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### **Panchayats in India - Forum for citizens' participation in local governance Representation and Participation of Rural Women – Experience and Challenges Nirmala Buch**

In this paper I look at the experience of the institution of rural local councils of “panchayats” in India - which is a traditional institution but has been embedded in the Indian Constitution and has been revived and strengthened in 1992 for larger democratic decentralisation and citizens' participation at the grassroots level. I start with exploration of the concept of participation and the levels of participation and then see citizens' participation particularly in the socio economic context of rural India. Then I briefly discuss the evolution of the institution of panchayats and its character as a statutory institution in the federal constitution of India culminating in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. I then address the issue of participation of citizens' particularly those from the politically marginalised sections in this institution. Here I specially focus on the rural women's participation, their use of the space created by the 73rd Amendment which mandated a minimum one third space to women and a space proportionate to their population in the area to the weaker sections recognised by the Indian Constitution as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) and also permitted the state legislatures to give mandated space to another identified group of "socio economically backward" class. This political space for representation has been given through a mechanism of "Reservations" or quotas and I briefly touch on what and how this quota is given in this context. I look at the rural women's entry in these new panchayats, their participation, leadership, the successes and also the difficulties faced by them. Finally, I discuss the challenges for the future and some of the micro - macro experiments being initiated by government and by social organisations.

#### **Participation -**

Participation refers to taking part or sharing. The concept is however understood differently in different contexts. Stan Burkey defines Participation as an essential part of human growth i.e. the development of self-confidence, human initiative, creativity, responsibility, pride and cooperation. Contextualising participation for development, Burkey understands participation as a process by which people learn to take charge of their own lives and find solutions to their own problems. Such an understanding of participation is limited because it restricts itself to direct participation. Participation can occur in different ways, in different groups and serve different interests.

Democracy being the rule of the people and by the people, participation as a process supplements representative democracy. The operation of democracy is affected by all innovations which result in providing opportunity for citizens to participate in the activities of democratic functioning.

According to Lawrence Prachett the big question which confronts participation is the extent to which its adoption may improve institutions of representative democracy. Beetham in his evaluation of democratic processes argues that the two principles of importance are popular control and political equality. They provide the required indicators which new participation processes are needed to concentrate on in public bodies, as additional means through which citizens are enabled towards exercising some control over decisions which affect them while ensuring that all citizens have equal opportunities to participate at the same time.

Participation implies citizen's engagement with the issues of importance to them and their feeling that their voice and articulation of their concerns has had a place in the final decisions. If the citizens are not engaged or they do not feel that their voice has been included, there is need to explore more avenues and institutions for their participation. Participation in governance in a representative democracy is primarily seen in election of their representatives and these representatives then acting on behalf of their constituents. With the complexities of governance and emerging identities and aspirations of various social groups, this participation through representatives has not satisfied citizens.

A related issue is of the levels of participation. Participation may be only formal or limited. It may be (1) only limited to voting to select representatives, (2) consultation (3) attendance (4) active engagement on issues (5) taking leadership role in identification of priorities, their acceptance, allocation of resources and attention; (6) implementation and (7) participation in accountability mechanisms. The levels of participation will be only formal and token if limited to the first three issues and will be more effective to the extent that it encompasses these other remaining activities.

Then there is also the question as to which citizens' participation, we are talking about. With the persisting social divisions in rural India, we believe that participation of those who have remained marginal in the institutions of governance so far is the most crucial indicator to assess citizens' participation. Hence in the rural India's context, it is the participation of women and weaker sections of SC/ST which is important part of effective citizens' participation.

### **Evolution of Panchayats in India**

India's federal structure provides for a central government, state governments and centrally, directly administrated union territories. The Constitution of India states that India that is 'Bharat' shall be a union of states. Further, Parliament may by law admit into the Union or establish new states on such terms or conditions as it thinks fit. Article 3 also provides for formation of new States and alteration of areas, boundaries or names of existing States.

The Constitution has clear distribution of executive and legislative powers between the centre and the states. For this purpose, Article 246 of the Constitution provides for the distribution of the subject matter and laws to be made by the national Parliament and by the legislatures of the States. The VII Schedule under this Article gives three lists. Union list - under which Parliament has exclusive power to make laws. List 3, the concurrent list, in which Parliament and the Legislature of any state also has power to make laws. List 2, the state list where Legislature of a state has exclusive powers to make laws.

This conception of the Indian federation speaks in terms of union of states along with territories and distribution of legislative and executive powers between them. But it has been felt that citizens' participation in decision making requires fora at a more decentralized level. The union and the state level are too distant for citizens' active participation even in this representative democracy. The representation needs to be at a much nearer level to enable a larger number of citizens to participate in the democratic processes of governance. This concern has not only developed recently but has always been a foundation of Indian democracy. The institution of panchayat provided a forum for such participation.

“Panchayat” meaning an assembly of five persons is not a new institution in India. Traditionally the Indian villages were governed by the institution of panchayats. As early as the 19th century. Sir Charles Metcalfe, the provisional Governor General of India (1835-1838) had called the Indian village community, “the little republics”. He said that regimes and dynasties have changed but this institution has survived and with all the difficulties and changes, it continued to govern the local community life. The institution of panchayats as existed at that time was based on social consensus of the local community and primarily focused on local disputes settlements by the community itself. It had participation of respected senior elders in the community who worked not on structured laws but on the basis of evolving consensus acceptable to the community.

The institution of Panchayats was revived in British India, primarily for local disputes resolutions and for local civic administration. The Royal Commission on Decentralisation in 1909 recommended constitution of village panchayats. Hence in the first five decades of the 20th century, before India's independence, panchayat laws were enacted by different provinces as well as by the erstwhile princely states. They were substantially with only male members nominated by the government officials though gradually more elected members and chairpersons were introduced in these bodies. Their constitution was still optional based on the application of local male citizens.

With India being still pre-dominantly rural (82.7% in 1951 and 74.3% in 1991), the panchayats have a special position in the Indian psyche, very different from the representative local governance in urban areas. When India became independent, India's founding father, Mahatma Gandhi had wanted that the Indian Constitution should be based on the grassroots institution of village panchayats and which should then lead to larger institution of the state. But B. R. Ambedkar, the Law Minister who piloted the draft Indian Constitution, questioned this legitimacy of the village panchayat in the context of the socio economic inequalities in the Indian rural society. Ambedkar questioned if this traditional institution can give social justice in the caste ridden divided rural society. He in effect highlighted the conundrum of political equality with persisting social inequalities.

The circumstances in which the Indian Constitution was framed, firstly, after the experience of the 1935 Constitutional reforms in which there were two entities -The centre and the provinces and, secondly, in the aftermath of the partition also led to Indian Constitution being more skewed in favour of the union. However even then the Constitution included Article 40 as one of the a Directive Principles of State Policy, fundamental in the governance of the country, that “the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government”. The subject of local government which includes village panchayats is within the competence of the state legislatures under the state list. Hence all legislation and other matters relating to village panchayats are under taken by the state legislatures. The period of 1950 to 1990 has therefore seen the evolution of the structure of panchayats, their responsibilities, resources and other related matters in the states of India.

Panchayats have been viewed in various ways as local bodies with municipal functions, agencies for delivering government's development programmes and services, agencies to work as local courts for disputes resolution and as the institution of self-government. Initially in a traditional form, it was primarily a body of the local community evolved through social consensus and informally entrusted with the task of local disputes resolution. Therefore it had no election, no structured body or set procedures. We see remains of this in caste panchayats

and tribal panchayats which look at the issues and disputes brought to them from their community. Even their procedures were more for coming to agreed settlements or consensus which sometimes took a long time and the persons selected for such adjudications were senior elders and respected members chosen for their authority and acceptability and not for any specialised knowledge.

In independent India, all these variants of their functions have received emphasis from time to time. They had functions of civic responsibility on the same lines as the urban municipal bodies but their role in civic services etc. has not been as pronounced as in the case of urban local government. Similarly, though disputes resolution has been one of the aspects considered from time to time with legal provisions for Nyaya Panchayats (judicial panchayats), their constitution and functions included in the state panchayat legislation from time to time, this aspect of the functioning has by and large been gradually disassociated from panchayats and the conception is now moving towards separate village courts which may need to have a component of individuals with knowledge of law. The development administration has become a more pronounced responsibility of the panchayats in recent decades. This can be related to the emphasis on planning and development with a number of basic services and programmes delivered some times with and sometimes without participation and contribution of the local community. In the first 30 years of independent India, panchayats were gradually seen more and more as agency for delivery and implementation of development programmes and services which were substantially sponsored or provided by the government.

The directive principle in Article 40 expected the state to organise village panchayats with powers and authority to function as units of self-government. Consequent action had to be taken by the states in the Indian federation. A series of national committees addressed the issues of implementation of the Constitutional mandate of Article 40. In 1957, a study team known as Balwant Rai Mehta committee looked at this issue in the context of Community Development Projects as mandated by the central government and its National Committee on Plan Projects which reviewed the whole process of planning and development during the II Five Year Plan of India. This committee made strong recommendations and gave a blue print for revival and strengthening of panchayats in the country. These recommendations and their acceptance were a significant landmark in the later evolution of panchayat system in India.

This committee's recommendations also made two important contributions. Firstly, it recommended panchayats not only at the village level but also at two higher levels namely the development block and the district. Its second contribution was to make the development paradigm as almost the main focus of these panchayat institutions. This focus on development administration resulted to some extent from the context of the setting up of this committee. As the Community Projects were based on the community's participation, the committee had an important term of reference which required it to make "the assessment of extent to which the movement (community development movement) has succeeded in utilising local initiative creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving economic and social conditions in rural areas". The committee's recommendations on the panchayats structure at the three tiers of the district, development block and village panchayats emanated from this important term of reference. These recommendations were accepted and the states set up Panchayati Raj Institutions on these lines with some variations in different states.

The year 1992 saw a water shed in the development of panchayat institutions and also their role. From only a directive principle emphasising that the state should organise village panchayats, it made it mandatory through the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment of 1992 to organise panchayats at three levels, have their regular elections, endow them with resources and have larger participation in terms of different sections of the society. The background and the need of such an amendment also shows the representative, participatory potential of this revived institution.

India is a country not only big in size and population but its plurality and variety in terms of physical features, area, agro climatic zones, ethnic groups, languages and levels of economic development create a challenge for the country's governance. The Constitution adopted by independent India's constituent assembly, which became effective from 26th January 1950 spoke of "we the people giving ourselves this constitution and "India that is Bharat" as a union of states. But in a country of the size and plurality of India, these two levels do not provide adequate political space for citizens' participation in the representative democracy. The 50 years of independent India saw various movements, sometimes for local fora and sometimes very clearly for separate identity and role for their own governance. These 50 years have seen creation of new states, converting of union territories (UTs) into states and sometimes the UTs being given quasi - state features with their own elected legislature. But the quest for more stable participation of the citizens in their own governance had continued to gather strength. Some how decision-making only at the central and states levels with their implementation through officials at the local level has not remained a satisfactory solution. The municipal bodies in the urban areas and panchayats in the rural areas were expected to be the fora for local participation, but the reluctance in successive political regimes and across different states in sustaining the functioning of these bodies created problems which had to be addressed finally at the national level.

This reluctance can be seen as emanating from two reasons. Reluctance to share political power and reluctance to share a role in development programme's formulation and implementation. The movements for social justice by different ethnic groups and the women's movement and other civil society movements which became stronger after the experience of 20 months long national emergency in 1975 intensified moves for strengthening citizens' participation at local levels. In the second half of 1980s, the environment was particularly created for looking at this issue more directly even as a series of collectors' conferences with the then Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi recommended that it was not possible to govern Modern India only through state's bureaucracy and a systemic change with institutions for citizens' participation in local governance was essential. The panchayats or Panchayati Raj (the rule of local councils) became the focus of these moves initiated for democratic decentralisation in the rural areas. In 1988 a Constitutional Amendment bill was brought up in the national Parliament. This could not pass the upper house of Parliament as the opposition parties, some of whom were in power in the states, apprehended that it was a move to undermine the states' role and make a direct nexus between the central government and the district and sub district levels within the states. This exercise as well as the final exercise which culminated in the 73rd amendment to the Constitution in 1992, addressed various aspects of panchayats to enable them to function as institutions of self government but very clearly signalled set up and sustainability of panchayats by mandating these features in the Constitution itself instead of leaving them to the states which would be legislating on the subject. The important mandatory features of this constitutional amendment are:

- (1) A uniform three tier panchayat structure not only at the village level but also at the district and an intermediate level in all parts of the country except in some small states and exemption of tribal areas;
- (2) Mandating a space for representation and participation to women and weaker sections who had not been adequately represented in this institution, so far despite the opportunity provided by the political equality enshrined in the Constitution;
- (3) Address issues of their sustainability and functioning by regular elections through a separate State Election Commission in the Constitution, devolution of financial resources through the mechanism of State Finance Commissions with Central Finance Commission's expanded terms of reference to supplement state resources for this devolution.
- (4) A very clear institutional revival of Gram Sabha - village assembly of all the adult members in Panchayat area.

The amendment was further extended in 1996 to the tribal population areas, designated in the Constitution as scheduled V areas, with provision for stronger representation of tribal community and their access and control over community resources, institutions and instruments of governance. These two legislative initiatives have thus brought institutions and their rules for wider representation and participation of citizens.

### **Representation and participation of women and weaker sections**

Participation in social political institutions in a society with different caste and ethnic groups, dominant and weaker sections, different levels of socio economic development and with historical legacy is impacted by all these factors and hence needs to be looked at on these parameters. Citizens can participate if the forum for participation is near and convenient, if it provides something for their needs, if they can enter the forum and if other forces do not prevent them from participating. To some extent the 73rd amendment and the 1996 law extending these provisions to the scheduled V areas have tried to address some of these parameters. Women, for instance, everywhere face constraints in entry and participation in institutional structures of governance and activities because of certain personal, social, economic and political constraints. Panchayats in earlier times had not seriously looked at the issue of women's representation, what to say, of their participation. In the case of weaker sections of SC and ST after the Constitution itself provided for reservation and quota in the elections to the national parliament and the State Legislatures there were moves for their quotas gradually moving towards proportion of their population in the Panchayats too. Though these did not materialise everywhere, Panchayats in the different states, in varying degrees, sought to provide for their increased quotas. Their participation levels were, of course, affected by various other factors.

The Constitutional amendment made it mandatory that these sections will have representation and quota in proportion to their population in the area not only in the membership of these institutions but also in the position of chairpersons of these bodies. It is important to note that the chairperson of a panchayat is a key person in terms of his position, role and responsibilities with a role much more than just presiding over meetings. As far as women are concerned, with the earlier debates of "as far as may be 30% " quota to women to bring a critical mass of women in these institutions, the Constitutional amendment settled for a minimum one third positions quota to women not only in membership but also in the position of chairpersons.

The legislative exercise to bring the state laws in line with this amendment, for which the amendment gave one year's transitional time, and the panchayat elections thereafter in 1994 onwards have brought an estimated 7,00,000 women in these institutions and half a million members of the weaker sections. The space for women is mandated not only for women in general but also to women from weaker sections separately. So the panchayats have representation of not less than one third women but also not less than one-third women in the quotas given therein for each of the weaker sections of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This is again not only in the membership of each panchayat at the village, district and intermediate level but also among all chairpersons of the village panchayats, of the district panchayats and the intermediate level panchayats. This also takes note of the issue of women's one-identity as well as difference among women.

The mechanisms of operationalising this quota indicated in the constitutional amendment itself provides for each membership position from a territorial area or the chairperson to be listed and notified for election of women candidates, though the electorate is common and it is not election of women by women's electorate. Secondly, the seats and posts of chairpersons identified for such mandated elections of women only are changed by rotation after every five years. So different seats in a panchayat and chairpersons of different panchayat bodies will be earmarked for women at each election. So by now we have experience of two elections of these panchayats though the second general election has either just been held or is being organised in different states. Women need not contest only these seats reserved for women. They can contest those seats too, which are open for contest by men as well as women.

The Constitutional Amendment widened the democratic base. Before this amendment total elected members in the Parliament and State legislatures were 4963. With the creation of 532 district panchayats, 5912 intermediate level panchayats, 231, 630 village panchayats along with 95 city corporations, 1436 town municipalities and 2055 Nagar panchayats (similarly created by a parallel 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment for urban areas) have brought approximately 3 million elected members at this third stratum below the Union and State levels. Even more importantly one million of them are women and 6,60,000 SC/STs (Institute of Social Sciences: Status of Panchayati Raj in the States and Union Territories of India 2000).

The overall increase in opportunities for participation in the democratic processes of the society brought about by the 73rd Amendment and the policy of reservations in particular has created an enabling environment for representation of women and weaker sections and for their participation. This has created a legitimate space for rural women to engage equally in the processes of civil society. In a traditionally hierarchical society, legislation and changing the formal rules of operation does not necessarily mean that all citizens are able to take full advantage of this enabling environment. People are excluded from certain social and political opportunities on the basis of their social positioning - whether according to caste, ethnicity or gender. Exclusion thus becomes both a cause and an effect but the way the reservations – quotas have been built into these structures and process, they have a strong potential for transforming these structures for representation and participation.

While some people think that the opportunities created by the revived and strengthened panchayats will, overtime, enable disenfranchised groups to emerge as empowered participants in local democratic processes, others believe that, unless remedial action is taken, the constraints remain so serious that these groups will be unable to perceive and act upon these opportunities. The debates center on two themes: first, the nexus of power and social

structures; and second, the factors - literacy, information and accountability - which can assist in addressing the factors currently undermining equality and inclusion. (Overview of Rural Development in India - World Bank - September 22, 2000)

It is indicated that the profound social divisions existing in rural India are the biggest obstacle to inclusive and poverty reducing decentralisation. Reservations and the targeting of programmes have not so far been particularly effective in terms of improving opportunities for poor and vulnerable people especially women and tribals, to meet their own social and economic development objectives. An empirical snapshot of the relations between social structure and political participation found gender, landlessness and ethnic origin to be factors of exclusion, but caste and size of landholdings not to be. And importantly, education and access to information were identified as two factors which have the most important attributes determining a person's inclusion in Gram Panchayat business. It was also clear that the returns to time invested in Panchayats are very limited for poorer people. (Ibid P 41 - 42)

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has started an interesting and exciting enterprise in citizens' participation particularly of sections of the population who were too marginalised to participate in governance at any level except through periodical voting, especially as it gave them a critical minimum guaranteed space in these political institutions. The most interesting aspect relate to women not only in totality but also from different castes and class as women from each weaker section have a mandated one third representation. The state panchayat legislations had to provide for these reservations. So the states provided these reservations and the related procedural matters. It is also significant that though the states could have provided even more than one third seats or chairpersons positions as the Constitutional Amendment mandated "not less than one third" but all the states have included only the minimum one third. However almost 7,00,000 women entered the panchayats and more than 5,00,000 members of weaker sections (SC and Scheduled Tribes) entered the panchayats at three levels by 1998. (ISS Panchayat update August 1998). This is a major change in women's representation and participation in rural local governance in view of the earlier panchayats generally having one or two women nominated, co-opted if they did not come through by election.

A significant feature of panchayats before 73rd Amendment was token representation of women and only some representation for weaker sections. They were perceived as substantially dominated by powerful sections of the village community. While this period also saw affirmative action in favour of weaker sections it was generally limited to development inputs and services and not for political representation and participation except as already provided in the national and state legislatures in the Constitution itself. Weaker sections and women and the poor and illiterate have a better chance of participation at the local levels than at the higher political levels of representative democracy at the state and national levels. The representative democracy at the grassroots levels permit a large number of this section to participate despite their over riding concern with livelihood and their other multiple responsibilities.

The exciting enterprise of these new panchayats has attracted attention of scholars and activists who have generally explored the contour of these bodies and what the citizens can do. One group of scholars feel that only this representative democracy cannot lead to participation and empowerment of the local citizens particularly of the weaker sections unless there is systemic change in the rural economic relations and power structure. They feel that otherwise these institutions will be substantially dominated by these powerful sections. The



others feel that this representation and participation will strengthen the role of local citizens in having their voice heard in this institution and to hold them accountable to themselves. The maximum questioning has been of the representation participation of women.

As we saw earlier, the village panchayats in colonial period were completely male institutions set up on application of male residents and voted by male voters even when elected. The three tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions evolved in independent India also included only one or two token women in their set up and these women also had to be often those interested in welfare of women and children and quite often nominated in case they did not come through election. Hence the “ not less than one third” representation to women is a major step towards their representation and participation. It has therefore naturally created maximum interest and also disbelief in their capacity for participation. Their lack of experience, illiteracy, lack of exposure, assumed disinterest are cited by those who do not believe that the rural women or at least most of them are at the stage where they can effectively participate in these democratic institutions of local governance.

A number of empirical studies in different states sought to document the representation and participation of women with their mandated presence in the new panchayats. A study in the southern state of Tamilnadu noted the high level of attendance of elected women in panchayats. This has to be seen against the general assumption that these women do not attend panchayat meetings. Rural Women have used the new political space in the face of unspoken opposition and doubts. A study in Haryana noted how most government officials looked to the male kins of elected women to attend meetings.

These studies have also noted women’s increasing awareness and confidence levels, aspirations, performance and priorities for crucial social and economic needs and also the counter forces, obstacles and handicaps faced by them. Others have noted how they found it difficult to assert due to the family pressure and social restrictions.

To begin with, it was assumed that women are not interested in politics and there will not be sufficient women to contest elections. In fact we identified four myths emerging out of the experience of women in panchayats. (1) Women's political passivity and disinterest raising the question "where are so many women to contest elections"; (2) the political connectivity of the new women, that they would be and were mainly from the politically connected families; (3) that only well to do women enter the panchayats and (4) women are only namesake, proxy members. They do not participate. So widespread has been the belief in these four myths that it has taken some time for scholars and activists to see the motivation behind these observations. The first myth was exploded by women themselves as they entered in large numbers. No positions remained vacant for dearth of women contestants for reserved posts even in the first Panchayats elections in 1994,1995. In India, the northern-Hindi speaking belt is generally taken as relatively backward in matters related to social development and gender whether in relation to education, health care, civic services or women's status and position. We took up a study in MP, Rajasthan and UP, which are included in this category which explodes these myths of women’s passivity in politics, their universal political connectivity, entry of only better of women and proxysm in actual participation in their decision making. [Buch: 1999]

Women as also men who have come to the panchayats after the reservations show a wider representation of socio economic groups in view of the reservation given to the social groups in proportion of their population and within them to women to the extent of one- third.

Majority of women across social groups, caste and class are younger and in the reproductive age group of below 45 years.

The myth that only the kins-women of the privileged have entered panchayats is also not borne out if we look at the previous political experience and political affiliations of women representatives' family members in their affinal and natal families. Only 3.7 and 6.2% elected women had family members on the natal and affinal family side who had any previous experience in panchayats. Majority of women are first time entrants in panchayats as well as in similar institutions. Only 3% women had ever been elected earlier and only 20% women were those who had any political party affiliation.

The most prevalent myth is that women are only 'namesake', 'proxy' members. We analyse it with reference to women's awareness and information and participation levels. Men and women still continue to live in different worlds. We explored the awareness of women representatives about the new reservation provided to them. A large majority (85.5%) displayed awareness on the subject. It was significant that in the case of women informal source of information like family members and neighbours were prominent as their source of information. A majority of women displayed good awareness level about panchayat related matters. Expectedly, the chairpersons had higher level of awareness and knowledge than the members. While the percentage of women who reported regular attendance in panchayat meetings is less than their male colleagues, two-third of them are regularly attending these meetings. This is against the widespread scepticism that women do not attend panchayat meetings.

When asked about the time given to panchayat work in the previous week, 68.9% women and 75.6% men reported the time spent by them in panchayat work. While more men have reported spending more time, we see a substantial proportion of women attending to panchayat activities [Buch: 1999].

### **Challenge and New Initiatives**

The general body (Gram Sabha) is conceived as an institution in this structure to provide for participation of all the adult members of the village. The experience of participation has however being quite mixed. With substantial population still living at the fringe of survival, the pre- occupation with livelihood issues quite often overtakes and overrules democratic participation. Panchayats, after all provide for people participation in the local democracy and a threshold of livelihood security becomes essential before these persons can take more interest in the local decision-making. The state of Kerala has started an experiment of decentralized planning involving these institutions and the District Planning Committee, which provides widespread citizens' participation in this exercise of planning.

Simultaneously another trend has also developed where number of additional committees of the village Assembly are being created in addition to the village panchayats. These seek to have six to seven committees in village which will deal with various aspects of local governance. The experience of this exercise is still to be seen and evaluated. In other places development decision making and implementation is being given to alternative structures of joint forest management for management of forest, janm bhoomi programme for implementation of development programmes in Andhra Pradesh. Another challenge here

relates to the area included in a village panchayat (too small or too large) in some states, its resources and capacity to take decisions at the local levels to work effectively.

One challenge relates to people's continuing disbelief in the participation level of women and weaker sections. In the case of the former they continue to feel that they would not have the time and the authority to participate in the local decision-making, in view of the personal and social constraints they still face. In the case of the latter they feel that they did not have the capacity to participate. There is also reluctance by the rural power elites to share power and political, social space with these sections. Another challenge comes from the dominant sections and other sections vying with each other for a space of these institutions. To some extent the economic dependence of the poor on the better off sections limits their capacity to fiercely participate in decision-making levels. However the strength of the experiment lies in the large number of weaker sections which have entered this institution and the collective strength of their presence which cannot be ignored.

The mandatory or automatic rotation of the reservation every five years or less has also not contributed to building and supporting leadership of women and they have to work harder to contest subsequent elections. But then there is no feasible alternative available so far to these rotations. In the case of women's their seclusion, lack of independent mobility, social practices and family ideology constrain their capacity to participate effectively.

Our study has shown that in quite a few places they have shown tremendous leadership ability to participate in these institutions to manage them in the interest of the local community. We need to explore ways of strengthening their participating capacity by evolution of support structures of their own. It is noted that these women have much less access to information and knowledge about various developments than their male counterparts find it possible. Therefore we have started an action research in three states of northern India as follow up of our earlier study, to develop networks of women in panchayats, in local administration, in Savings and Credit Groups and in other women's collectives. The experiment also seeks to explore the evolution of Mahila Sabha (Women Common Meeting) before they participate in the General Assembly of the village to collectively assert their needs and views in the still patriarchal society. There are also other experiments where association of members and chairpersons of panchayats have been developed to explore common issues for their effective participation.

## Endnotes

He made his well-known remarks, which were critical of this institution. He said "I hold that the village republics have been the ruination of India, I am therefore surprised that those who condemn provincialism and communalism should come forward as champions of the village: what is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindness and communalism.

The district has been a basic unit of administration in India across the country. Development blocks were created in the context of the need of development administration particularly the community development projects started in 1952.

Collectors are the senior government officials responsible for administration and coordination of all government activities at the district level. India has more than 500 districts.

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