitation (Construction of the toilets), Drainage facilities,Old Age ,widow Pension,BPL (Below Poverty Line) Card, BPL Electricity Line, Construction of road,Housing for the poor under the Govt scheme,High School, Playground for the children,Library facility

10.What are the specific problems faced by women in your area?

Toilet facilities, Illiteracy, Lack of Education, Economic independence, Nutritional deficiencies especially on the part of pregnant and lactating women

11.Do you put emphasis on women's issues and problems on the agenda of the Panchayats?

Most of the women showed keenness to address women's issues as are revealed from the answers.

12.What are the steps taken by you to address the problems faced by women?

Some of them replied that they have taken initiatives in 'provision of educational

facilities, adult literacy, development of cottage industries, vocational training'.

13.What is your opinion about women empowerment?

Women should be conscious of their rights. They must have economic independence. Education is regarded extremely important in empowering women.

14.Have you attended any training programme ?

60% of women told that they have attended some training programme.

15.Have you been successful in fulfilling the objectives for which you participated in the PRIs?

98% of the women representative replied that they feel stifled because of the party politics,the highhandedness of the officials and the unresponsiveness of the governmental machinery.

16. Had there been no quota system, would you ever have contested the elections?

95% of the women replied in the negative.

17. Do you receive support from your family members regarding the discharge of your public duties?

All of them mentioned that their family members extend them their full co-operation.

18.Has there been a change in your status within your family?

80% of the respondents felt their status within their families have increased. Their family members are feeling proud of them.

19.Do you feel women are less capable than men?

98% of the respondents believe that women are as capable as men.

20.Will you contest in the future elections to the panchayat bodies?

50% women did not show any interest to contest in the future elections. The reason being the frustration of not being able to meet the purpose for which they joined the grassroots democratic institutions.

Findings and Suggestions:

- The field study shows that grassroot women leaders are still operating in a patriarchal system and more truly proxies for males who were ex-sarapanchs/ex-ward members etc.
- During my many field visits I found how every time I interacted with a woman panch or Sarapanch ,invariably she was escorted by a male member (husband/brother-in-law/a male relative) and questions fielded to them were answered by the male members escorting them.
- In the Panchayat Parliament that I observed I found male relatives sitting close to the meeting and at times intervening which was taken as a normal norm though unconstitutional. Though women at times spoke, I was told by sources there that these had been doctored by the male relatives.
- Most of these women are political party backed .The parties themselves are male dominated .To garner women votes and as a matter of compulsion because of the quota under the 73rd Amendment they have fielded women candidates and at times the devolution of power to the village panchayats becomes a sham as the MLA (Member of the State Legislative Assembly) calls the shot and the real power spatially speaking stays away from where it is supposed to be.
- Most of the women members are of under-matriculate/intermediate level. It was surprising that a vast majority of them did not know about the 73rd amendment that has brought them to the positions that they have in the village council.
- However, to give due credit to the elected women leaders,they are keen to bring about a change in the lives

of the people in their villages. They are quite conscious and concerned about the local issues and particularly the women's issues .Most of them have raised the issues of sanitation, health, education of the girls.They have emphasized the economic independence as the gateway to women empowerment. Against many odds, they are eager to be agents of change in their own ways. Therefore, their role and participation can't be dismissed as that of 'reluctant agents of change'.

However, women's effective and meaningful participation at the grassroots level through the panchayat system cannot reach a higher level unless women are made aware of the realities and are properly trained for their role. Reservation alone cannot deliver the goods. Effective and higher contribution of women will need much intervention by way of action and other inputs. It requires a sustained multi-sectoral campaign of actions, producing breakthroughs in the following priority areas.

The following areas need enough attention for achieving the objective of diffusion of power to the women leaders.

Political Education

Political education is the first step (initial measures). For political education there will have to be two types of target groups. Wherever women have already entered the PRIs, these women need to be politically educated and informed. Such education should not be confined to creating awareness among women of their powers, rights and functions but also about Indian Polity, the nature of its democracy and constitutions, policies and programmes for women and other weaker sections. For the general women it would mean mobilizing them for voting in the elections

and even campaigning and questioning the candidates, both male and female.

Political Information

For education, information on issues such as current political development and trends, legislations, policies and plans is the basic step, information should lead to mobilization.

Panchayati Raj

- a) **Reserved Seats:** Panchayat and people's organizations must ensure that representatives serving in seats and reserved for women as well as for SCs and STs are actively supported in attending meetings and engaging in Panchayat activities.
- b) **Training:** All panchayat members including the women's representatives must gain access to training. They need to carry out their responsibilities in all key areas like panchayat finance, nutrition and health, family planning, sanitation, education and economic development.
- c) **Gender Sensitization:** Male panchayat representatives and government officials must have the opportunity through workshops and training programmes, to appreciate and become more sensitive to the importance of women's leadership and the challenges women face.

Women Representatives

- a) **Literacy Training:** Women panchayat representatives who are not able to read and write must have access to literacy training.
- b) **Leadership and training:** Leadership training and ongoing support must be available for the inculcation of the leadership qualities women require, the ability to create a vision, to communicate effectively and to be able to make the vision a reality. If the women have to

transform the values and priorities of India's political and cultural space, they must raise their own consciousness of the quality and content of feminist leadership.

- c) **Networking:** Women representatives must share experiences, learn lessons and build structures of mutual support that enable them to project themselves as part of a state, national and international network of women treading the same path.

Efforts at Government Level

Access to Information: Rural women must gain access to all information about the responsibilities and entitlement of panchayats. All relevant legislations, regulations and budget documents must be readily available and translated into local language.

Alliances for advocacy and action

Alliance building: NGOs, women's groups and other civil society organizations must constitute vibrant and active networks and alliances dedicated to advocacy and coordinated strategic action for Panchayati Raj and women's leadership in Panchayats. These alliances must create a climate of awareness and support for Panchayati raj throughout all sectors of society.

Communication and information flow

The alliances must facilitate effective and open communication between the government and panchayats to ensure that information about available resources, programmes and initiatives are available and fully understood. Formation of resource centers with full time social activists could help by emerging as forums for information, dissemination, discussions, reading materials and even counseling services. The social activists with the necessary skills in political understanding, raising resources and networking may organize various

activities like group discussions, awareness lectures.

Role of Media

Media must provide education and create political awareness through an ongoing coverage of the historic process of building local democracy with particular emphasis on the rarely told story of women's successes as Panchayat leaders.

Conclusion

Having been trapped by socio-cultural norms and traditions, the women in Indian society have for a long time been out of the so-called 'public area' of activities, i.e. politics. But politics is as much a women's concern as a man's because it equally affects her life conditions. For a healthy democracy all need to participate in the shaping and sharing of power. If gender prevents half the population from participation in the politics, it can not be a democratic society.

The 73rd Amendment of the Indian constitution has opened the windows of opportunities for the rural women in India to access political power. Democracy has become more participatory in the process of implementing it. This Amendment has an empowering impact on women as it puts women in decision-making at the grass-roots level. During my study and field visits, I found in a few cases women are functioning well in the PRIs. There are signs of diffusion

of power to the rural women in local self-governing institutions in a small way but it is a welcome beginning, which will have catalytic effect in not so distant future. Interestingly within their own families also the shift in power equation in favour of the women is taking place as the respectability of these women is going up in relation to other kith and kin. However, to hasten the process of redistribution of economic and political power in the rural society, what needs to be done is proper mobilization of the rural women, awareness generation among them through political education and training. For this task the government, NGOs, Women's organizations, both academic and action oriented, need to join hands in their effort. It is an established fact that the extent of patriarchy, illiteracy, poverty and socio-cultural norms are deeper in the rural areas compared to the urban areas. A concerted effort is necessary by all institutions and individuals who care for women, and do not want them to remain politically powerless forever. The process of diffusion of political power can be accelerated by enabling measures such as economic independence, access to resources as well as to education, continuous training for capacity building and coordinated functioning of different Government Departments.

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