

ISST Checking

*Women in Local Governance:
Macro Myths, Micro Realities*



ISST Occasional Paper

By

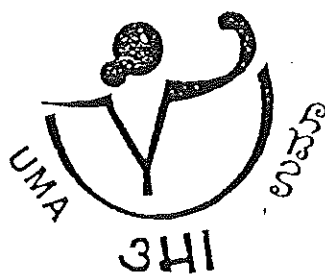
Mukta Banerjee

UMA NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTRE
Institute of Social Studies Trust,
Bangalore

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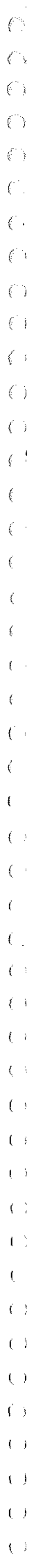
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ABSTRACT

Four cases studies on the performance of elected women members of panchayats, drawn from a field project meant to strengthen the participation of women in local self governance, show how micro realities link up with macro myths. Case study 1 deals with a woman panchayat member from an upper caste background who resigned herself to her husband's diktat in panchayat matters. Case study 2 is an illiterate woman of backward social origin who, contrary to macro myth, performed remarkably well and took a firm stand on several issues. Case study 3 depicts the circumstances of an extremely capable woman Municipal Counselor. As a single woman, she was thought to be 'loose' and her performance in office hence sidelined, so that the myth of women not being capable in the public domain was reinforced. The fourth and last case study profiles a competent woman sarpanch in Karnataka's only all women gram panchayat, whose unfamiliarity with her new responsibilities and initial dependence on experienced men lessened with the passage of time.

Women in Local Governance: Macro Myths and Micro Realities

The reservation policy and the women's movement's have been instrumental in mobilizing and strengthening the participation of women in political bodies. Women have been elected to Panchayat Raj Institutions at various levels and the impact of their participative performance is obviously being felt on the political processes of the country. The broad political operations and the nature of these political activities have had its trickle down effect on the women, who by and by are gaining confidence in this new field. This is because the art of acquiring and exercising power to effectively influence decision-making process is gaining grounds. The policies governing them have also been actively taken up by women in large numbers. In doing so they have tried to bring about social change by making necessary demands to fulfill their needs.

Such participation is also a condition and indication of a women's own present power and mental strength. Direct and visible participation helps to enlarge the vision of the social group by increasing awareness amongst all members of that group.

Policies are being made by the decision-makers affecting the lives of both men and women, but how may women have access to the decision making position? The cost of participation in the formal political institutions are very high in terms of money, time and energy. The pattern of women's life in rural areas does not permit such luxuries, unless exceptions are made. The realm of formal politics is dominated by the institutions of the state, which are the

central, state and local level where political parties and pressure groups are most visible. Besides the deep-rooted patriarchal norms governing the daily lives of these women are difficult to change.

Let us try to understand what does political participation mean to women? How does one assess their performance in PRIs? How has being members of a formal political body changed their lives? And finally, what is the attitude of the men towards women's participation.

What is Political Participation, and what are its indicators?

According to Ms. Mazumdar (1993) Political Participation means involvement/engagement in any organized deliberate activity that seeks to influence/alter the character/ functioning/ structure/ policies/ assumptions/ behaviour of any one or more of those institutions or the power process in any of these spheres. Thus attempts to remove barriers to such activity, to make it effective, to generate new/alternative channels of power with access to established norms is viewed as political participation.

Another relevant definition is "the collective action of women against oppressive patriarchal power with the long term goal of social transformation that would ensure women's rights and their liberation from subjugation, superstition, degradation and injustice". (Patel V, 1993)

The concept of political participation of women is broader than the one which covers women's participation only in the electoral and administrative processes. It includes the entire gamut of voluntary activities with a bearing

on the political processes including support for political groups, dissemination of political views, involving in any form of organized activities that effect or seek to effect power relationships. It refers broadly to activities by those not formally empowered to make decisions, these activities being mainly intended to influence the attitudes and behaviour of those who have powers for decision-making. Infact, protests and demonstration against those in power also form part of political participation. Women's participation has covered a range of activities including movements, protest, and support meetings on a large range of issues. (Devi, 1998)

But in India, political participation of women is severely limited due to traditional factors as that of caste, class, religion, feudal and family status all of which are patriarchal forces that work in favour of men against women. Consequently, women are still left on the periphery of the political process and full participation remains elusive to most of them , inspite of capturing some seats of power and influence.

Any attempt to measure women's political participation simply by studying official/organisation or formal membership is inadequate as it is found that much of the third world politics occur outside conventional political institutions. A record of women's participation in political process other than formal is quite creditable. Women have been visible in mass movements group upsurges and protest struggles in large number though their presence is not felt in structural decision-making institutional settings. In this broader context political participation by women also seeks to reorganise the lives of these women in society and ensure that it is not underestimated as 'non-political' and women's concerns treated as 'social' by nature. Thus in order to

assess women's political participation one has to look at their involvement in different types of mobilization such as movements and struggles. The question that needs to be investigated in depth is one to which is able to ascertain women's participation in mass struggles and protest movements and not necessarily only formal political bodies ranging from village level to parliament.

What are the varying degree and patterns of political involvement on women? How far do women exercise their recognized political rights and prerogatives? Do women exercise them equally? Or are there differences amongst them as to their interest and involvement in political affairs? What is their role at higher levels in legislatures and executive positions? What social factors are responsible on their political involvement and behaviour. (as of status, education or age) or is it solely responsible to their personality and psychological efficacy?. How far do organization influence them?

And finally in what ways do attitudes of men effect the degree of political involvement and participation of women? Do they feel that women should be admitted to political offices only in exceptional circumstances within certain limits. What are the policies of the different political parties with respect to the involvement of women in political affairs? All these need to be investigated but are beyond the scope of the present paper

In India women who have entered the arena of formal politics, have been elected through the process of classical democracy, namely universal adult franchise, political party campaigns in a multi-party system and mandatory elections every five years. Women also have to contest elections to win the

seats. These elected bodies have the power to decide both the what and how much of development and also the administering and monitoring of those decisions.

In 1983 in the state of Karnataka there was a move to decentralize government. This stated that 25% of the places in the councils would be reserved for women. The elections were held in 1987. The sight of more than 14,000 elected women thrilled with their victory, was quite shocking for the new government.

This however was not to last long! As soon as the 5 years term expired in 1992, the PR bodies of Zilla Parishads and Mandal panchayats were dissolved by a notification issued by the state Government. This meant that the dissolution of these bodies need to be confined to a maximum period of 6 months but could be as long as the government deems it necessary. Further it also provided for authorising the government to appoint administrations in the PRIs during the period of their dissolution. The main argument put forward by the government was that the working of the reorganised PR over the recent years since 1987 had brought to surface several deficiencies. Hence, the existing act need to be amended to remove these deficiencies and this would take time. Subsequently in 1993 the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed by the Parliament whereby 33% women were to be elected at the local body amongst other changes.

Now both the percentage of minimum reservation and scope of these reservations were widened. The new panchayat laws of Karnataka aimed at strengthening PR by reorganising and re-empowering of the Taluk level

institution. Several social scientist, public leaders and administrators said that this change would strengthen the efficacy and role of PR as a whole in the state. During the 5 years of their functioning (1987-92) these institutions had rendered a good account of themselves by and large in contributing to political and development processes at local levels. It was hoped that in this new phase some of those patterns of functioning would continue.

These women politicians are governing in the formal sense of the word. They are the government for their area, be it one village or at the larger levels of taluks or districts.

Now it is necessary to find out how these women have made an impact in these local bodies, on government and on the governance of development i.e have they been able to create a political space for themselves? And can this be used to transform their lives?

To look at aspects related to women's presence in the PRI system, one obvious possibility is that of women transforming this by changing the quality, content and face of representation to focus into people led development. This means that they exercise their power to raise and expand funds on what they choose to be priority issues and are also accountable to go to the polls to get the mandate for return to power.

One of the main reasons for encouraging women into politics is that they will project their own experiences, problems, and concerns on to political platform as unmet needs and priorities. Women's needs are often considered to fall outside the preview of traditional politics. This means bringing into the public

domain issues which were formally personal and private. Women have now been able to articulate these needs (commonly heard of as those being water and toilets as against roads and buses by men).

We find that women panchayat members by and large used informal, innovative methods in solving their problems. These informal and at times 'pressure mechanisms' are often devised by women themselves and not by external agencies such as NGO's. This is partly because women who lack familiarity with formal political processes tend to create their own informal political spaces, mechanisms and systems to ensure that they can participate effectively. Thus, this should be seen as a vital survival mechanism which has the potential to transform the value of politics? (Dutta, 1996)

These institutions are outside the realm of traditional experience of women. Hence, partly they learn to absorb some of the formal nature of these institution and partly they bring in their own intuitive response methods. A few prominent women have shouldered responsibility beyond panchayat raj to enter into a variety of public and private organization in the field of education, welfare co-operatives and commercial enterprises.

Besides leadership qualities have been found, amongst women considered 'backward' as that of SC/ST communities, less-educational and economically poor households, even amongst widows. So, sparks of local leadership have been lit and if one can recognize the signs of promise they hold, there is much hope that they will perform in due course.

Participation for women then have meant

- a. sense of power,
- b. building self confidence
- c. new social issues for fighting election - liquors, child marriage
- d. change competitive politics into co-operative ethics, and most importantly,
- e. inverting hierarchies and power relationships. This has to be examined carefully over some period of time,

because in terms of women's entry into politics the 'boat is rocked' such that existing hierarchical structures are changing. The extension officers, bureaucrats etc need sensitization, not the EWR. Similarly all men need sensitisation not women. When women have power as Adhayaksa/Upaddyaksha, men have to listen to them. Thus the whole notion of male superiority is questioned.

So if the wisdom of grassroots organisation especially the courage and clarity of women from these arenas has to become policy, it cannot be only intellectual persuasion but by arrangements made within a political system for that voice to have power (Jain 1995)

WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT RAJ - Background to the ISST Project

Women's participation in local and national governance in India has been limited to the exercise of adult franchise and that too, in the context of increasingly questionable electoral systems. As a consequence, political decision making is often contrary to women's felt needs. But what of the landmark 73rd amendment's reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj bodies? That issue, to which this paper is devoted, is addressed with case study material from an ISST (Institute of Social Studies Trust) project of which a key objective was to strengthen the participation of women in local self governance. Both elected men and women representatives of Gram Panchayats (EMRs and EWRs) were profiled in case studies, and it is this material that is drawn upon to comment on issues of women's participation in Panchayat Raj in Karnataka. Case studies, it was felt, would elucidate clearly the life style rural women lead, and given their circumstances, the ways in which they can function best.

To understand the roles and responsibilities of elected members and investigate the different dimensions of their performance, several field level workshops were organised. Initiatives undertaken included an in depth study of an all women's gram panchayat in Mydolalu, the only one of its kind in Karnataka. Information that was collected directly through these field interactions and through other sources like research and workshop reports and theoretical papers were compiled at ISST's National Resource Centre, which grew even as it assimilated these inputs. Following a more detailed outline of this backdrop in Section 1, the paper goes on to document micro realities, which were found at times to be contrary to widely

prevalent, 'micro beliefs' or pet theories. Section II discusses field impressions that emerged during the course of the study, reflecting micro realities that were at times at odds with popular views such as those in the extract below:

"The general opinion was that the majority of rural women being illiterate, would be ignorant of the ways of manipulative politics; intricate financial procedures and 'deals' and complicated development schemes and processes; that the women would be constrained by social norms and customs and intimidated in the presence of elderly men and senior relatives. Women not having been used to equality and exercise of their rights, would not be able to assert themselves or occupy positions in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. In case they do it, it would be under the guidance of the males as proxies signing on the dotted line".
(Kaushik, S. 1996.)

The realities on the ground, however, worlds removed from perceptions like these, reveal considerable diversity. It was found that women panchayat members can be classified into distinct categories, with their circumstances reflecting varied themes. One finding was that women belonging to upper caste/ class groups often fall into the 'proxy' category of elected representatives who dance to the tunes of their masters. This suggests that social standing does not necessarily enhance political participation. It is a theme that is brought out in the first case study.

Case study 2 is that of an illiterate woman of backward social origin. Contrary to macro myth, she performed remarkable well in the public domain and learnt to take a firm stand on several issues. She talks of 'group efforts' (networking) through mahila mandals which have been the backbone of the struggles she has associated with. Success would not however have been possible without her personal grit and determination. Here is a case of a woman from the most backward social stratum who, with some support, went on to become a high achiever. This case study also shows some innovative and creative ways in which problems can be overcome. Several such instances were encountered during the course of the fieldwork.

Case study 3 profiles an extremely capable woman Municipal Counselor who, as a 'single woman', was thought to be 'loose'. The stereotyping is gendered, for men in similar circumstances are liable to be let off Scot free. When competent women are perceived by the community to be morally lax and given to feathering their nests through dubious means, it is this to which attention is drawn, so that the macro myth of women not being capable remains unchallenged.

Case study 4, of a women 'Sarpanch' in Karnataka's only all women's gram panchayat, brings out the achievements and concerns of a woman who was able to take up several issues with the help of her panchayat colleagues. Women leaders who tend to have no role models to fall upon, this case study suggests, seek help from men, who are more at home in the public sphere. It is a dependence that can, however, be overcome in course of time. Another key element of case study 4 is its description of a panchayat directed ban on

alcohol in the village - a success story that augurs well for like efforts elsewhere.

To understand the role of women in panchayat raj and help enhance their performance as EWRs (Elected Women Representatives), the Institute of Social Studies Trust, Bangalore undertook a Ford Foundation financed project immediately after the reservation policy came into effect in the wake of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1993. The first phase of the study began soon after. It was decided that the thrust of the programme would be in two distinct areas, of which one was the dissemination of information on panchayati raj and the development of skills in communication, public speaking and so on, while the second prong would facilitate discussion on societal issues, with an emphasis on patriarchal constraints (but without explicit references to gender discrimination). The 'experience sharing' mode to which the entire project was geared, it was felt, would be conducive to an understanding of constraints as also an assessment of felt needs. The data generated could be documented and fed into the project's research wing, which could then work towards producing suitable training material. The training wing, oriented as it was to participants' felt needs, was able to document ground realities; the research wing collated material from this and other sources and compiled felt needs data from the field to develop Resource Books for elected women representatives.

In phase I itself, the ISST began collecting a large amount of material on panchayat raj and related aspects from secondary sources, especially in relation to the requirements of newly elected women. All these and much more have been compiled, categorised and updated in the second phase of

the project, which was called 'UMA - National Resource Centre on Women in Panchayat Raj (1996 - ongoing)'. The National Resource Centre has now a large compilation of material that is available for ready reference. This is accessible to academics, researchers, trainers, governmental or non governmental organisations, interested individuals, and elected members who may require them. Some material is available in regional languages like Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Marati, Oriya, Bengali and Gujarati.

The emphasis in Phase II was on 'developing political skills through periodic interactive workshops with elected women and men, drawing upon varied methodologies unique to specific situations, as reported upon in Uma Prachar, the Institute's quarterly publication in English and Kannada. It is hoped that all these activities will collate to form a comprehensive and holistic picture of how the participation of women in local governance might be strengthened.

CASE STUDIES

Theme 1: '*Social standing does not ensure political participation*':

Unlike Elected Male Representatives, who tend to be from the rural elite class and are given to voicing their opinions strongly on a number of matters, political or otherwise, Elected Women Representatives were found to be of two distinct types. Some, who were illiterate and appeared to be from poor and deprived households, were bold and strong in facing struggles and times apprehensive on account of lack of knowledge, they were not afraid, as elected members, to take up struggles and articulate their concerns

in panchayat meetings. By contrast, EWRs from the upper caste or class - the wives, mothers and mothers-in-law of a male rural elite - were often what is known as 'proxy' candidates. These were women whose husbands, their political ambitions thwarted by the reservation policy, had coaxed their wives, mothers, or daughters in law to occupy reserved seats, while they themselves operated from behind the scenes. Such women neither understood the roles and responsibilities of a panchayat members, nor could exercise their rights without consulting their husbands, sons or fathers-in-law. They seemed subservient, weak personalities whose demure behaviour was typical of women belonging to patriarchal households. One such was Girija, who we met on one of our field visits to a village panchayat.

Case Study 1: Girija

I belong to the Lingayat (upper) caste and am married to a man who has a shop and earns a moderate income. We also have some land, where some labourers work for my husband. At times I look after the shop when he goes to town, but mostly I confine myself to household activities. My children go to high-school in town by bus. I am the Upadhyaksha (Vice-President) of our Gram Panchayat and have been holding this position since I was elected in 1994.

Since we belong to the dominant community, we are quite strict with our observance of customs and do not allow girls to move about freely once they come of age. Family honour is very important and I follow the rules just as I was taught as a child. I went to our local school for a few years and can read and write and sign my name. Soon after puberty, my marriage followed. It was a grand affair on which my people spent a lot of money. To please

everyone during the ceremony was quite difficult, but my parents managed somehow. My husband was from a well-known family in the community and initially, we lived in his family's household. But we build this house and the shop and set up an independent establishment after my first child was born. Two more children followed soon. I manage the housework and, at times, the shop. Fortunately, we have water supply in the house and also a water tank, so we do not face much of a problem in the dry summer months. We prospered and live comfortably now with our grown up children. I mostly confine myself to the activities of the house. My husband handles all monetary matters and anything that requires mobility outside the house which includes attending the Panchayat meetings on my behalf. He informs me of all that has transpired at these meetings, and I sign the meeting's attendance register. Only once did I actually attend a meeting with him. I do not understand much of what goes on and I let his opinion prevail. At first, I was quite inquisitive and would ask my husband many questions about the panchayat. But he was evasive. Moreover, he did not approve of my mixing freely with other elected members. I felt the less I talk the better, and I am happy discharging my duty as a wife and lady of the house.

A few years ago, we heard of a camp that was being organised by government officials to promote schemes for village women. Many of us were quite excited and attended the camp to find out what it was all about. The organisers talked of free 'tailoring classes', nutrition garden classes, handicrafts training, and so on - activities that could help us earn some money. They urged us to enroll for their training schemes, saying these were for women's development. Their programmes, they assured us, were government sponsored, and not for their own benefit. Though unsure of ourselves and

reluctant to come to any kind of agreement without first consulting our husbands, we returned home discussing what we had been told what each of us would like to learn. But I was in for bitter disappointment, for my husband said: 'Tailoring classes'? Do you want to earn by stitching clothes for people? Besides, with all your household activities and the needs of the shop to take care of, will you have time to spare? I am doing well now but will need to go out of the village more often - so you will have to supervise the fields also. Forget about going outside the house for classes'. And that was final!

It was in the following year, when the reservation policy came into effect, that my husband surprised me by saying that I should become a woman panchayat member. What a strange suggestion it was indeed, coming from him. I was shocked beyond words! What did I know about Panchayat Raj? How could I venture outside the confines of our household? I had never done that without my husband escorting me, not even to attend social functions. I was gripped by a mixture of excitement and fear and could not sleep well that night. My husband had mentioned that some other women like me would also get elected and I wondered who they would be. I waited patiently for him to go out of town so that I could venture out, without feeling constrained, and discuss the matter with other women of the village. Some women, who were known to be quite bold, would probably be chosen, I thought. I had no idea of the selection procedure. Even if some of us were selected, what were we supposed to do. And then it struck me; I realized why my husband wanted me to become a panchayat member. He had contested earlier and tasted power, but now, as a result of the reservation policy, a panchayat seat was beyond his reach. All was not lost, however, for if I was elected, he would indirectly command respect and power in the village. So he wanted me to get elected. And before

I knew it, I became one of the elected women representatives of our gram panchayat.

Our Gram Panchayat has four female and seven male members. After we got elected, a big function was held in the village. There were flowers and songs, lamps were lit and tea and snacks served. We women sat together, hardly believing what was happening. People showed mixed reactions; some were happy, some sad, some jealous. A big lecture was organised in which all the elected members were told how they had to function as elected members of the panchayat, for the benefit of the village. Some people said 'We should have better roads now'. Others felt the water situation should be improved. One woman wanted the Anganwadi to function better. As for me, I could not think of anything. I could hardly believe that all this was possible. I could still not envisage why we women were elected - what did this new government policy mean? What difference did it make if men or women were panchayat members? Who could explain all this to us.

We were hesitant, uncertain and inexperienced. Some of my women colleagues in the panchayat expressed fears about speaking in public; 'People will laugh at us as we don't know anything about the panchayat'. My husband said to me: 'Don't worry, I will do everything for you when the time comes'. One woman counseled 'My husband was a member of the Mandal Panchayat; he can guide us'. Another came up with a similar proposal, to which we agreed; "Kenchamma who lives in the next village and was also a Mandal Panchayat Member will know many things. Let us all go together to her house this Friday, after the weekly market purchase". But my husband was not pleased with this turn of events and forbade me to make any further plans for

meeting other women members without consulting him first. I got the message. Over a course of time, I have let my husband take over my duties as panchayat members. This way, we have no major fights and our responsibilities remain divided as before. Since I am comfortable, I have no reason to complain.

Theme 2: Innovative Methods of Participation

For mainstream political scientists and policy makers, activities classified under the heading 'politics' are differentiated from other activities, relationships and actions, so that revolutionary thinkers are those who declare politics to exist where it did not before. The narrow definition of political participation has however been questioned in analyses of women's participation in the political process, which has been understood to include any form of organised activity that effects power relations in decision making. From this point of view, as stated earlier protests and demonstration against those in power also form part of political participation. Women's participation has covered a broad range of activities including movements, protest and support meetings on all issues connected with labour, dowry, rape, domestic violence, price rise, food adulteration and deforestation, as also movements for the promotion of peace (Laxmi Devi 1998)

Case Study 2: Zubadabi

"All these years, I have lived and wept in the backyard of my house. Now they tell me to come and speak in front of everyone. How can I? " were the words

of one women panchayat member who had been elected and was in an ISST programme. I belong to an orthodox Muslim family and was married at a very young age', she told us. 'My life is very tough and what I go through everyday, no one knows; But today when we hear people like you speak, it gives us courage to do things that will ensure betterment and bring about improvement in our village. I have seven children and, over the years, have come to learn of the troubles others like me face.

From time to time, we have heard talk of family planning, but have been quite reluctant about going in for it. Recently a 'health camp' was held in our village which I visited out of curiosity. But the many men from the city who swarmed around alarmed all of us. They spoke to us in groups and asked us if we had any 'special problems'. We village women were very embarrassed by such open queries. It was against tradition to speak to strange people about such private concerns. There were one or two women in their group, but they did not talk to separately to us. We worried that if we went inside the camp, they might try their family planning gimmicks on us without our knowledge! So, inspite of the problems many of us suffered from, we did not seek help.

Now, when you ISST people speak to us, with health officials present, we feel indeed such discussions should be held freely amongst ourselves. Only when we are able to talk without feeling that our health problems are all our fault can we bring others around. At least our next generation can benefit and be free of early pregnancy and the many associated problems we have faced. My daughter is to be married shortly and I would very much like her to be well informed. But only from people like you, whom we can rely upon.

As far as the panchayat is concerned, I can say that joint effort by many women together will achieve what a woman alone cannot. Let me illustrate the point. From the UMA MELA we learnt many things. We got to know, for instance, about sitting fees that elected representatives are entitled to for attending panchayat meetings. This we were not aware of this earlier. We approached the panchayat secretary jointly and asked him for the money and were pleasantly surprised when he gave it to us promptly.

Like the panchayat, the mahila mandal group in our village is also quite active. We often carry some of the issues raised in the mandal to the Panchayat and are able to tackle many of our concerns. I happen to be a member of both groups, like two other women. We jointly take decisions and have been successful. Recently we leased out two acres of land and deposited the rent money in the Mahila Mandal Account. We also have formed a group of 15 members who take turns to run a petty shop under the DWCRA scheme. In this manner we have been able to collect some money with which we run a credit scheme for women. The Mahila Mandal meetings are held on the 10th of every month. If a member is absent, she is fined Rs.5/-.

One other Mahila Mandal members started an anti-arrack movement, as addiction to the intoxicating drink is a big problem here. The high consumption of arrack by both men and women has been a big worry for us. We managed, after repeated requests, to convince the BDO (Block Development officer) to withdraw the license of the local arrack dealer! This was no mean achievement! The women have stopped drinking arrack, but the men still go elsewhere and still drink.

We feel now that there is so much to learn when you become a panchayat member. - what activities can be undertaken, what schemes are available, what improvements are possible and also, how people think about the issues that concern us. I have also learnt to be in time for the meetings, which I regularly attend. All this would not have been possible if I had not had gone through the programme you organised for us.

Let me share one more thing with you - an interesting anecdote. Very often, when we, as panchayat members, visited the taluk or headquarters, we felt that the concerned officials were not very attentive. Once we overheard them saying that we were village rustics and did not know anything. We came back and discussed the matter with other members of our panchayat - and hit upon an idea. We collected Rs.10/- from each member and bought a few synthetic, modern looking sarees. Normally, it is the locally made handloom sarees that we wear. But we drape these modern sarees when we want to visit senior officials in town, and find that they attend to us seriously and promptly. It is surprising how things work.

Theme 3: "Travails of a 'Single-Woman' "

"Often women are married to men who are twice their age as second or third wives and it is not uncommon for these women to have a relationship with a younger person. Similarly, women deserted by their husbands develop relationships that are not a secret in the community. However, when these women became sangam members, men attack the sangam as promoters of

promiscuity, warning the husbands of other sangam members that their wives will lose their morals. NGO staff too, carry rigid notions about sexual behaviour, reflecting middle class values, and their ambivalence in this regard is obvious. Overcoming middle class notions about morality prescribed by patriarchal norms is a constraint" (Stephen 1977:77)

More generally, a stigma attaches to the single woman by virtue of her marital status and not necessarily her sexual liaisons outside of marriage. We came across several single women who were independent, strong, dominating and able to carry out their responsibilities as EWR's quite effectively - but were looked down upon because they had no 'marital security; were monetarily or otherwise on their own; and enjoyed unrestricted freedom of movement, which went against social norms. Gangavva is a case in point.

Case Study 3: Gangavva

I am called 'Girni Gangavva' because I run a flour mill. This has been my source of income for the past 8 years or so. My mill has served me well and I must say I am quite comfortable now. But, I have lived a very hard life. My husband and I belonged to the lingayat community. We were very poor and worked as agricultural labourers on other people's farms. Despite all our hard work, we never had any luxuries, not even claim to have our own house. I could not bear any children and also had to suffer humiliation. When my husband suddenly died, I was quite shattered. All alone in this world, I felt I

had to learn to live and live well. I gathered courage and tried to see how I could earn a living. I felt also that I would like to do something to help other people. It was then that, with someone's help, I got the money to buy my flour mill. My mill has sustained me over the years and made me economically self-reliant. It gave me the freedom to do what I want; it made me strong and courageous. I have been able to speak freely and carry out activities I thought were proper, and have earned a name in society. I have done all this despite my being an illiterate, with a little help from others.

I was elected as the Municipal Counselor in 1980. As a result of my performance in office and the various activities I carried out, I was re-elected for a second term. I have now been Municipal Counselor for ten years. Let me give you a picture of how I worked during my tenure. As you know, these are dry and drought-prone areas and water is a very valuable and scarce commodity. So, I decided to investigate how the water situation could be improved. It turned out that preferential supply to the richer households in the locality was rampant. I also identified household that used water wastefully. I brought these practices to light and had them curtailed. Electricity supply was another, related problem. As a result of my efforts, public utility services in this municipality have been streamlined. Additionally, I made it a point to accompany my staff on their rounds to collect house taxes. My presence deterred tax dodgers, who very commonly do not comply when they have to deal with junior functionaries. I found also that it helped if I was present when the corporation employees actually cleared garbage from the public garbage bins in the town.

My methods have produced results and I can say with confidence that my ways have been appreciated by many. I am no longer the Municipal Counselor now, but if there is any help required or meetings to which I am invited, I always make it a point to go and say what I feel. In this way, people are aware that even when not in position of authority, one can take on responsibilities and discharge them. Also, I still run my flour mill and help other women who need my guidance.

Yes, I have taken monetary help when in dire need and in return for favours and have had a fulfilling relationship with a man for several years now. That is my 'personal life' and I do not see why I should be judged any differently from others as far as my work is concerned. I am proud of my achievements and feel life has been quite fulfilling. I still run my flour mill and help other women who need guidance. If you ask around, what you hear may not show me in a flattering light; but I am not disturbed or upset - my relationship with a man is a matter of my need and is completely different from what I have tried to achieve as an office bearer.

Theme 4: Women - Thy name is Shakti

The importance of creating women's panchayat at the village level received formal recognition in the mid-seventies, when the committee on the status of women in India recommended the establishment of statutory women's panchayats. This was seen as transitional measure to ensure greater participation by rural women in the political process. (Dutta 1996). Since Independence, there have been only a handful of all women gram panchayats, and these could be found in the States of Karnataka, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh,

Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. The case women gram panchayat in Karnataka, the only one of its kind in the State, located in Mydolalu, Bhadravathi Taluk, Shimoga District. One concern in this study was to examine whether this all-women panchayat functioned differently as compared to a mixed panchayat - whether there were differences in terms of power, leadership, decision-making and so on, and also the kinds of concerns that were addressed. Were these specific to women's issues and confined to matters like dowry, domestic violence and rape, or did they relate to the problems faced by the village in general? Last but not the least was the objective of studying the role of men and the kind of power they could yield in all woman panchayat.

Case Study 4: Basamma

The day dawned like any other, but today was special, for, to my surprise, I found myself sitting in President's chair of our Gram Panchayat! I was in a state of total chaos. I did not know what was happening to me. I had been given the responsibility of running the panchayat of which I knew nothing. A big question that bothered me was - would I be able to shoulder the responsibility I was given? I had never stepped out of the four walls of our household and all I knew to do was take care of the husband and children and do household chores. That was my routine. Now I had to do something extra, that too, something that was totally new to me. How was I to handle the dynamics of office administration? Moreover, as a member of the backward community, Kuruba, how was I to function in village dominated by upper castes? All these thoughts were driving me mad.

Not even in my wildest dreams, had I imagined I would be a Panchayat President. What transpired was that all village leaders assembled in a meeting and decided they should have a gram panchayat but of a different kind; and that's how our all-Women Gram Panchayat was born. You could say it was a product of the fancy of our village leaders. Through a process of unanimous election, they chose the members of the panchayat, I among them. Later, I was elected President. No women were present at this meeting. It was the men who called the shots. We women were kept informed only after the deed was done.

My new responsibilities were a challenge to me. I am not well educated; I have only read up to class 7, but, I thought, now that I am in the river, I have no choice but to swim across to the other side. That's how I gathered confidence. Then slowly, I began to discover myself; I began to sense the abundant capacity and power within, I began to feel I possessed leadership qualities - and I started tapping my innate talents. At first, things were very smooth and I had to go through a difficult patch due to my lack of experience. I was not entirely without moorings, though, for I tried to follow the paths my predecessors trod. Gradually, I overcame my limitations.

During my tenure as President, I was against implementing programmes only for women or focussing only on women's issues. So I made it a point to have programmes relating to health, the anganwadi, community development, income generating schemes, and so on. Community development programmes that covered roads, water, street lights, and schools have been successfully implemented. We also helped a local NGO get loans for making Kannada

greeting cards. One major achievement was a ban on the sale and consumption of arrack in the three villages falling under the jurisdiction of our panchayat. The penalty for violation of the ban was a fine of Rs.1000 and expulsion from the village for a whole day.

Our 'Village Sanitation Programme' designed to provide toilets to every house. Was another major success. So far, 41 houses have received the benefits of this programme. My panchayat colleagues and I saw to it that beneficiaries made all the preparation for toilet construction before we provided them with materials and cash, so as to guard against the possibility that the materials and money would be used for purposes other than that for which they were meant. Inspired by our work, the Rural Development & Panchayat Raj Minister has undertaken a 'Nirmala Karnataka Yojana'. We have made Mydolalu a model village, to the point where it is visited by foreigners.

I almost forgot to tell you also of another of our success stories. We have a 'Primary Health Centre' to cater to the needs of all the three villages of our panchayat. Some time back, there was no doctor attached to the PHC, with the result that the sick and ailing were left unattended and had a tough time. Moved by the plight of the people, I decided to take drastic action. So I used a written complaint to the District Health Officer stating that if the PHC was not provided with a doctor, it would be closed down within a month. I must say I got full cooperation and backing from our village folk. Because we took a firm stand on the issue, immediate action was taken and soon we had a doctor in our midst.

Every year 10% of the total Panchayat funds are allocated for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. This year, I diverted half of the amount (Rs.5000/-) to Ambedkar Bhavan, which, as you know, was set up to benefit the Scheduled Castes. The remaining Rs.5000/- I spent on providing utensils to SC & ST women. I deliberately provided utensils instead of cash for the simple reason that money might be spent on drink.

There are still many programmes to be taken up. Our villagers have many girls who have had schooling upto the SSLC level. I have seen to it that they are provided with DWCRA loans to take up income generating activities. But after having put them through a tailoring course, I have decided to give them a course in chulas, washing kattas (slabs) and water tanks for the SC & ST people of the village. As I said, we banned arrack; now we propose to ban the sale of English liquors. We will punish violators with a fine of Rs.10,000/-. Those providing information about a violation of the ban will be rewarded with Rs.2000/-. These rules will be brought into effect in the near future. I want our Gram Panchayat area to be 'Alcohol free' and would like to see male talent, energy and time used in a better productive way.

Initially, I admit, I was totally dependent on the panchayat secretaries. Mr.N.Murthy and Mr.Eshwar Rao who were the backbone of our all-Women Gram Panchayat. Though I continue to be guided by their suggestions and advice now and then, I have with experience learnt to act on my own. But, for the co-operation of these gentlemen, I would do not have been able to work so efficiently as a Gram Panchayat President.

Before I became panchayat President, my world comprised only of my family - my husband and children. Now I live in a bigger world and have even begun to see the whole world as mine. I have been lucky, as panchayat head, to have had opportunities to contribute to society. I wish other women too would cross the boundaries of home and hearth, and show the world the stuff they are made of. They can do wonders. Their talent should not be hidden within the four walls of the home. They should be given a chance to prove that 'shakti' (strength) is another name for woman.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Reproduced below are excerpts relating to the 73rd Amendment and the reservation policy.

"The 73rd Constitutional amendment is a milestone in the history of legislation which has ensured the coming of women to the leadership and decision making positions and has made such a role mandatory and universal in the whole of India".

"The initial reaction to the announcement of reservation for women has been one of happiness and excitement, but also of bewilderment and anxiety. It appeared that women would not come forward, especially in the rural areas to fight the elections. Even leaders who had unanimously passed the Act, the government officials who were committed to implement it and others articulated the fear, that women would be reluctant to

participate in politics, unless allowed by the family elders in the community to do so". (Kaushik, 1996)

Our experiences show that this was not always true. In several instances, we learnt that women have overcome initial hurdles and were able to manage well. However, a reservation policy alone is not enough. Various other support mechanisms are required. It is true that the major benefits of reservations are often cornered by better off sections among target groups. Still, to achieve the goal of complete empowerment for the deprived people of the country, we need to focus on other support policies, for

"The task of building a fully just, egalitarian and human social order would require a different kind of exercise than mere reservations. It would require to have both a short term and long term strategy aiming at motivating, organising and uniting all the deprived people irrespective of caste, class, gender, region and other identities for a radical transformation of our society....."
(Chaudhury 1998)

NOTES:

The research wing has also carried out small studies from time to time and reported on these at ISST seminars. The ISST has, over the years, brought out and published several resource books and materials. These are currently available on request and could be looked at in a larger forum of similar interests.

UMA stands for 'Utsahi Mahila Abhyudaya' ('Enthusiastic Women's Prosperity')

An anganwadi (also known as balwadi in some places) is a children's primary school run by the State education department.

DWCRA stands for 'development of Women and children in Rural Areas'.

Gimi is the Kannada term for 'flour mill'.

Nirmala Karnataka Yojana means 'Clean Karnataka Scheme'.

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