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FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS: GENDER AND PARTICIPATION  
IN THE *PANCHAYATI RAJ*

by

Aparna Thomas

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Political Science

Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan  
June 2004

FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS: GENDER AND PARTICIPATION  
IN THE *PANCHAYATI RAJ*

Advisor: DR Jim BUTTERFIELD  
Aparna Thomas, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2004

In April 1993, the Parliament of India passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, reforming the structure of local governments. The amendment mandated that the composition of local councils include at least one-third women.

This study explores the effects of the 1993 Indian women's reservation bill in changing policies at the local government level in ways that address women's interests. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions: 1) Are women really *participating* in *panchayati raj* politics, or are they merely present? 2) Do quotas as institutional mechanisms make a difference in agenda setting and policy outcomes? Although it may be early to judge the effect of quotas on policy outcomes, the focus of the study is on agenda setting. I examine agendas before and after the introduction of quotas in order to measure their impact.

Using a combination of qualitative methods that include non-participant I observations, interviews and analysis of records and proceedings, I examine women's participation at all three levels of the *panchayati raj* in the Sangli District, in Western Maharashtra. I argue that while quotas, as institutional mechanisms are a necessary step, women's participation, while successful in some cases, is hindered by the influence of other variables such as party politics, caste and lack of support from the family.

Drawing on literature from institutional design and feminist theory, I posit that successful participation is a result of the balance between formal institutional design and its compatibility with informal institutions. I conclude that successful participation by women in *panchayat* politics is a result of a combination of various factors. Additionally, successful formal institutional design must consider the role of existing informal institutions. As such, reservations for women in India are an important first and necessary step, however, not a sufficient condition for women's "empowerment."

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The responsibility for all errors is solely mine.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Although the new Constitution did guarantee women equal rights, Indian women continue to remain oppressed and struggle over everything from survival to resources. There exists in India a strong legal environment and a movement to protect women's rights. However, the social status of the majority of Indian women remains unchanged. While women have made considerable progress in some areas such as education and employment, they continue to be subjected to the influence of the existing patriarchal attitudes in Indian society. The dilemma for Indian women today is that despite the liberal provisions of the Constitution and various laws, serious inequalities remain.

A major factor contributing to these inequalities is the nature of women's identities, which are based in religious, not secular values. Religious ideology (largely Hindu) and the traditional social structure associated with it have been the strongest influences in the construction and development of gender roles in India. These in turn have reinforced the patriarchal structure of the society, in which women remain imbedded even today.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is a direct and concerted attempt to rectify that. In April 1993, the Parliament of India passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, reforming the structure of local governments. Among other measures, the amendment mandated that the compositions of local councils include at least one-third women. The “reservation”, as it is called, applies to delegate and chair positions in the *panchayati raj* (local government councils) at all three sub-state levels. The 33 percent reservation bill has legitimized the

entry of women in mainstream politics at the grassroots level, and is seen as a first step for empowering women to participate more effectively in political decision-making.

The issue of quotas is not unique for India. The country has had history with caste quotas Independent India in 1947, advocated equality as a crucial value against a heterogeneous society divided by caste. India's constitutional policies were designed to relieve caste inequalities. The result has been reservations for members of lower castes in a number of fields. The issue of quotas is also relevant in other countries. Since seeking quotas is linked with notions of identity, Western nations with multi-ethnic populations are faced with the question of how to deal with the demands of various groups. Recent feminist discourses also reflect the concern regarding women's under-representation in general and the introduction of gender quotas in particular.

This study explores with the effects of the 1993 Indian women's reservation bill in changing policies at the local government level in ways that address women's interests. As a result of the reservation law, over a million women now sit as elected representatives in local bodies (IPU 1997). However, has the increased presence of women had the desired effect? This research will address two related questions: 1) Are women really *participating* in *panchayati raj* politics, or are they merely *present*? 2) Do quotas (as institutional mechanisms) make a difference in agenda setting and policy outcomes? Because it may be early to judge the effect of quotas on policy outcomes, this study will focus primarily on agenda setting. In so doing, I plan to examine agendas before and after the introduction of quotas in order to measure the impact of quotas.

To explore whether reservation policies can address women's deeply rooted problems, this study relies on feminist theories of the origins of inequality, as well as

theoretical perspectives on institutional design. This topic calls attention not only to women's participation at the local level, but also to women's involvement in politics in general. The question of how to represent and articulate interests of diverse groups in society forms the core of democracy theory. In addition, since institutions structure participation and representation, the effect of quotas may have a significant impact on the democratic process itself.

### Existing Scholarship on Caste and Gender in India

For the purposes of this study, scholarly literature on Indian women's status and political participation can be divided into two broad categories. First, I have included a large body of literature concerning the impact of caste- based quotas. Because I am interested in exploring the effects of gender -based quotas, drawing on the evidence from caste- based quotas is very useful. Here I have also used literature specifically focused on India, dealing with India's political structure and background to the various laws. Finally, I have included an analysis of research on women's participation in the *panchayati raj*.

The 1950 Constitution conferred equal rights and status on all citizens, forbidding any discrimination on grounds of caste, creed, religion or sex. The states were required to secure to all citizens' – men *and* women – equality, the right to education and to adequate means of livelihood (Liddle and Joshi 1989). However, despite the various laws and legislation passed regarding women's interests, those interests have not been adequately addressed. The contradiction for Indian women today is that despite the liberalizing of the laws, serious inequalities remain. A major factor contributing to these inequalities is the nature of women's identities, which are based in religious, not secular values. By refusing

to interfere in the personal laws affecting women (which are dominated by religion), the government sanctioned women's social identity based on religion.

In the following sections, I examine quota laws in two contexts. First, I examine caste- based quotas in India to reflect on the questions of how reservations in general have resulted in increased representation- both in terms of numerical representation and effective participation by lower castes. Next, I examine gender laws across countries and sectorally within India. Based on the evidence of the consequences of gender quota laws elsewhere and caste quota laws in India, I argue that Indian gender laws might have similar effects for women

### Indian Caste Quotas

The traditional social system in India was organized around caste structures and caste identities. Caste is many layered social hierarchy developed several centuries ago. In the Hindu religion, people are born with a place in the universe. The Hindu caste system is basically divided into two broad categories: the *varnas* and *jatis*. The *varna* system consists of four categories, each ranked according to their social honor: the *Brahmins* (priests and scholars), the *kshatriyas* (warriors), the *vaishyas* (merchants), and the *sudras* (laborers). Below these four categories are the untouchables, those in the lowest position. Thus, the *Brahmins* represent the highest and most honorable position and the untouchables, the lowest in the *varna* system. *Jatis* are subcategories within the *varna* system. *Jatis* also include groups based on kinship and marriage.

The untouchables are further categorized into 3 categories: scheduled castes (SCs) scheduled tribes (STs) and other backward castes (OBCs). Among these, the SCs and STs form the majority of the untouchables; therefore, the majority of the reservation policies

apply to these two groups. The terms “scheduled castes” and “scheduled tribes” refers to a list of castes prepared in 1935 by the British Government (Kolenda 1985). All of these groups are beneficiaries of “protective discrimination”, a term applied to the laws reserving seats in legislatures, seats in government employment, seats in schools and universities, as well as certain types of financial assistance.

### Legislative Changes

Members of SCs and STs have historically suffered discrimination in the public and private sphere. The reform of the caste system began as early as 1942, when still under British rule; a law was passed reserving 8.5% of all seats in the national government for members of the lower castes. The political system that evolved during the period of British control was shaped by two contradictory objectives: emphasis on unity of the country for legitimacy and the use of divisions of Indian society for political control (Kak 1990). The British attempted to solve the problem of inter-ethnic tensions by the application of quotas. Subash Kak notes that entry into the British army was based on preferences for certain groups (1990). The British also organized and recognized separate electorates for Muslims and Sikhs. Thus, the institution of quotas by the British served their interests of control. In 1947, when India became independent, quotas were increased to 12%. Similarly, since then several laws regarding reservations for untouchables have been passed in the fields of education, employment and in the Constitution.

The Constitution of India of 1950 abolishes “untouchability” and prohibits discrimination in access to shops, restaurants, hotels and places of entertainment, or in the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads, and places of public resorts, or in admission to

educational institutions (Kolenda 1985). Article 23 forbids forced labor, commonly part of the dominant caste or feudal system. Article 25 allows for entrance to Hindu educational institutions. In addition to these protections in the Constitution, in 1955, the Parliament also passed the Untouchability Offenses Act. In 1952, a law was passed mandating 20% of all seats in public institutions at the college and university level to be reserved for SCs and STs. In 1970, a similar law was passed regarding employment in the public sector, according to which 16.66% of jobs were reserved for SCs and STs.

Historically, caste distinctions in South India have been more bitter, particularly in Kerala (Kumar 1992, 294). The education level in Kerala has been above the very low Indian average. Caste also entered political life in the South earlier than in the North because in the south both the nationalist movement and the Congress party was weak. The South was also the first region in India to introduce reservations of various types on a wide scale (Kumar 1992). The princely state of Mysore was in fact the leader for the advancement of the OBCs. The committee set up in 1919 to consider adequate representation of backward communities in public service, recommended extensive reservations. In 1921, the Mysore government ordered that half of all government posts should be given to non-Brahmins (Kumar 1992).

Reservation advocates cite the South Indian experience as evidence that reservations need not lead to social disharmony. They also argue that South Indian states are among the best administered in the country, evidence that reservations need not affect efficiency (Kumar 1992). Such compensatory policies have produced substantial redistributive effects, though redistribution is not spread evenly among the beneficiary groups (Galanter 1997).

Nevertheless, reservations have resulted in both increased representation as well as substantive policy changes favoring SCs and STs. in the areas of education, employment, politics and economics. Reserved seats, for example, provide an important legislative presence for SCs and STs and increase the attention given to them as well. It also results in policies favorable to their interests. The reservation of jobs has resulted in a sizable portion of the beneficiary group earnings, as well as the security, patronage and prestige that accompany government employment (Galanter 1977, 189). Educational opportunities have also increased for these groups. Reservations in education and employment liberate untouchables from their caste roles and enable them to utilize opportunities. Reservations provide a measure of representation in legislative settings. The presence of SCs and STs in legislative settings locks their place in the government and assures that their problems are not dismissed or ignored.

### Policy Changes

Caste based reservations have also resulted in effective policy changes favoring SCs and STs. Since independence, the government has made efforts to rectify the economic policy pursued under the British. Several five-year plans were launched which included welfare of the backward classes (Revankar 1971, 279). In the 1950's, economic development in India was characterized by investment in heavy industry and import substitution (Rudolph and Rudolph 1997). Plans were launched and the emphasis was on increasing capital necessary for investment. Included in such plans were initiatives for improving the conditions of lower castes. Historically, since lower castes had been excluded from the development process, instituting quotas was a practical method for



ensuring development of these groups. Moreover, since the lower castes constituted almost half of the Indian population at the time, their development could not be ignored.

There was a special emphasis on revising cottage industries that are dominated by SCs and STs. The plan also emphasized the significance of cottage industries as the only solution to the unemployment problem in the country. It established several boards to assist villagers (the majority of whom were SCs and STs) by offering technical and financial assistance for improving the handicraft industry (Revankar 1971).

The government pursued similar policies in agricultural reform. Here the problem for lower castes was related to land ownership. The agricultural population was classified into categories based on land ownership (Revankar 1971). Since the majority of the lower castes did not own land, the government undertook various schemes to benefit them by establishing cooperatives that provided low interest loans for land purchase and small businesses. Furthermore, land reform was pursued aggressively by individual states such as Karnataka, which created several programs to assist disadvantaged groups (Manor 1997). In 1971, Urs was elected to power as Chief Minister, based on a specific mandate to increase representation for lower castes. He managed to change the existing reservation policy in the state by forming a commission to develop new criteria that would incorporate more disadvantaged groups (Parikh 1997). He argued that the existing reservation policy was unjust, as it excluded certain poor groups within the higher castes and thus wished to expand it. In 1975, the government accepted most of the commission's recommendations, thus increasing the reservation policy in the state to 50 % (Parikh 1997, 173).

Thus Urs single-handedly succeeded in revising existing reservation policy in Karnataka. His success can be explained partially by the fact that his coalition government was comprised mainly of lower caste groups. In other words, the Karnataka case is an example of policy outcomes resulting from specific coalitions. As I argue in the next section, political parties in other states have also used caste as a key factor in both securing votes as well as attempting to change policy.

### Political Parties

Political parties have also been affected by the constitutional reservations for SCs and STs. Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) demonstrate how the Congress party played an indispensable part in brokering and integrating diverse social forces. On the whole, it has been able to subsume castes into their larger ideological agendas. The authors compared Indian caste groups to interest groups in American politics. They argued that caste was more likely to be subsumed and integrated by leadership and policies of parties than it is to threaten established political communities. Independent India of the 1950's was made up of a one-party democracy, the Congress Party. Although the Congress was made up of diverse social groups, conflicts were negotiated and managed within the party organization. The Congress Party had a strong organizational structure combined with the dynamic leadership of Nehru, followed by Indira Gandhi, that allowed it to manage caste conflict and dominate Indian politics as well (Parikh 1997).

However, after Nehru's death, the break-up of the Congress party and the emergence of a new political coalition led by Indira Gandhi had consequences for many aspects of Indian politics, among which were reservation policies. Nehru's Congress was able to take advantage of the reservations without encountering any serious liabilities

(Parikh 1997). In the south, where reservations for scheduled castes were overwhelmingly popular, the party supported extensive reservations. In the north and west, where elite and middle castes disliked reservations, the party refrained from introducing reservations for groups beyond scheduled castes and tribes. And at the national level, the party tabled OBC reservations when it became clear that there were both practical and political difficulties involved in their formation and implementation (Parikh 1997, 170).

In the 1970's, with the rise of Indira Gandhi's Congress-I party and the rise of party competition, however, these accommodations could no longer be sustained. Her victory had been achieved in part through the mobilization of lower castes and minorities. Her campaign rhetoric stressed equality and the introduction of policies that improved conditions for the poor and the disadvantaged. Reservation policies were a high profile, expected component of this program (Parikh 1997). Previously, lower caste development had been undertaken in ways that would not alienate traditional elite and middle castes. From the 1970's on, however, the increasing political awareness of both lower castes and the politicians who needed to court lower caste votes made reservations more important and politically more volatile (Parikh 1970). This was the result of two main developments. First, there was a grassroots movement to expand reservation policies. Second, there was also a top-down mobilization of new political groups. The rise of competition between Congress factions created incentives for such factions to mobilize new electoral groups. Reservation policies were a way for politicians to show their commitment to these increasingly important electoral groups.

Political parties were able to keep disputes over reservation at the state level until the 1990's, when the Prime Minister V.P. Singh announced that a commission report (commonly referred to as the "Mandal Commission") on reservations would be implemented. The report itself recommended increased reservation of jobs in government, the public sector, nationalized banks, all universities and government affiliated colleges, based on the evidence that lower castes (SCs, STs and OBCs) constituted 52% of the total population (Kumar 1992, 292). Although the Mandal Commission Report was not adopted, it nevertheless created tensions among political parties, particularly because since the 1990's India has had a series of coalition governments. The coalitions depend upon regional political parties, which in turn depend upon SC and ST votes. Therefore the proposal to implement the Mandal Commission affected the majority of the political parties. It also resulted in riots throughout India, with more than 100 upper caste students killing themselves in protest of reservations (Kumar 1992).

Parikh (1997) argues that since the break-up of the Congress Party reservation policies have become vitally important and politically volatile for many Indian parties. They are important because they are among the most powerful signals available to make emerging electoral blocs realize that parties are interested in them. But their power leads to their political volatility, because their policies result from the inequalities generated by the caste system (Parikh 1997, 191). She notes that since such policies focus on the ascriptive characteristics of particular groups (castes), reservations create strong attachments in the groups they target and similarly create hostility in the groups they ignore. She further suggests two reasons why reservations were unproblematic during the

reign of the Congress. First, the Congress Party hegemony made it difficult for individual groups to break policy consensus. Second, the groups that were to make reservations problematic had only just begun to mobilize as distinct political entities (Parikh 1997, 191).

Party policies regarding quotas are primarily driven by electoral considerations. No political party desired to oppose quotas due to the fear that the backward constituencies would get alienated. Parikh (1997) provides two case studies to demonstrate the variety of ways in which reservation policies played a role in the political process. In each context, politicians needed to develop strategies to solidify coalitions and SCs and STs constituted a significant portion of their constituencies. In the states of Gujarat and Karnataka, efforts were made to maintain voting blocks through political coalitions. Thus reservation policies are difficult to give up and the political decisions made by parties reflect this reality. No party opposed reservations completely. In fact, as Parikh demonstrates, parties since the 1970's increasingly supported reservations as they expanded their electoral bases to include SC and ST groups (Parikh 1997).

Based on the above discussion, caste quotas have succeeded (to a certain extent) in influencing legislative change and policy outcomes. The creation of caste quotas can be understood to have both normative and instrumental rationales. Normatively, the creation of quotas can be interpreted as recognition that lower castes suffer economic, political and educational discrimination, and special provisions are needed for members of lower castes to achieve equality with the rest of the population. The practical reasons can be understood as a means to promote stability in the country by avoiding caste conflict, an issue very relevant to post-independent India, which was still recovering from

the split with Pakistan. Political parties also made rational calculations and supported reservations in order to strengthen their electoral bases. Also, the fact that India undertook a developmental approach in the post-independence period suggests a desire to create institutional frameworks that would provide opportunities for development.

The legislative changes resulting in Constitutional provisions for lower castes range from reservations in educational institutions to reservations in politics.

Performance can be measured by the increase in the numbers of lower castes represented in the fields included in the reservations. While the sheer presence of lower castes in politics or in the public sector is not an adequate measure, it can be interpreted as the first successful step in the goal for equality. As a result of caste quota laws in India, legislative changes resulting in increased representation of lower castes have occurred. Reservations have also resulted in favorable policy outcomes for lower castes. Evidence from Gujarat and Karnataka demonstrates changes in individual state policies as a result of reservations (Galanter 1997; Kaviraj 1997; Kolenda 1985; Revankar 1971).

Thus caste quotas have succeeded (to a certain extent) in influencing legislative change and policy outcomes. The creation of caste quotas can be understood to have both normative and instrumental reasons. Normatively, the creation of quotas can be interpreted as recognition that lower castes suffer economic, political and educational discrimination, and special provisions are needed for members of lower castes to achieve equality with the rest of the population. The practical reasons can be understood as a means to promote stability in the country, an issue very relevant to post-independent India, which was still recovering from the split with Pakistan.

## Gender Quotas

The issue of gender quotas is significant both in India as well as in other countries. Numerous countries and political parties have experimented with it. Gender quotas have emerged in other countries in two formats: as internal rules within parties and as mandated minimums in legislative bodies. The former were first seen in the Nordic countries three decades ago and these countries have had the highest proportion of women in their parliaments since (Caul 1998). Regarding the latter, in the past five years, several Third World countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Venezuela, The Dominican Republic, Costa Rica and India have implemented legislative gender quota laws. Both Jones and Caul demonstrate that gender quotas have had a significant positive effect on the percentage of women legislators elected (Jones 1998; Caul 1998).

### Types of Quotas

In a global context, quotas can be instituted by two methods: through national legislation and by political parties. Statutory quotas exist primarily in proportional representational. This method requires at least a minimum proportion of the elected representatives to be women (IDEA Handbook 1998, 97). Statutory quotas exist in Italy (50% of the PR ballot), Argentina (30%), and Brazil (20%). Currently, a 30% statutory quota is being debated in the Indian parliament as well.

A second type of quota is when the electoral law can require parties to support a certain number of women candidates (IPU 1998). An Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) study identifies Belgium, Namibia, Argentina, and, Nepal as countries with such laws. However, these laws are not uniform. For example, in Argentina, women have to be

placed in strategic positions so as to win and Nepalese law requires single-member districts to have a 5% quota for women candidates (IDEA Handbook, 1998).

Additionally, political parties also adopt their own internal rules for women as parliamentary candidates. Political parties in several countries such as South Africa, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Australia, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and Sweden (IDEA Handbook, 1998) have used this.

Thus quotas to increase the proportion of women in parliament can either be legislated at the national level or set by the individual parties themselves. Jones notes that national quota laws are more effective than party quotas because national laws are enforced in all parties (Jones 1998, 5). However, he also argues that quotas in parties are more frequently adopted because of the fact that parties compete for votes, and it is easier to pressure parties to adopt such policies.

#### Quotas through National Legislation

The IPU study identifies Uganda, Argentina, India, Bangladesh, Tanzania and Eritrea as countries where gender quotas have been written into the constitution or introduced through national legislation (IPU 1997). In Uganda, each of the 39 districts is required to reserve one parliamentary seat for women. In Argentina, the law mandates a 30% quota for women candidates.

The IPU study also suggests that quotas are more easily introduced in countries where other forms of quotas already exist (IPU 1997). The Indian case is an example with a history of caste quotas. Since India already has caste quotas, gender quotas may have a greater opportunity for successfully being introduced and for being effective. Furthermore, this study reveals that the newer the political system, the easier it is to



implement quotas due to the fact that incumbency in an older political system may restrict women's access to political positions.

### Gender Quotas through Political Parties

Political parties in Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were among the first to adopt gender quotas. According to the 1997 IPU study, 40% of Swedish parliamentary members must be women, 34% in Finland, 38% in Norway, 34% in Denmark and 25% in Iceland. Caul (1998) argues that the adoption of gender quotas depends upon several factors, including the influence of women activists, the type of electoral system, the influence of diffusion and competition, party ideology, party organization and the size and age of the party. Caul studies party responses to pressure for women's representation by analyzing the influences of gender quotas. She finds that a party-list proportional representational system, fewer parties in the system, a high level of new left values within a party, a younger party and a larger party dependent upon vote share, positively influence the adoption of gender quotas (Caul 1998). The IPU study notes that in the Scandinavian countries, both women within political parties and the women's movement have influenced the creation of quotas (IPU 1997).

Caul (1998) further makes the distinction between candidate quotas and internal party quotas. Internal party quotas aim to increase the number of women in high-level party positions. Some parties have set gender quotas for their national executives (Irish Worker's Party), while others have set quotas for their party conventions (the U.S. Democratic and Republican Parties).

The IPU study concludes that the quota system has been much more commonly used within party structures than for legislative elections (IPU 1997). Such quotas are a

more indirect way to increase representation. These types of quotas also vary from one party to another. Several parties with internal quotas have created leadership positions within the party for women.

Originally, some feminists were against party structures due to their hierarchical nature, and they preferred to be part of autonomous organizations. However, there is consensus in the literature that parties are vital for political change. Lovenduski and Norris (1993) note that political parties are a major arena for women's activities in several Western European countries. Parties provide women an opportunity to get involved in the political process. They are also a crucial link between citizens and government. The authors explain how gender has affected party politics and how the imperatives of party politics influence the patterns of women's political representation. More importantly, women's demands for political representation inevitably affect party politics and party politics inevitably affect the strategies that women employ to press their claims (Lovenduski and Norris 1993, 3). The authors find that factors crucial for women's representation in parties are a leftist ideology and a strong, centralized party structure.

A study on Canadian parties suggests that while no party in Canada has enforced strict quotas for women, all parties have made efforts to recruit women (Matland and Studlar 1998, 120). The New Democratic Party (NDP) has been the most active in developing policies to include women. This party is the leftist party in Canada and has the highest proportion of women among its nominated and elected candidates. Although the authors do not specifically mention party ideology, their findings support Lovenduski

and Norris' (1993) proposition that political parties with leftist ideologies are more open to women's representation.

As far as electoral systems are concerned, women tend to do best under multi-member constituencies with a high number of seats per district. They also argue that national party list systems tend to be more favorable for women. In contrast, plurality or majoritarian systems are least favorable for women (Lovenduski and Norris, 1993). Based on the evidence from their case studies of Canada, Australia and France, Lovenduski and Norris suggest reasons why party lists favor women. First, in a single member constituency, local parties are likely to pick one person, and thus may not choose a woman candidate. However, in a proportional representation system, voters are presented with a number of candidates and parties may have an incentive to pick a woman, so as to balance the ticket (Lovenduski and Norris 1993).

Thus, the literature supports the proposition that the institution of quotas is clearly conducive to increased representation of women in government. The adoption of candidate quotas reflects the significant efforts that parties have undertaken regarding women's issues. Quotas represent the "institutionalization of changing attitudes towards women in politics" (Caul 1998). Once quotas are in place, there is less need for constant pressure for women's representation.

However, as Caul argues, quotas for women candidates might be an example of party policies designed to attract women's votes. As such, quotas may be more an electoral mechanism and less a reflection of real support for women and women's issues. Although political parties may use quotas to get votes, the above evidence suggests that

quotas have resulted in increased representation of women in several countries. In other words, quotas place women in more positions.

Quotas also result in policy outcomes favoring women. For example, Lovenduski and Norris (1993) note that women in Italian parties successfully implemented party initiatives favoring women. Similar strategies were used by women in the British Labor party and by women in the German Democratic Party in the 1980s. In Norway, women politicians were responsible for initiating policies regarding women's health care (Lovenduski and Norris 1993).

### Indian Gender Quotas

After independence in 1948, India opted for a democratic political system. In an attempt to democratize, a decentralized system of government was established with power divided between the federal, state and local government.

The village *panchayat* is the basic local government unit in rural India. The functions of the village *panchayat* include civic, welfare services and other socio-economic functions. Although the *panchayati raj* existed informally before independence, it was formally established only in the early 1950's. It is a three-tiered system of elected local government for rural areas consisting of a directly elected village council (*gram panchayat*), an indirectly elected block council (*panchayati samiti*) and an elected district assembly (*zilla parishad*). Additionally, *panchayats* were required to hold *gram sabhas* (meetings, open to the entire village population) regularly, to discuss the activities of the *panchayats*. While the *panchayati raj* was intended to work as a vehicle for economic development, social change and grass roots democracy, *panchayats* have been criticized for not addressing the needs of the poor and for being largely ineffective

(Everett 1996, 6). Generally, women were excluded from the *panchayats*, and men of higher castes dominated the elections.

Initially, the system represented a traditional model of all the local disputes being settled by consensus of the five village elders. Since the 1970s, however, there have been attempts to change the structure of the *panchayati raj* system in order to make it more democratic, and several constitutional amendments have been passed towards this end. As required by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, all the states of India (except Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland) amended existing legislation to bring them in line with the new constitutional provisions of April 1994. The states cited above were exempted by another constitutional provision based on the fact that they are considered tribal areas, and fall under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (Kaushik 1996, 5).

The *panchayati raj* system of the pre and post independence period differed on the topic of representation. Before independence, members of the upper class and caste dominated the system of local government. Women were also generally excluded from formal representation. In the 1950s, several laws were passed which increased representation in local government through regular elections and meetings and also increased its strength by widening the scope of their functions. Women's involvement in local government became an issue at the same time that efforts were underway to strengthen the *panchayati raj*.

Although women's involvement in local governments since independence has been low, this is not to suggest that women have been totally excluded from the local government system. On the contrary, women have been actively engaged in promoting health care, in teaching and in providing social services to other women at the village

level. For the most part, women have not been able to achieve formal power in the local government system because they have been excluded from the formal elected committees of the *panchayati raj*. In other words, they have not been part of the formal decision-making process at the village level. Although the constitution guaranteed women equal rights and representation, women's involvement at the local level was constrained by a number of factors such as socio-economic status and caste.

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

In 1989, the Congress Party presented in parliament a constitutional amendment requiring a 33 % reservation for women in *panchayats* and municipalities. Although the bill passed in the Lower House, it failed in the upper house. It was re-introduced three years later and was adopted by Parliament in 1993 as the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Indian Constitution (IPU 1997). As a result, over a million women now sit as elected representatives in local bodies.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment left several areas to the states to decide, including the powers, functions and organization of the *gram sabha* and the method of electing the chairperson at the village level (Kaushik 1996, 10-12). The States were allowed one year to make the necessary amendments to their existing *panchayat* legislation. However, since the amendment was unclear about certain issues, such as dissolving existing *panchayats*, states have used this as an excuse to postpone elections. Therefore not all states have women representatives in the *panchayats*. As of January 1996, only 12 of the 27 Indian states had implemented quotas: Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and, West Bengal (Tekchandani et al 1997, 6).

In 1995, the question of quotas was raised again, but this time the focus was on women in parliament. Initially, most political parties agreed to this proposal. However, controversy emerged when the bill was introduced to the Eleventh Parliament in 1997. The objections focused around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and for women of lower castes was a problem; second, the issue of elitism was also a problem (Rai 1995). Most women's groups believed that the caste issue was a divisive one for women. Also, many believed that elite women would gain special privileges to seats in parliament (Rai 1995). Thus, to date the amendment has not been passed by the parliament. However, the current government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has committed itself to introducing another quota bill for women in parliament.

## Similarities and Differences between Gender and Caste

Since caste quotas in India and gender laws elsewhere have resulted in legislative changes as well as favorable policy outcomes for those involved, it is logical to expect that Indian gender quotas will do the same for Indian women. However, doing so involves addressing the similarities and differences between caste and gender in general, and the demands made by advocates of caste quotas and gender quotas in particular

Reservations for women, as for lower castes, were seen as a means for encouraging greater participation in public life (Everett 1996). Reservations, therefore, not only ensured political participation, but also indirectly encouraged women to step out of their traditional roles as wives and mothers (Everett 1996). Lower castes were similarly encouraged by the quotas to view themselves differently, particularly regarding their traditional occupational niches.

However, beyond these obvious similarities related to discrimination, caste and gender quotas also have substantial differences that could affect outcomes. Caste quotas have been successful to a large extent due to the nature of caste politics. For the most part, the various scheduled tribes and castes (an official designation) have worked together as a coherent political group. Political parties have also recognized the saliency of caste in Indian politics and have mobilized around it. On the other hand, there is a lack of consensus on gender identities. Because gender identities are often constructed in relation to other identities such as caste and class, they fail to be recognized in the same manner as caste identities. Thus, it may not be reasonable to expect gender quotas to have the same impact as caste quotas.



Moreover, caste identity is rooted in religion. As such, caste quotas as an institutional device to achieve equality are essentially a liberal mechanism geared toward providing equal access and opportunity. Since the roots of caste inequality are far deeper than mere access and lack of opportunity, such a liberal mechanism has a limited effect.

Similarly, gender quotas as liberal mechanisms can only go so far in addressing gender inequality. Gender identities are often constructed in relation to other identities such as religion, caste and class. Thus, it may not be reasonable to expect gender quotas to have the same impact as caste quotas. Shirin Rai's (1997) analysis suggests that the number of women who have benefited from caste based reservations (particularly in politics) remains rather small- only 4.1% of 22% of the reserved parliamentary seats were occupied by women (110). Rai's observations have some important consequences for gender and caste quotas. The dominance of caste identity suggests that lower caste women have not benefited much from caste-based reservations.

Based on the discussion of caste and gender quotas, this study takes the approach that caste quotas can serve as a predictor for the likelihood of success of gender quotas, but only to a certain extent. As noted above, since caste quotas have achieved considerable success in legislative as well as policy changes, it might be reasonable to expect similar results with gender quotas.

However, quotas as liberal mechanisms designed to address inequality are only a necessary first step. The larger problem of inequality of Indian women continues to exist in spite of such institutional mechanisms. Thus this study acknowledges that while quotas (both caste and gender) are a necessary step, they are not a sufficient step for achieving gender inequality.

The nature of the caste and gender demands also raises the theoretical question of the transferability of institutional design from one context to another. Bruce Coram's (1996) fallacy of "stretchability" suggests that similar institutions may not produce similar outcomes. Even small changes in the initial conditions or rules might lead to widely divergent outcomes (Coram 1996, 101).

The fallacy of stretchability also can be used to explore the relationship between caste and gender quotas in India as well as with regards to gender quotas in India and elsewhere. In the Indian case, I argue that the history of the caste quotas within India and gender quotas elsewhere provides evidence that gender quotas in India might result in some issues of importance to women making it onto agenda and, ultimately, appearing in the form of policy outcomes. However, if Coram's fallacy holds true, the similarities and differences between caste and gender in India might lead to different results.

However, Robert Goodin (1996) supports the new institutionalism proposition that although individual actors and agents can pursue their interests, they are still constrained by their environment. Moreover, he also suggests that rules and incentives can be borrowed from other institutional settings, if proper care is given to context.

Finally, although caste and gender quotas have differences that might account for differences in outcomes, their similarities outweigh them. Both sets of quotas began from the premise that quotas would result in greater participation by lower castes and women respectively, ultimately leading to more favorable outcomes. Moreover, other similarities in their demands such as access to education and employment also suggest that the comparison between caste and gender quotas has validity and the degree of success of

caste quotas might prove to be useful in judging the likely degree of success of gender quotas.

### Women's Performance in *Panchayats*

Prior to the reservation bill, statistics regarding women's participation in village councils were significantly lower (between 4 and 5 percent). Today about 33% of candidates participating in the *panchayati raj* are women. These women are faced with basic developmental issues such as poverty, illiteracy, and lack of health care. Today, as most states have completed their first five-year term of office, a quick review of women's performance by social activists and research groups have shown mixed results regarding women's successful participation.

On the one hand, there is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that reservations have made a difference. Several case studies support this conclusion. Acharya Keya's (1999) study assesses women's impact on a *gram panchayat* meeting in the Kolar district in Karnataka. While the men deliberated over how to spend part of their budget, two women assertively demanded that a "crèche" (day care center) be the priority. The author concludes that the women were successful and convinced the men on the council to start the day care center (Keya 1999). Incidentally, Karnataka was the first state to reserve seats for women in 1983, 10 years prior to the constitutional amendment. Today, awareness of women's participation in rural governance is high in this state (Keya 1999)

Other studies also demonstrate similar results with regards to women's participation. In Maharashtra state's Yavatatal district, a female *panchayat* member called a meeting to discuss the problem of dowry, clearly indicating a desire to pursue an issue

affecting women (Nanivadekar 1997). However, women also continue to be faced with obstacles. Several studies document women's lack of effective participation at council meetings (Sooryamoorthy 2000; Nanivadekar 1997; Stree Aadhar Kendra 1995). Often, the husbands lead discussion on behalf of their wives. In other instances, women are seen preparing tea for the male members of the council, and standing only in the background.

Furthermore, studies also indicate that a number of women elected in the first round of elections in most states, were introduced as "proxies" of male politicians (Nanivadekar 1997). Such women got elected because they were close relatives of male politicians.

Such evidence suggests that women continue to be seen through traditional patriarchal roles of being wives and mothers, not as effective decision-makers in the public sphere. A number of factors continue to constrain women's participation in '*panchayati raj*' (village self- government)," notes a UN report (1998). Several no-confidence motions have been brought against women leaders to remove them from their positions in the village councils, it says. There are also examples of physical violence to keep women from speaking up in the councils.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this project is divided into two sections. First, the aim of this project is to include quotas in the larger framework of institutional design. I am interested in exploring the relationship between quotas as a mechanism of formal institutions, with informal institutions such as religious laws and patriarchy. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the intersection of formal and informal institutions,

especially the impact of formal institutions on informal institutions. As such then, this project falls under the study of institutional design.

Second, feminist literature on gender and politics also forms an important part of the theoretical foundation of this project. Since I am interested in women's participation in politics, various perspectives on gender and politics need to be considered. Feminist literature depicts varied degrees of success regarding women's participation in politics, based on various perspectives on inequality. These perspectives can also be included in theory of institutional design.

In order to link these theoretical perspectives- i.e. institutional design literature and feminist perspectives on inequality, I will work from a model that represents a continuum on the role of agency, structure and culture. The model is loosely based on the various perspectives on institutionalism, briefly described below.

#### Perspectives on Institutionalism

The literature on institutions can be categorized into three broad approaches: historical, rational choice and old sociological (synthetic, political science, eclectic center) approach. This classification is derived from Hall and Taylor 1998, Koeble 1995, Lijphart 1998, and Offe 1998. Historical institutionalism overemphasizes structures and legacies, while rational choice institutionalism deals with the dilemmas of collective action and rational actors struggling to solve them. Finally, sociological institutionalism purports that the arrow of causality is mutually reinforcing. It has two varieties. One, which often is associated with political science, is more inclusive, acknowledging that structures as well as agency have a role to play in institutional design. The other, often

called postmodernism or new sociological institutionalism, disregards the agency (since it is completely submerged in subjective discourses).

For this study, I use North's definition of institutions as rules of the game, as it is the most inclusive definition of institutions. According to him, institutions are "humanly devised constraints" which reduce uncertainty and provide structure to everyday life (North 1993, 3). Institutions seen from this perspective make behavior predictable over time to some extent. Clague (1998) also defines institutions in an inclusive manner. They include organizations, sets of formal rules, property rights, contracts, and other market rules as well as electoral laws and practices, parties, legal systems and cultural norms of behavior (206). In other words, institutions are both formal and informal.

Formal institutions include constitutions, parties, legal systems, market systems etc (Hall and Taylor 1996; Lijphart 1996; Katzenstein 1996). This is what Katzenstein (1996) calls "thin" institutionalism. I also operate with the assumption that design is possible within formal institutions. Quotas can be seen as a mechanism of formal institutions designed specifically to achieve desired outcomes. Quotas also can be seen as formal institutions designed to reform other formal institutions- the *panchayats*. Institutional design in this case is rooted in formal institutions, and seeks to change informal institutions.

Informal institutions include cultural institutions, religious laws that govern personal relations, patriarchy (when seen as a set of rules for gender relations), values, norms (Uslaner 1998; Calvert 1996), social power and social organization (Migdal 1994). I also include Goodin's (1996) definition of informal institutions (spheres of family and kinship, education, economics, politics, cultural institutions, and stratification).

The debate among the three institutionalisms centers on the degree of importance assigned "to the individual and to institutional context within which decisions are made and to the larger environmental factors such as culture, social norms and conventions" (Koeble 1995, 231). Historical institutionalism considers the institutional context that represents an intersection between environment and individual action as the most important explanatory variable. Rational choice institutionalism stresses individual action and initiative in creating institutions. New sociological institutionalism (postmodernism, culturalism) is concerned mostly with the larger societal environment. Thus each brand of new institutionalism operates with different independent variables that explain social change or continuity.

#### Institutional Design Literature

Similarly, there are different views regarding institutional design. There is a continuum of views on the level of success of design and consequently on the level of success of reform/change. Views range from high optimism, moderate/cautious optimism to complete pessimism. These views correspond with the degree of importance accorded to agency, structure and culture respectively. The most optimistic views on institutional design are also advocated by those who accord a high degree of importance to rational actors and rational choice (Weingast 1998). In the middle of the divide stand scholars such as Dryzek (1996), Coram (1996) and Goodin (1996), who are moderately optimistic about the success of institutional design. They caution against the influence of past legacies and the role of informal institutions- cultural variables etc. On the more pessimistic side of the divide are scholars such as Uslaner (1998), who argue that the role

of informal institutions is too powerful to bring about any change. Thus there is not much possibility for reform.

For scholars such as Weingast (1998), design is possible, when the right incentives are introduced. He advocates institutional design. By providing new incentives, institutions change behavior from non-cooperation to cooperation, which minimizes the adverse legacies that may exist. Thus the desirable outcome can be constructed (i.e., trust and maintained through successful institutional design) (194). However, devising a good design may require using second-best design. Designers may have trade-offs and not be able to achieve all their original goals.

Similarly, Barbara Geddes (1996) suggests that institutional design is the result of actors pursuing self-interest to enhance their careers and reelection chances. She views design as initiated by particular rational actors. Their decisions are the most important explanatory variable. Politicians pursue policy goals that fit most closely with their self-interest. There is a strong causal relationship between selfish interests and policy change (29). Ultimately, an individual decision, based on self-interest, is what drives institutional design. Self-interests are what explain preferences of some institutional arrangements over the others. Institutional design emerges as a result of bargaining positions (strengths and weaknesses) (6).

For others such as Dryzek (1996), success may be achieved, but not without difficulty. He offers a two-tiered definition of institutions. First, there is "institutional hardware", which includes rules, rights and operational procedures. Secondly, there is "institutional software", which consists of discourses (104). Discourses are a source of information about context. Thus for Dryzek, informal discourse analysis should be



viewed as a complement to formal analysis. Without this informal approach, the information about institutions and their design is incomplete. He emphasizes that institutional design needs to take into account the discourse analysis.

Institutional design means the reshaping of discourses. These can be changed during a time of institutional flux, created by war, depression, revolution, collapsed peripheries of otherwise stable societies, etc. (122). Thus discourses can be changed at the margins, but hardly at the core.

Similarly, Goodin suggests several principles to guide institutional design. They reflect his adherence to "middle range theories"- combining both internal consistency and external fit. Those include learning by doing, robustness, capability of adapting to new environments, sensitivity to situational complexity, and variability. In other words, institutions should be stable, flexible and open to innovation (Goodin 1996, 40-1).

For Coram, design is influenced by the context (Coram 1996). He contends that there is no one perfect design, which can work for all contexts. Indeed context is crucial because it alters design. Realizing this may not only make the designers more aware, but also make institutional reform less stressful. One implication is that learning is possible- both sectorally and comparatively.

Offe warns us that design is the rarest form of institutional innovation. Institutional success is guided by two principles (internal/external consistency). He is a political science institutionalist, the one who occupies a middle ground between structures and agency. He is skeptical about design, since it may be the rarest of forms of institutional change. The role of designer might not be even recognized and acknowledged as such. (Offe 1998, 207).

However, others such as Uslaner are not as optimistic about the success of institutional design. Uslaner describes how norms are translated into institutional design. Design is contingent on the stability of preferences and norms. Therefore, an institutional designer needs to focus on the informal institutions. These norms are the most important explanatory variable of institutional design and its success. Uslaner describes himself as a culturalist. Informal institutions (culture) outlast formal institutions. Thus institutional designers must pay close attention to core values (Uslaner 1998, 108). Changing values is what lies at the heart of institutional change. If institutional design does not conform to the dominant idea, it will have a limited impact (no matter how good the design).

#### Feminist Perspectives

As noted, gender reservations directly take on traditional gender roles in Indian society. To explore more fully the scope of the problem and the likelihood that reservation policies can address it, this study relies on feminist theories of patriarchy and of the origins of inequality. These perspectives can be linked to theories of institutional design based on the degree of sanguinity assigned to reform.

#### Patriarchy

Patriarchy manifests itself in cultural attitudes and beliefs in societies and it is a system in which males have complete power in the economic, social and political arenas. Accordingly, appropriate gender roles are defined by the patriarchal system (Bhasin 1993, 3). Sylvia Walby (1990) calls patriarchy a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Walby emphasizes the importance of understanding patriarchy as a socially constructed system.

Thus, patriarchy is about far more than access to decision-making authority. The mechanism that the designers of the quota law count on is that more women in politics will result in gradual changes in women's attitudes, status, and access to resources.

### The Origins of Inequality

Understanding patriarchy and the inequality that inheres in it involves not only defining it, but also analyzing its origins. Theories divide into four camps: the liberal, Marxist, radical and socialist feminist schools. Differences exist regarding the origins of patriarchy as well as solutions for change.

For liberal feminists, patriarchy is seen as a problem that can be overcome through institutional changes, such as enfranchisement and the universal application of other civil and political rights (Jagger 1988). Liberal feminists can also be classified under the most optimistic regarding success of reforms.

Marxist feminists argue that women's subordination began with the development of private property. Because women were confined to the domestic sphere, they became economically dependent on men and this provided the basis for their oppression (Phillips 1998). In terms of success of reforms, Marxist feminists lean towards the more pessimistic side of the continuum.

For radical feminists, patriarchy preceded private property. They believe that the original and basic contradiction is between sexes and not between economic class differences between men and women (Jagger 1988). Thus radical feminists are also very pessimistic about change.

Finally, socialist feminists look at both the relations of production and reproduction in their analysis. According to them, patriarchy is partly related to the

economic system, but is also influenced by other factors such as ideology. Thus for socialist feminists, inequality is the result of both economic as well as cultural factors (Jagger 1988). For socialist feminists- cultural attitudes need to change along with changes in the economic system (relations of production etc). They would lean more towards moderate/cautious success of institutional design.

As an institutional device designed to minimize or overcome the influence of patriarchy, quotas are essentially a liberal mechanism. While the immediate short-term intent of the designers was to increase the number of women in politics, the desired long-term implications are that women involved in politics will eventually change cultural attitudes. Similar to affirmative action policies in the US, this is a liberal mechanism. . Representation in liberal democracies is linked to notions of identity, and the role it plays in politics. Anne Phillips (1995) is critical of the liberal approach. On the one hand, she calls for a politics of presence, in which legislatures to some extent mirror the society that they represent, and that gender is one of the elements that should be mirrored. For her, changing the composition of the representatives is one way in which the politics of presence can be achieved. However, she is not very sanguine about the consequences of quotas. She admits that there are “no guarantees” that women’s interests will be addressed when the gender composition of the elected assembly is changed (Phillips 1995, 82-3).

The reason that may be the case in a place like India is the persistence of social institutions embodied in traditional gender roles. The assignation of women to roles as the “virtuous wife” (*pativrata*), mother and keeper of the home is not directly confronted by putting women in decision-making positions. Cultural attitudes may change with

women in role model positions, but not soon. As such, I argue that quotas are a necessary but insufficient step for addressing women's inequality in India.

However, although quotas are an important step, there are limits to what quotas can achieve. In a place like India, social institutions that embody traditional gender roles persist. Men also control and manipulate women in decision-making positions from behind the scene (Kaushik 1996). Thus, cultural attitudes may not easily (or, ever) change simply because women are in role model positions.

To sum up, the literature both on institutional design as well as feminist theories of inequality presents a mixed picture of what formal reforms can achieve. Even in cases of optimism, success is seen only at margins- e.g.- the idea that more women in politics will result in an overall improvement in women's lives. Given these cautionary notes, is it possible to think about quotas resulting in significant changes for women in India?

Preliminary research/anecdotal evidence nonetheless presents cases in which women have succeeded in changing policies. In the midst of obstacles, women are engaged in decision-making and policy making. Thus, the question to be addressed is how to account for success in these cases. What explains success in some cases and not in others?

This question of how and when success is achieved can also be framed within the context of the institutional design literature. Since I am interested in the question of the interaction between formal and informal institutions, I must address the relationship between formal and informal rules, which is by no means a new question. However, what is new is the systematic treatment of the relationship between formal and informal

institutions. Based on the existing literature on institutional design, the following observations can be derived.

Concerning the relationship between formal and informal rules, the literature also presents a continuum of views ranging from conflict through neutrality to cooperation. McAdams (1997) suggests that formal rules are sometimes in direct conflict with informal rules and thus fail to change informal rules. A second possibility is that formal rules are either ignored or remain neutral. A third is that formal rules can change informal rules (McAdams 1997). Helmke and Levitsky explain how and why informal institutions change by suggesting that informal institutions may change as a result of replacement by another informal institution or replacement by a formal institution (Helmke and Levitsky 2002, 27). As informal institutions are traditionally considered to be resistant to change, the authors argue that when change does occur, it is expected to be slow and incremental (Helmke and Levitsky 2002).

I find Helmke and Levitsky's explanations about institutional change very useful for the purpose of this study. They suggest that depending on the level of compatibility of the informal institution with the formal institution, informal institutions are likely to change as a result of a change in the design of the formal institution, or in response to a strengthening of formal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2002, 29-30). They also summarize additional sources of informal institutional change as follows: "changes in spontaneously emerging informal institutions are likely to come from sources that lie outside the formal institutional context, such as cultural evolution and changes in resource distribution" (Helmke and Levitsky 2002, 34). In other words, not all informal institutions change as a result of formal institutions.

## Hypotheses

The literature suggests that despite political and legal reforms in India, women's political participation continue to be influenced by social and cultural factors, i.e., patriarchal attitudes toward gender roles, the influence of male figures, etc. Furthermore, although quotas have resulted in increased participation by women, their effectiveness – and the limits of quotas as an institutional mechanism to achieve equality – needs to be tested.

I hypothesize that as an institutional mechanism for increased representation for women, quotas are resulting in changes in agendas and in policies at the local level. However, I also hypothesize that quotas can only be effective insofar as liberal mechanisms are able to address the core issues underlying inequality.

- 1) With the introduction of quotas there is increased representation of women which leads to change in agendas that favor women's interests.
- 2) With the introduction of quotas there is increased representation of women which leads to change in policies that favor women's interests.
- 3) Nonetheless, quotas as liberal mechanisms for change are likely to have limited success in achieving equality for Indian women because they are not likely to affect cultural attitudes towards women.
- 4) Thus changes that affect women's lives will be only at the margins.

## Preliminary Research

On a pre-dissertation research trip to India from Jan-April 2000, I worked as a research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), New Delhi for three months. The institute is an independent, non-governmental entity, engaged primarily in research on the

*panchayati raj* in India. While its focus is much broader than studying the effects of the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, I learned much about the topic from its library as well as from its faculty. Here I accessed useful background information on women's status in various *panchayati raj* councils. I was also able to make further contacts in Delhi and elsewhere in India through the ISS. I also met with academics and activists and gathered preliminary data in New Delhi, Bombay and Pune. By interviewing people from a variety of fields, I gained a better understanding of how the reforms are actually being implemented. But most importantly, I used the opportunity to develop measures, discuss methods, and select my case studies, as well as establish contacts in the field.

I also assisted the ISS in organizing a National Conference titled, "Women and the *Gram Sabha*", held on April 24-25, 2000, as part of Women's Political Empowerment Day celebrations. Women's delegations comprised of elected officials of the *panchayati raj* from different states attended the two-day conference. I observed group discussions on themes such as women and social development, women, *gram sabha* and decentralized planning, and women, *gram sabha* and resource mobilization. I also interacted with delegates from different states and established contacts for field research.

## Research Design

### A Case Studies Approach

The research strategy of this project consists of a qualitative case study of one district within an Indian state. Since I am interested in the effects of the reservation bill on women's participation, a comparison among villages within a state was useful because different villages might demonstrate different outcomes. In other words, although the bill has been implemented in all the states and villages, it is not given that its effects are



similar. Although this research presents a qualitative study of one region within India, an in-depth study of this type can provide for a greater contextual understanding of the phenomenon to be studied. Using a comparative methodology also allowed for an analysis of processes or outcomes across a set of similar or different cases (Ragin 1987, 13). Moreover, the chosen state varies considerably in terms of its social, political and cultural conditions that it provides potential for some generalization.

### Methodology

The methodology of this project is qualitative and multiple. Qualitative research has several strengths. According to Silverman (1993, 20), qualitative research involves taking the subject's perspective. It includes providing detailed descriptions and a greater understanding of actions and meanings in their social context. Qualitative research also favors a flexible research design. It allows for a greater contextual understanding of complex social phenomena and close encounters with the data (Collier 1999).

The methodology is based on multiple methods. The particular combination of methods chosen is based on the hypotheses. Multiple methods allow for greater accuracy in determining the existence of patterns, processes and relationships. Each method has strengths and weaknesses. Triangulation can serve to overcome the limitations of individual methods and present something closer to a complete picture of the phenomena under study (Silverman 1993). I propose a methodology that will include the following: direct observations, interviews, indirect observations, and textual analysis. I utilize an ethnographic method, as it is best suited for the questions I ask in the dissertation. I situate my methods within the disciplines of politics, sociology and anthropology. Furthermore, my methodology has been influenced by feminist methods that stem from a

common concern of bringing women at the center of the research (Cornwall 2003). I posit that an intensive case study approach is best suited as it allows for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of women's situations.

First, I have used direct observations. These are my observations in the field, particularly, my observations from attending *panchayat* meetings. The strengths of using this method correspond well with the general strengths of qualitative research. Observations allow for seeing through the eyes of the subject. Observing meetings helped me understand the dynamics of the interactions among the committee members, which will further provide clues to the reasons for certain outcomes. Observations also allowed me to include new data when and if they became available. I have organized my observational research by constructing a set of general and specific questions about my topic to avoid sitting at meetings without a guideline. I also took extensive field-notes, while watching and listening to the deliberations.

Second, I have also used interviews as a method of determining observations of participants actually involved in the process. By interviewing members (both male and female), I could determine existing patterns regarding women's participation and effectiveness in *panchayati raj* councils. My interviewing relied on open-ended, semi-structured and detailed questions. Since the goal is to develop a comprehensive picture of the subject's attitudes and/or actions, such a method allows the women flexibility in structuring their responses. I have shared the data analysis with peers and experts to minimize bias and problems of interpretation.

Third, I have used indirect observations – i.e., interviewing experts, witnesses, and specialists on the topic, as well as certain participants in *panchayati raj* politics. My

preliminary field research in India exposed me to various case studies conducted by academics and NGOs on different aspects of women and the *panchayati raj* system. Since I have relied on experts for contacts and other information, their perspective on my topic was useful. I identified categories of people to interview in order to present a comprehensive picture. I interviewed actual members of the committees (both male and female) as well as the chairs of the committees. I also interviewed members from the media (who have reported on the activities of the *panchayats*), NGOs, activists, and academics. Since much of the literature on this topic is in the form of anecdotal evidence, either through the media or in publications by various NGOs, it was important to interview people involved in writing about the topic. However, it is equally important to be conscious of the various biases that might emerge from the various perspectives. Using a broad set of questions as a guideline and triangulation of methods helped me in this process.

Fourth, I have also used textual analysis in order to measure change. I considered different kinds of documents such as files, statistical records, records of the official proceedings of the *panchayat* meetings (minutes) and records of the agendas. While conducting textual analysis, however, it was important to be aware of the limits of accuracy in how well these texts reflect reality. Again, I addressed this issue by using this method in combination with others (triangulation). I also conferred with experts on the topic regarding the accuracy of record keeping.

#### Measurement

Determination of the validity of my hypotheses was based on how much agendas and outcomes have changed since the introduction of quotas. Since my goal was to find

out whether women have been effective in changing policies, ideally, outcomes would have provided me with the most tangible evidence that women are making a difference. However, it might be too soon to measure change in terms of policy outcomes since the reservations have been in place for only the past six years. Moreover, they have been implemented differently in different states. But while in the field, I came across considerable anecdotal evidence regarding policy changes that resulted from women's participation in meetings.

However, based on the assumption that change may be slow, but nonetheless underway, I examined agendas as a surrogate for policy outcomes. By examining agendas before and after the introduction of quotas, I was able to determine if women had been successful in bringing their issues onto the public agenda of their localities. I analyzed records (including both minutes and resolutions) of local government councils. These records assisted me in determining which issues were on the agenda *before* the quotas were implemented, and consequently which issues were brought forth *after* the reforms.

Numerous studies document the lives and experiences of women in various *panchayats* in different states in India. The majorities of the studies emphasize the background conditions of the women candidates and provide detailed descriptions of their entry into politics. However, there is a considerable dearth of information regarding women's performance in *panchayats*. One reason is perhaps that it is too soon to analyze women's performance, given the fact that has only been eight years or so, since all the states implemented the reservation policy. Moreover, in the cases that performance is evaluated, the emphasis has been on the constraints and obstacles that women face during their tenure in the *panchayats*.

As George Matthew (1994) rightly points out, women have social handicaps and constraints of various kinds that block their effective participation in the *panchayats*. They have to participate despite cultural, economic and political barriers and must overcome many obstacles at the family and community levels. While these constraints are a reality for the majority of the women, there is also evidence indicating that women have managed to overcome such odds in many cases.

So the question of what explains success in some cases is an important one, as it can lead to analyzing factors that might be more conducive towards women's successful participation in *panchayat* politics.

Women's performance in the *panchayats* can be measured based on the following criteria. The criteria have been developed on a continuum from most likely to least likely to occur. For this study, success can be broadly defined within four major categories: 1) women's initiatives, 2) participation in *panchayat* activities and knowledge about *panchayat* politics, 3) policy changes and 4) changes at the personal and family level. These categories have been developed to serve as preliminary indicators to measure success. However, they are not exclusive and can/will be modified based on the evidence gathered during field research.

### **1) Women's Initiatives**

Included in this category are the issues/measures undertaken and initiated by women within the *panchayat* or within the community (village/*taluka*/*zilla*). Examples include women's initiatives in starting self help groups, *mahila* mandals (women's cooperatives), other income generating activities, campaign against alcohol, emphasis on

providing education for adults, abolition of child labor practices, and other social practices such as dowry.

## **2) Participation in *Panchayat* Activities/Knowledge about the functioning of the *Panchayats*.**

Included in this category are questions pertaining to women's decision-making and participation.

- a) Attending monthly meetings
- b) Attending *gram sabhas*
- c) Attending special meetings/emergency meetings
- d) Discussing issues during meetings
- e) Amount of time given to *panchayat* related activities.
- f) Asking questions
- g) What are the problems solved as a result of participating in *panchayat* meetings?

Also, the level of knowledge and understanding of the roles and responsibilities as a member of a *panchayat* can determine the degree of participation. This includes knowledge about the rules, finances, how decisions are made, election procedures etc.

## **3) Policy Initiatives**

Here I have searched for examples where women have initiated issues for discussion mainly at the monthly meetings. Based on the analysis of the proceedings of the monthly meetings as well as my own observations from attending the meetings, I was able to determine the extent to which women's interests are addressed. The following list of issues are included as women's interests: 1) *health issues*: water, sanitation, access to medical facilities, supplies; 2) *education*: access to schools, resources; 3) *food and nutrition*: access

to resources, distribution of resources; 4) *employment*: availability of work outside the home, access to loans for starting small businesses; 5) *services*: access to government projects and social service assistance.

#### **4) Personal Change**

Ideally, the ultimate goal of gender quotas is towards changing social and cultural attitudes about women. One of my hypotheses deals with the possibility of a change in gender roles occurring as a result of women's experiences in politics. However, I also argue that gender quotas are liberal mechanisms with limited possibility for change. Role transformation can occur at least at two levels. First, change can occur at the individual level, if women begin to assert their opinions while making decisions for themselves. Second, change can also occur at the community level. For example, if women become more self-confident about their roles in the community. While this criterion for success is an important one, it may also be the least likely one that I find.

Included under this category are questions such as:

- a) Do you make decisions about your life and the life of your children at home?
- b) Do you protest injustice (if occurs) at home?
- c) Do you have control over finances at home?
- d) Do you feel more economically empowered?
- e) Has your status within the family changed?

Additionally, I have also analyzed the proceedings of the parliamentary debates regarding the introduction of the quota bill. Doing so provided insights to the intent of the framers. More importantly, it served as another measurement for the limitations or success of quotas. After discussing my plans with various scholars in India regarding the

accessibility of records, I was informed that records exist in every village, *taluka* and *zilla parishad* (the three levels of the *panchayati raj*). There is a record keeper at all meetings. Meetings are usually held at least once a month. The agenda is prepared before the meetings and the law requires it to be distributed to all members prior to the meeting. While the quotas may not have yet resulted in many policy changes, if it can be demonstrated that women's issues are making it onto agendas, then quotas have had at least a minimal effect that may hold promise for more policy outcomes in the future.

The records are hand-written in the local language and placed in the respective office. As per the law, the records are supposed to be available to the public. However, I was advised that in reality, I would sometimes need to be introduced. I worked with activists and researchers associated with the Institute of Social Sciences to make initial contacts with village leaders and, where needed, facilitate access to official minutes.

#### Case Selection

The state I have chosen is Maharashtra. The selection of the state was based on a number of factors, both theoretical and practical. I will discuss three theoretical reasons and two practical reasons respectively. First, Maharashtra is a state that appears in the center of the continuum on the level of female representation in the *panchayati raj*. It is the second most populous state in the country, after Uttar Pradesh. The state was also chosen based on socio-economic indicators: namely the female literacy level. Here again, Maharashtra appears in the center of the continuum.

Second, the role of the caste system was considered. For example, caste is a dominant factor in local politics in the state. The majority of the leaders in the *panchayats* in Maharashtra belong to the Maratha caste, making it an interesting case study,



particularly since traditionally the Brahmins have controlled local politics in the country. Third, differences in party influences and the state on agenda setting and local government institutions are other important factors. The Maharashtra State government has historically always been involved with the *panchayati raj* system.

The practical reasons refer to language consideration and travel times and costs. Since the researcher is fluent in two Indian languages- Hindi and Marathi, the state was chosen accordingly. Hindi is the national language spoken in most parts of the country, while Marathi is spoken in Maharashtra. Fieldwork was completed between September 2001 and June 2002. In 2000, I also spent five months in India as part of a pre-dissertation trip.

Regarding the unit of comparison, first, I selected a *zilla parishad* in the state. The *zilla parishad* is the highest tier in the *panchayat* system. *Zilla parishads* are large units and include numerous *talukas* (intermediate level) and *gram panchayats* (village level). Initially, the selection relied primarily on contacts through the ISS in New Delhi, and local contacts in Maharashtra. I chose to focus on the Sangli District in Western Maharashtra. Second, I selected a *taluka* (Malegaon) and five villages within that *zilla parishad*: Sakharwadi, Bhimagaon, Bharatpur, Kapsewadi, and Tulsapur<sup>1</sup>. My selection was limited to those cases that were accessible. After selecting a *zilla parishad*, I selected a *taluka* and *gram panchayats* based on accessibility (relying on my initial contacts as well on geographical distances and travel times).

Choosing a *zilla parishad* within a state and then choosing a *taluka* and *gram panchayats* within it provided me with a sample of women's participation in all three

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<sup>1</sup> Except for the name of the district where fieldwork was conducted, all other names of villages and the *taluka* have been changed.

levels of local government. It also allowed for comparisons on two levels- between the three levels of local government within a state as well as between villages within a state.

Based on my preliminary field-research, I used contacts in order to get access to written records and interviews. Furthermore, I also chose one control case - i.e. an all-female council. Although the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment applies to all states, differences in its implementation exist. In addition, in Maharashtra, all-female councils exist at the *gram panchayat* level. A control case helped determine similarities and differences among men and women in participation in local politics.

Random samples were drawn from the universe of elected officials at all three levels. A sample was generated to include not only female elected officials, but also male officials in order to compare views on if/how agendas/outcomes have since women entered the scene. Factors such as background- caste, education, economic status, role of political parties were considered.

#### Brief Description of Selected Case: Maharashtra

Village *panchayats* first developed in Maharashtra as early as 1869, when local committees were formed under the Bombay Local Fund Act. Women also could participate as early as 1934. Furthermore, the Bombay Village *Panchayat* Act of 1920 provided for the formation of village *panchayats* as elected bodies with voting rights limited to male members (Joshi and Mitragotri 1994). This act was amended several times between 1920-1960. Maharashtra is the only state in which the *panchayati raj* system has been based on direct elections since its creation. Most other states had originally based their system on nominations. Furthermore, in 1990, Maharashtra implemented a 30 percent reservation for women within the *panchayati raj* system, three

years before the 73rd Amendment. It was also the first state to implement the mandated *panchayati raj* reforms after the 73rd Amendment.

#### Structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions

The village *panchayat* was constituted according to the Act of 1958. It consists of both elected and appointed members. The appointed members were the chairpersons of various cooperative societies such as credit societies and agricultural cooperatives in the village (ISS 1994, 128). The numbers of elected members range from seven to fifteen, depending on the population. Seats are reserved for SCs and STs as well as women. The term of the village *panchayat* is five years.

The *panchayat samiti* tier also has both elected as well as appointed members. The *panchayat samiti* is more of an administrative body in Maharashtra. The functions of the *panchayat samiti* were quite similar to that of the *zilla parishad* regarding development programs. The *panchayat samiti* functions under the guidance of the *zilla parishads*.

The *zilla parishad* in Maharashtra is made up of committees. This system is unique to Maharashtra and was set up to ensure the participation of elected members in the decision-making process (ISS 1994, 127). The membership of the committees ranges from ten to seventeen. The following nine committees are included in each parishad: finance, works, agriculture, social welfare, education, health, animal husbandry and dairy, women and child welfare and the standing committee. The directly elected members elect the president, vice-president and the chairpersons of the committees.

The development functions of the *zilla parishad* include providing funds for agriculture, health and education. The administrative functions include supervision over

all *panchayat* samitis as well as *gram panchayats*. More importantly, the *zilla parishad* in Maharashtra controls the budget for all the *gram panchayat* and *panchayat* samitis. Thus, the *zilla parishad* seems to be the strongest and most influential among the three tiers in Maharashtra. Although the power to take policy decisions lies with the elected members of the *gram panchayat* and the *panchayat samiti*, since the *zilla parishad* controls the budget, it controls the implementation of the policies.

In 1990, there was a two-seat reservation policy regarding women in the *panchayati raj* system. However, there was also a provision that allowed the co-option of women members if the seats failed to get contestants. There was also a tendency for the women to get nominated rather than elected. Furthermore, a majority of the women came from upper caste/class (Stree Adhar Kendra 1995). Studies conducted on women's positions in the *gram panchayat* have mixed results. According to D'Lima and Gavankar (1993), women representatives were rarely informed of meetings or male family members would attend instead. The registers were often sent to their homes for their signatures or thumbprints.

However, several positive aspects are also noteworthy. The Maharashtra State has been actively involved in improving women's political participation. The Maharashtra government created a Commission for Women in 1993. The next year, the state government also announced a policy on women considered as a progressive move towards women's empowerment. However, to date this policy has not been fully implemented. (Stree Adhar Kendra 1995).

Another unique feature of women in *panchayati raj* institutions in Maharashtra is the existence of all-women *panchayats*. There are thirteen such *panchayats* in

Maharashtra. One reported reason for this phenomenon is the migration of males to Bombay in search of labor (ISS 1996). Women in these *panchayats* emerge as effective leaders. A study done in the Brahmanagarh *panchayat* reports that the elected women assumed power because the men were away in Bombay. The women took decisions relating to the water supply and land allocation. Furthermore, the incidence of alcoholism also declined as a result of strict laws (ISS 1996).

This combination of a history of social activism along with a history of state activism to promote women's interests and participation in politics makes Maharashtra an interesting case to study. Moreover, Sangli District is an interesting case within the state because it too has a long history of social activism. Sangli has the distinction of being the largest grower and supplier of sugarcane in the state. As a result, the district also has the most number of sugar cooperatives that arose in the 1970s. The rise of the sugar cooperatives resulted in strong trade and labor unions. The leaders of the sugar cooperatives have long been involved in *panchayat* politics throughout the district. Women too were involved in the sugar cane industry from the beginning, working either as wage laborers in the fields or in the factories.

Along with the role of the sugar cooperatives, caste, political parties and family and kinship networks are other important factors affecting women's participation in the *panchayati raj* in the district. The subsequent chapters will explore each of these factors in greater detail.

## Importance of Research to the Discipline

### Empirical Contribution

The role of women in politics is an important topic in Comparative Politics and Women's Studies. The issues of representation and participation in a democracy are also important to both fields. My research addresses the question of whether quotas work as an institutional mechanism for increasing women's political participation. The topic is also relevant because currently a number of countries are experimenting with gender quotas.

Additionally, since most of the literature on Indian women's political participation consists of descriptive studies, my research will add to the existing literature, as I focus on exploring the reasons for success and failure in effective participation.

### Theoretical Contribution

My study relies on feminist theories on the origins of inequality as well as theories of institutional design. The research will serve as a basis for a greater understanding of the extent and limits of quotas as a liberal institutional device, designed to minimize or overcome the influence of patriarchy. It will also broaden the focus of the study of institutional design by investigating reasons for particular outcomes. My research also examines the issue of representation and identity politics in a democracy and will be of interest to those who study democratic theory, institutional design and gender and politics.

## Organization of Chapters

Chapter II Government Laws and Resolutions: A Background to the *Panchayati Raj* System in India and Maharashtra: this chapter provides the background to the issue of reservations for women in Indian politics. I begin with a general description of the government laws and resolutions regarding the *panchayati raj*. Next, I discuss the background of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, which resulted in the reservation of seats for women in the *panchayati raj*. This chapter also provides a description of the overall structure of the *panchayati raj* system in Maharashtra. I also discuss the historical and cultural context within which state and *panchayat* level politics emerged in Maharashtra, as a precursor to the discussion of the role of caste and political parties and leaders.

Chapter III Parties/Patronage and Gender: in this chapter, I discuss the role of parties in local politics; specifically, the nature of the relationship between party leaders and policy-making in the Sangli District. By presenting evidence from interviews and proceedings of meetings, I argue that decisions are commonly made along party lines and that party leaders, both elected and informal, strongly influence policy. Women are thereby constrained in their ability to successfully participate in decision-making unless they follow the party line. However, party competition can also work in favor of women. In instances where intense party competition and rivalry exist, women have been successful in making their voices heard, and men have taken them seriously. On the other hand, in instances where one party dominates the *gram panchayat*, *panchayat samiti* or *zilla parishad*, women have been less successful in influencing policy.

Chapter IV Caste, Class and Gender: this chapter deals with the relationship between caste and gender so as to highlight the ways in which both variables intersect.

This relationship between caste and gender is further explored in the political sphere through women's participation in *panchayat* politics. Through a discussion of upper and lower caste women's experiences in *panchayat* politics, I argue that caste identity is an important variable that influences women's participation. Furthermore, caste simultaneously augments and limits women's participation as it forms the basis of identity. Caste also affects upper and lower caste women differently.

Chapter V Family, Kinship and Gender: this chapter explores the role of the family and the household in the lives of women in order to understand how a gender roles and power relations that exist within it are further reproduced in the political arena. The chapter is divided into three sections: Part One presents a brief historical sketch of the status of women in Indian culture and society. Part Two explores the social and cultural construction of gender roles today. Part Three discusses the influences of family and the household on female elected representatives of the *panchayati raj*.

Chapter VI Conclusion: in this chapter, I present some final thoughts on women's participation in the *panchayati raj*. The impetus for writing this dissertation was to ask the question of whether quotas have resulted in successful participation by women in *panchayat* politics. Based on empirical evidence, I examine the nature of women's political participation in the *panchayati raj* and provide an analysis of various factors affecting it. I also discuss the larger theoretical implications of women's participation by linking the topic to feminist theory, theories of institutionalisms and to the larger body of gender and politics literature. The chapter is divided into four sections. First, I look back on the arguments made in previous chapters in order to arrive at my conclusions. Second, I revisit my original hypotheses and discuss whether they were confirmed. Third, I



explore the links made throughout the dissertation with the theoretical frameworks of feminist theory and institutionalisms. Finally, I discuss the larger implications of my study and suggest areas for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### GOVERNMENT LAWS AND RESOLUTIONS

This chapter provides the background to the issue of reservations for women in Indian politics. I begin with a general description of the government laws and resolutions regarding the *panchayati raj*. Next, I discuss the background of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, which resulted in the reservation of seats for women in the *panchayati raj*. This chapter also provides a description of the overall structure of the *panchayati raj* system in Maharashtra. I also discuss the historical and cultural context within which state and *panchayat* level politics emerged in Maharashtra, as a precursor to the discussion of the role of caste and political parties and leaders.

The main objectives of the chapter include providing the broad historical and institutional framework in an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which this context is tied to the development of various *panchayat* institutions and practices unique to the state.

#### History of the *Panchayati Raj* System in India

The local government system in India dates back to the time of the Mahabharata in 3000 B.C., which documents the establishment of village communities to solve local problems (Matthew 1994). Numerous references are also found in the early *Vedas*. The term *panchayat* traditionally refers to a group of five members, generally male, and representing the elders and most prestigious members of a village. The *panchas*, as they were called, represented the judicial system in rural India. Their decisions were binding.

Traditionally *panchayats* dealt with disputes over resources and sometimes also settled family disputes (Matthew 1994). These *panchayats* were not only the centers of administration, but were also regarded as the centers of social life and solidarity in rural, agrarian India. Sir Charles Metcalfe, a British governor, referred to them as the “little republics” (Matthew 1994, 4).

The *panchayats* were by no means ideal centers promoting democratic participation. Due to the caste-based feudal structure of the village society, not all villagers had an equal voice in the participation and functioning of the *panchayats*. The literature is divided on this issue. On the one hand, scholars argue that the traditional *panchayats* were the precursors to modern democratic institutions (Matthew 1994; D’lima et. al. 1974). Others argue that the *panchayats* were influenced by caste and communalism (Kothari 1967, 1970).

Local government in its present structure and functioning style is the product of the British rule in India. Lord Ripon, in 1882, was the first to initiate the decentralization of administration through the creation of a large network of self-governing bodies. By 1825, eight provinces in British India passed acts for the establishment of village *panchayats*. By 1948, twenty states had enacted these acts. However these *panchayats* were limited both in scope and function.

In the struggle for independence, the leaders had promised to give independent India an effective system of rural local self-government. Village *panchayats* were central to the ideological framework of an independent, democratic India. Gandhi was one of the staunchest advocates of village *panchayats*, as is evident in the following words:

My idea of village *swaraj* (independence) is that of a complete republic independent of its neighbors for its own vital needs and yet interdependent for

many others in which dependence is a necessity. The government of the village will be conducted by the *panchayat* of five members, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum required qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, the *panchayat* will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Any village can become such a republic today without much interference even from the present government whose sole effective connection with the villages is the execution of the village revenue... Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government (Gandhi 1942).

Jawaharlal Nehru (1946), the first Prime Minister of India, pioneered the creation of the modern system of the *panchayati raj* in independent India. The major objectives of the *panchayati raj* were:

- 1) to provide a broad base to democracy in the country by transforming powers from the center and the state through districts and blocks to the villages;
- 2) to enable people to participate in democracy in a more effective manner and thus provide a training ground for future leadership in the country;
- 3) to provide the rural population an opportunity to plan and administer their own affairs and to arouse and stimulate rural initiatives towards community development programs;
- 4) to engender consciousness among people, thus helping them in the proper utilization of the available resources and manpower;
- 5) to develop a sense of community, self-reliance;
- 6) to provide the weaker sections of society an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and management of rural affairs; and
- 7) to strengthen the link between the federal, state and local governments.

The importance of village or rural local government is also obvious in the Constitution, which in its directive principles of state policy states: “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” (Article 40, Constitution of India). The local government system constitutionally falls under the direct control of the state governments that enacted legislation setting up village *panchayats*. Further, villages were given increased attention in the 1950s when India launched its first Five Year Plan. The plan document emphasized the role expected of the *panchayats* in performing civic functions and assisting in the process of development (Planning Commission 1952).

During this period, India was in the midst of pursuing a developmental ideology and initiated the Community Development Program that was to cover the entire country by the end of the Third Five Year Plan. This program introduced a new unit of development administration, the block, which was comprised of about one hundred villages and was administered by state governmental officers. Along with the creation of the block and the Community Development Program, the *panchayati raj* institutions were viewed as development organizations. These institutions were designed to facilitate development in the rural areas as well as perform legislative and administrative functions.

#### The Balwantrai Mehta Committee

In 1957, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee was appointed by the government to study and evaluate the local government system. The goal of this committee was to suggest ways and means to uniformly implement the *panchayati raj* system throughout the country.

The Mehta Committee proposed a scheme for democratic decentralization as a means for achieving greater participation (Matthew 1994). The report also outlined a

blueprint for the structure of the panchayati raj with the *gram panchayats* at the village level, *panchayat samitis* at the block (intermediate) level and *zilla parishads* at the district level. Thus the 3-tier system was created. The Mehta Committee primarily focused on decentralization of democratic institutions. Other objectives included shifting decision centers closer to the people to encourage their participation and placing the bureaucracy under local popular control (Maheshwari 1979, 1111).

The report was first implemented in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh in 1959 and then in Tamil Nadu, before other states adopted it. In 1959, there were 262 *zilla parishads* and 4033 *panchayat samitis* in the country (Joshi and Mitragotri 1994). The powers of these bodies varied from state to state as a result of structural and operational variation in the pattern of *panchayati raj* institutions (Maheshwari 1979). For example, Maharashtra and Gujarat deviated from the model outlined by the Balwantrai Mehta report and adopted a three-tier system that made the district level *zilla parishad* the most powerful of the three levels in terms of decision-making, whereas in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the *zilla parishad* did not have executive functions.

To a certain extent, this type of unevenness can be explained by the fact that Indian federalism assures state autonomy and each state sought to structure its local government system according to its unique conditions.<sup>2</sup> However, the one of the major objectives of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee was to bring about a uniform change in the local government system, and perhaps this attempt of the Mehta Committee to reform the *panchayati raj* system constitutes the most extensive type of reform in the Indian system of governance since independence (Matthew 1994).

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<sup>2</sup> Indian Federalism is often referred to as “multi level federalism” in view of the uneven size of the states with different levels of complexities (Jha and Mathur, 1999, 28). The *panchayati raj* constitutes the third level of the Indian Federal system.

During the next decade, the *panchayati raj* institutions were successful in certain aspects. In many states, the *panchayati raj* institutions succeeded in the areas of supply and distribution of agricultural resources, and in irrigation work. Provisions for the creation of primary health centers and schools were also made. There was an emphasis on improving rural health care, by providing facilities for clean and safe drinking water. Thus in terms of rural development, the *panchayati raj* institutions of the 1950s and 1960s were fairly successful in implementing various schemes envisioned by the Mehta Committee and leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru (Matthew 1994).

Shriram Maheshwari argues that *panchayati raj* institutions were also successful in other areas. New leaders, who were younger and more enthusiastic about the prospects of change, emerged as a result of the institutional changes (1979). *Panchayati raj* institutions also narrowed the gap between the bureaucracy and the public. Finally, the introduction of the *panchayati raj* in the country resulted in a change in rural relationships from the traditional vertical to more horizontal and democratic decision-making. (Maheshwari 1979, 1113).

Moreover, from 1957 until about 1963, the central government also focused on improving the *panchayati raj* in India. During this time the central government sought to secure the states' acceptance of the *panchayati raj*, mobilizing national public opinion and supporting its various activities (Matthew 1994). Regular conferences were held with elected officials and bureaucrats, and a number of committees were established to examine various aspects of the *panchayati raj*. As a result, national attention was clearly focused on the *panchayati raj*. Due to the interest generated in the *panchayati raj*

institutions, several states also set up committees to assess these institutions and to recommend changes (Matthew 1994, 10).

However, the focus on the *panchayati raj* was not long lasting, and the period from the mid-1960s is referred to as the decline of the first phase of the *panchayati raj* (Matthew 1994; Maheshwari 1979). Even in states like Maharashtra and Gujarat that had been success stories due to the history of reservations and a focus on decentralization, serious problems in governance and the implementation of programs and schemes began to emerge. For example, the community development program, initially created as a mechanism for greater decentralization and development at the grassroots level, was brought under another department, and thus lost most of its autonomy and authority (Matthew 1994). George Matthew (1994, 12) argues that the bureaucracy also gained the upper hand in the alliance with the state and the center, thereby becoming the most powerful actor in local governance. A strong bureaucracy was emerging that would pose problems for decentralization.

By this time, there were over 217,300 village *panchayats* covering over 96 percent of the 579,000 inhabited villages and 92 percent of the rural population (Matthew 1994, 15). *Panchayats* had clearly emerged in most parts of the country. Thus an evaluation of the causes for the failure in the functioning of these institutions was crucial.

The literature reveals four major causes for the decline of the *panchayati raj* institutions in the mid 1960s: the emergence of new leadership, the role of the Community Development Program, a shift towards centralization of power in the federal government and the increased influence of the bureaucracy (Maheshwari 1979; Matthew 1994; Kothari 1985 et al).



In the 1960s, large numbers of people were able to contest and win elections though democratic mechanisms that had been in place for a decade or so. As a result, there was excitement about the potential leadership that was emerging. However, the new leaders were also further removed from the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, and thus also had a weaker ideological commitment to the *panchayati raj* (Maheshwari 1979). Power struggles between state and local level leaders also added to the growing problem. State level leaders also began to view the *panchayati raj* leadership as threatening to their political standing. George Matthew (1994, 15) argues that particularly after Nehru's death, state level political leaders were determined to end the threat to their leadership from the village, block or district leadership. This was further illustrated by fewer powers, functions and resources given to *panchayat* leaders, and repeated postponement of *panchayat* elections.

Added to this, the restructuring of the Community Development Program also contributed to the growing problems at the local level. In 1966-67, crop failure and food shortages throughout the country led to the re-evaluation of the priorities of the Community Development Program. Greater emphasis was placed on agricultural production and in that same year, the Ministry of Community Development was placed under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. In this process, the initial comprehensive concept of rural development was reduced to a project for agricultural production (Maheshwari 1979).

Furthermore, this was also a time in Indian politics when greater centralization of power became visible, affecting the limited autonomy that the *panchayati raj* institutions enjoyed previously. Centralization of the executive and judicial powers deprived the

village *panchayats* of their power and influence. Under the political leadership of the time, state governments were made increasingly subservient to the central government. The central government also began to develop a new system of hierarchies to administer various programs (particularly related to increased agricultural production) and in the process bypassed *panchayati raj* institutions.

Perhaps the most significant development was the alliance between the bureaucracy and the state and central level political elite (Matthew 1994). Since the new development programs were centered on the bureaucracy for implementation, it soon became very powerful. Rajni Kothari (1985) argues that there was in place the idea that a centralized bureaucracy would benefit the rural poor better than local elected leaders with vested interests.

The bureaucracy in alliance with the state and central level politicians began consolidating power by managing and implementing development programs in the rural areas. It viewed the *panchayati raj* institutions as dominated by upper caste members, corruption and inefficiency (Matthew 1994, 15). Thus, as a cumulative result of these factors, the *panchayati raj* declined in terms of its original objectives.

#### The Ashok Mehta Committee

In December 1977, the central government appointed the Committee on *Panchayati raj* Institutions under the chairmanship of Mr. Ashok Mehta. The primary objective of this committee was to suggest measures to strengthen the *panchayati raj* institutions. In what is known as the Ashok Mehta Committee report, the committee submitted 132 recommendations. This report marked an important turning point in the history of the *panchayati raj* system as it emphasized the urgency for decentralization of

the administration (Maheshwari 1979). It also suggested reforming the structure of the *panchayati raj* by implementing a two-tier system, with the district level and a *mandal* level (*panchayats* covering 15,000 to 20,000 people) at the grass roots level.

Other recommendations were the open participation of political parties in *panchayati raj* elections and constitutional protection to further expand decentralization of power. The committee recommended that *panchayati raj* institutions participate in development activities in areas of agriculture, forestry, cottage industry and welfare activities (Singh 1994, 819). These recommendations were in line with the original intent of the *panchayati raj* institutions to perform developmental functions along with legislative and administrative functions.

The Committee also made noteworthy recommendations to create forums to monitor and promote the interests of the weaker sections of society namely lower castes and women. It suggested regular audits by district level agencies to check on whether funds allocated for certain groups were actually spent on them (Maheshwari 1979). Also, a “social justice” committee was to be set up in each *zilla parishad* to further promote the interests of these groups.

Furthermore, the committee also reevaluated the relationship between the state government and the *panchayati raj* by suggesting that the former was not to supersede the latter. If dissolution of the *panchayati raj* was necessary, then elections were to be held within six months. Matthew (1994, 17) argues that the most important difference between the functioning of the *panchayati raj* institutions based on the Balwantrai Mehta and the Ashok Mehta Committees was the shift in emphasis from a development-oriented approach to making *panchayats* into “genuine political institutions”. Thus during this

phase, *panchayats* emerged as political decision-making structures. Bureaucracy was no longer emphasized as in the past. Rather, the focus was on increasing pluralist representation. . The states of West Bengal, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir were among the first to adopt the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee, and they revised some or all of their state *panchayat* acts accordingly (Matthew 1994).

The present structure of the *panchayati raj* is based on both the Balwantrai Mehta and the Ashok Mehta Committees' recommendations. Although the Ashok Mehta Committee was created in order to investigate the problems with the *panchayati raj* structure, it was distinctive in certain aspects. The differences in the recommendations of the two committees are most visible in the areas of the numbers of tiers and the location of authority. The Ashok Mehta Committee had the advantage of using the successes of Gujarat and Maharashtra as case studies in making its recommendations (Maheshwari 1979). The creation of the mandal *panchayats* is perhaps the most notable original contribution of the Ashok Mehta Committee.

The emphasis on creating institutional mechanisms to ensure justice for the weaker sections of society is another innovation. In order to meet these goals, the Committee recommended greater measures for decentralization of powers from the states to the *panchayats* and also within the tiers of the *panchayati raj* system. The logic behind this recommendation was the general belief that if *panchayats* were given greater decision-making authority, the local bodies would over time become more inclusive and democratic so as to include marginalized groups. Thus there was an emphasis on including weaker and marginalized groups such as women and lower castes into the

decision-making process, particularly at the grassroots level. The *panchayati raj* was seen as an “extension of democracy, thus making it imperative to provide it with constitutional sanctions and transfer of powers from the State Government to the local bodies”.<sup>3</sup>

In order to examine the specifics of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, a brief discussion on the Indian Administrative system is warranted. The administrative hierarchy in India consists of the central government, which functions from Delhi. The Indian Federation is divided into 28 state governments. Within each state government, there exist three levels of government: the village, block and district. The village is the smallest unit, and usually about 500 villages are included within a single block. Additionally, 15-17 blocks are included in a district. States have districts ranging in numbers from 17-20, depending on the size and population.

The bureaucracy is responsible for handling all state-sponsored development programs. The role of the bureaucracy requires that the programs be carried out within the perspective of the political leadership. However, the bureaucracy itself is expected to remain apolitical.

The officers of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), the prime civil service institution, perform most of the key functions of the bureaucracy. Recruitment to the IAS is on a national level and is highly competitive. In general, IAS officers are known for their efficiency and capable leadership. At the district level, IAS officers work either as chief executive officers (CEO) of *zilla parishads* or as collectors. The responsibilities of a collector include supervision of revenue collection, maintenance of law through the police department, district planning and the overall coordination of the functioning of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions*. 1978. New Delhi: Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Government of India. pp 32-33.

district. Senior IAS officers work as heads of public-sector corporations and secretaries of various departments in the state and federal government.

### The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment

The debate and passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment was a controversial process. It was in the works for almost three years before it became an act in 1993. Rajiv Gandhi's government first introduced the bill in 1989. At that time, it was passed in the *Lok Sabha* (lower house), but failed to get the majority in the *Rajya Sabha* (upper house). The following year, the V.P. Singh government introduced a different bill, but it lapsed with the dissolution of the *Lok Sabha*. The bill was reintroduced in 1992 with some modifications, and was finally passed on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1992. It became effective in April 1993.

The passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment provides constitutional status to the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (Ministry of Rural Development Annual Report, 2001). With the exception of Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi and Arunachal Pradesh, all the states and Union Territories have enacted their corresponding legislation. As a result, 227,698 *panchayats* at the village level, 5,906 *panchayats* at the block level and 474 *panchayats* at the district level have been constituted in the country (MRD Annual Report, 2001).

The main features of the Act are as several. It provides for a three-tier system of governance at the *panchayati raj* level for all states with a population of 2.5 million and more. *Panchayat* elections at all three levels are to be held every five years. There is also a provision for the reservation of seats for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women. The State Finance Commission is to make recommendations regarding the financial

powers of the *panchayats*, and the District Planning Commission is to prepare development plans for the entire district.

Specifically, first, the amendment provided a crucial role for *gram sabhas* (village meetings open to the public). Since *gram sabhas* are considered to be the primary source of democratic power at the grassroots level, the act provides for a *gram sabha* to be held at least twice a year. The *gram sabha* can exercise such powers at the village level as the legislature of the state may provide by law.

Second, all states were required to establish a three-tier system of consisting of the village, block and district levels (although states with a population of less than 200,000 are not obligated to establish *panchayats* at the block level). Third, all seats in a *panchayat* are to be filled by persons chosen by direct election from territorial constituencies in the *panchayat* area.

Fourth, the act also provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in proportion to their population in a *panchayat* area, including that of the chairperson, in all three tiers, with one-third of these seats reserved for SC and ST women (Singh 1994, 824). Furthermore, the act also provides that one-third of the seats in the *panchayats* at all levels be reserved for women. It directs the states to carry out the reservation by rotation in every *panchayat* at each level. The question of reserving seats for lower caste women has been left to the states (Singh 1994).

*Panchayat* bodies are to have a term limit of five years. When dissolved, new elections for *panchayats* are to be held within six months. The Amendment also makes provision for the establishment of a state finance commission, the goal of which is to

make recommendations to the state government regarding financial and budget matters of *panchayats*. The act also provides for the audit of *panchayat* accounts, with a clear format for how accounts are to be kept and submitted to the state governor. The state election commission was given responsibility for regulation of *panchayat* elections. Reasons by which *panchayats* members can be disqualified were stipulated. .

As a result of this amendment, *panchayati raj* institutions have been given the necessary powers to function as institutions of self-government in terms of economic development and social justice, as well as in terms of implementing various schemes provided by the federal and state government in order to meet specific goals.

According to Article 243-H of the Constitution, state legislatures have been empowered to enact laws such as authorizing a *panchayat* to levy, collect and appropriate some taxes, duties, tolls and fees (MRD Annual Report, 2001).

In order to ensure that the *panchayati raj* institutions function as instruments of local self-government, the Ministry of Rural Development has also taken additional measures with regards to the financial autonomy and transparency of the *panchayati raj* institutions. The role of the *gram sabha* is seen as the most crucial in achieving these goals at the village level. As the *gram sabha* becomes more active, it is expected that the local citizens will be more involved in overseeing the functions of the *gram panchayats*. The amendment was an important landmark in the local government system in India. To accord constitutional guarantees to the *panchayati raj* institutions in itself is a major step (Jha and Mathur 1999). Additionally, notable achievements included fixed tenure for *panchayats*, regular elections under the supervision of an independent election



commission, and of course the reservation of seats for SCs, STs and women. These steps are important in the goal towards empowerment of women and lower caste groups.

However, the act has several shortcomings. First, as Singh (1994), and Jha and Mathur (1999) argue, the act offers little to the *panchayats* by way of functions, power and resources. In other words, the act does not provide for self-sufficiency in making decisions at the local levels. The actual decentralization of specific powers has been left to the states to determine, and there is concern that based on past experience, states will be reluctant to part with it. Hoshiyar Singh (1994) provides a compelling example to illustrate this point. He argues that the reservation of seats for chairpersons of *panchayats* is likely to be misused by the political party in power at the state level to weaken opposition. By reserving some of these offices for SC, ST candidates and women, parties might end up creating more caste-based tensions (825). Furthermore, the role of the state-level politicians (MLAs and MPs) in *panchayat* elections could also lead to political domination, going against the original intent of decentralization. Although state-level politicians are prohibited from getting involved in elections at the *panchayat* level, in practice, parties and politicians play a major role in the nomination of seats and also in the actual campaigns.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of such criticisms and limitations, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment still remains one of the most progressive steps in the democratic system of governance in India. Particularly, the provisions made for women in this amendment are necessary steps towards the goal of women's empowerment and gender equality. Since the bill has a controversial history, it is important to highlight specific events that influenced this bill.

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss the role of parties and political elite in *panchayat* elections in detail in the next chapter.

## Background to the Women's Reservation Bill

Although the reservation bill was formerly introduced only in the early 1990s, supporters of the bill had been working on it since the 1980s. In 1988 the draft National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) recommended reservation of 30 percent of seats at the *panchayat* and *zilla parishad* level through nomination and co-optation (Sharma 1998). However, national women's organizations rejected this plan and emphasized the need for elections at all levels to ensure the emergence of grassroots leadership. The NPP did not take the debate on political representation any further, although the final version did recommend a 30 percent reservation of seats at the district and lower levels to be filled by election (Sharma 1998). The issue of reservations at the state and national levels was not raised.

In 1989, a National Conference on *panchayati raj* and women was held, when Rajiv Gandhi announced a bill that 30 percent of seats in *panchayati raj* institutions would be reserved for women. He claimed that this was only the beginning and that his government would extend it to 50 percent in two years (Sharma 1998). The bill could not be carried through due to a lack of majority<sup>5</sup>. The bill (as the 72nd Constitutional Amendment) was introduced again in 1991, when Congress took over the government. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Bills providing for one-third reservation for women in *Panchayati Raj* Councils and greater decentralization of the *panchayati raj* system in general respectively were finally passed in December 1992 and were ratified by all the states in April 1993.

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<sup>5</sup> The opposition to the bill will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

### Intent of the Framers: Support for Reservations

The women's reservation bill came into existence as the result of a systematic effort by both the Congress party and its leader at that time, Rajiv Gandhi, as well as various women's organizations all over India (Karat 1997). Both Rajiv Gandhi and his supporters viewed reservations as a necessity. Given India's history with caste-based reservations, gender-based reservations was a natural extension in the attempt to achieve equality. Caste quotas and gender quotas are similar when they are seen as mechanisms for empowering disadvantaged groups. Women too have been part of the greater disadvantaged social group in India. Reservations for women were seen as a means for encouraging women to participate in public life (Everett 1996). Moreover, advocates of gender quotas argued that women would not be elected if they competed on equal terms due to the existing patriarchal bias against women in Indian society. Reservations, therefore, not only ensured political participation (or, at least, their presence in decision-making bodies), but also indirectly encouraged women to step out of their traditional roles as wives and mothers (Everett 1996).

Supporters hoped that over time, the experience and confidence gained through the experiences of involvement in the public life would translate into other changes for women in their private life. With training and support, women would achieve a greater sense of self-awareness and their rights. Reservations were seen as a method to question existing social norms and customs. Since popular notions perceive politics as something unsuitable for women's abilities, opponents used women's lack of education and experience as evidence of their inability to perform in the political sphere (Shah and Gandhi 1991).

Prominent female politicians like Najma Heptulla (deputy chair of the *Rajya Sabha*) were among the staunch supporters of the bill. “The status of our women is still poor. Women at every level are excluded from decision-making—at every stage, starting from the family,” she complained (*Rajya Sabha* 1990). However, Heptulla, who is also president of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), blamed Indian women for not being more assertive in demanding their rights. She urged other women lawmakers to not give up their struggle to force the government to enact legislation to reserve a third of parliament and state assembly seats for women.

Second, reservations were also seen as a means of upward mobility for women. Caste and regional background play an important role in women's entry into politics. However, there is a striking difference between male and female politicians. Men from a lower class and caste with little or no education have been able to move upwards in local politics and occupy positions at the state and national levels. Women, on the other hand, find it very difficult to do the same. Most of the women politicians at the state and national levels come from well-educated, high caste, politically connected families (Shah and Gandhi 1991). In fact, the family plays the role of a political patron in women's political careers in India. Those without rich families have had to seek out male patrons as in the case of Jayalalita, the current chief minister of Tamil Nadu, and the woman known as the companion of the former chief minister, M.G. Ramachandran (Shah and Gandhi 1991).

Supporters of reservations argued that women wanting to enter the political field find it very difficult to do so. Poor, rural and semi-literate women lose even before they can begin. Only those from wealthier families and those with political connections

survive. It is therefore not surprising that in Indian politics most women politicians have not worked their way up but have been placed on the political map at different levels because of their contacts (Status of Women Report 1974). Thus, seen from this perspective, reservations would ensure that once women entered politics at the local level, they would gain the necessary political experience and expertise to move to the state and national levels. Mohini Giri, another Indian woman who has played a prominent role in public life, stated in parliamentary debate that India is “still a patriarchal society where men are leading as they have been doing for a thousand years. Many of them (women) in rural areas are not even told about equality,” (*Rajya Sabha* 1990). A key reason is that half of India’s women can neither read nor write.

Third, reservations would simply reverse the declining trend in the number of female legislators. According to a study on the status of women in India that was commissioned by the UNDP (1992) based in the country, women have little or no say in decision-making at all levels of society. India’s estimated female population of 481 million is more than the combined populations of the United States, Canada and the Russian Federation. Women’s role in public life is largely limited to casting votes during elections. Only six percent of candidates for the parliamentary elections in 1991 were women. Less than eight percent of the over 500 members of parliament are women.

Supporters for reservations expressed concern over the declining numbers of women candidates. For example, in Maharashtra in the 1989-90 State Legislature elections, a total number of 288 seats were contested by 6268 male candidates and only 148 female candidates. Only five female candidates were elected to the state legislature (Shah and Gandhi 1991). Moreover, this also needs to be seen against the backdrop of an

increase in the number of female voters and the reduction in the gap between male and female voters. In the Maharashtra State legislative Assembly election in 1990, more women voted in 43 out of the 288 constituencies (Joshi and Mitragotri 1994). Although several factors determine voting patterns, it is evident that women form a sizable voting bloc. In light of the low numbers of female candidates, reservations were a mechanism to encourage more women to run for elections. Thus reservations were meant to encourage more women to enter politics.

Fourth, various politicians for practical reasons also supported reservations. Heptualla argued that male lawmakers who supported the bill did so only out of a feeling of political correctness (*Lok Sabha* 1992). Moreover, male politicians and political parties have suddenly begun to view women as a substantial voting bloc. Reservations would force parties to recruit women or lose reserved seats. Thus, it would appear in the best interests of parties to support reservations. Often male politicians show support for the reservation policy in public, and nominate their wives and other female relatives in order to secure their own place (Karat, 97).

In sum, support for the reservation bill came from major political parties, such as the Congress party, individual politicians – both male and female – as well as from a number of women's organizations. The major reasons for support range from ideological reasons such as the existence of a patriarchal society and women's positions within it as well as practical reasons such as considering women to be an important voting bloc and potential candidates who would play along party lines. There is also a basic premise that a change in the gender composition of the members will add a different perspective,

inspire more women to enter into politics, and ultimately articulate women's interests (Sharma 1998).

### Opposition to the Reservation Bill

Opposition to the bill came mainly from three groups: some political parties, groups representing the interests of the OBCs and also some women's groups. Large sections of the opposition parties rejected the bill, arguing that it was a form of political manipulation due to the fact that their parties (unlike the Congress Party) had fewer female candidates to run for elections (Shah and Gandhi 1991). In some instance, groups representing other backward castes<sup>6</sup> (OBCs) even tried to physically prevent its introduction, as they believed the bill to exclude their interests. Women's groups also argued that reservations would only promote the idea of women as secondary citizens, in need of assistance from the state in order to enter politics (Kishwar 1996).

Political parties and party leaders had a mixed reaction to the bill. Leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav, leader of the Samajwadi Party, were unhappy with the 33% reservation policy and said his party was prepared to back a smaller ten percent. Others wanted a sub-quota reserved for women from among the OBC group and from among minorities. Caste-based quotas already exist for the scheduled castes and tribes at the bottom of India's hierarchical social order. The bill, considered one of the most ambitious pieces of affirmative action anywhere, required a two-thirds majority in Parliament for passage and was successfully implemented in 1993

Along with the passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, there was also a move to introduce another bill, reserving seats for women at the state and national level. The

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<sup>6</sup> OBCs are the third category along with SCs and STs, classified by the constitution. For more discussion, see chapter 1.

question of reservation was once again raised in 1995. This time the issue dealt with women in parliament. Here again political parties as well as women's groups objected to this new bill. The main objections centered around the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and for lower caste women in particular (Rai 2002). Women's groups regarded caste as a divisive issue and were uncomfortable about the prospects of upper caste women gaining more power as a result of the bill.

In the current government, the Congress party, which forms the main opposition, announced commitment to the bill with its leader Sonia Gandhi saying she would issue a whip to ensure voting by her party members. This is not surprising, considering the role played by the Congress in advocating the bill. Other parties such as the BJP support the bill, with some reservations again related to how the seats would divide among members of various caste groups. Support from the major parties is a crucial factor to the successful passing of the bill, whose future is still remains to be seen. Institutional factors such as electoral rules are also the cause for opposition to the reservation bill. Opponents argue that the widely practiced single member constituency system used in India is not favorable to the cause of women legislators. Instead, more women are elected in countries with an electoral system based on proportional representation in which political parties and organizations elect more than two candidates in each constituency from a list of candidates presented (Rai 1998). In other words, party lists in a proportional representation system work better for women than mandatory quotas in a single member constituency system.

The single member constituency electoral system usually results in a denial of proportional representation to various sections of the electorate besides women. It can



often discriminate against minority groups and under-privileged sections, and discourage voter turnout. These problems can be traced to a fundamental flaw in the system—only those who voted for the winning candidate get their chosen representative. Those who make up more than 50 per cent of the electorate in a constituency may end up without the representative of their choice. For instance, a Congress candidate in a predominantly BJP constituency or a Muslim in a predominantly Hindu constituency would be more likely to be shut out by the current electoral system. It can often happen that the candidate of a majority of voters will not be elected. Under the single member constituency system voters will often find their most preferred candidate highly unlikely to win.

Hence, a mandatory quota system has serious flaws in a single member system. Oddly, making the system more gender balanced will also, at the same time, make the system less representative of other choices of the voters. The proposed law requires that parliament contain a certain minimum proportion of women MPs. In India, where several political parties vie for a single seat, parties often elect candidates with less than 50 per cent of the total valid votes cast. For example, reserving a certain percentage of seats for women may as a consequence restrict the likelihood of getting those who belong to other backward castes elected.

Moreover, opponents also argue that at present there are not enough viable women candidates for political parties to nominate in every constituency proposed to be reserved for them. Therefore, a party that has a strong popular base in a constituency will be compelled to return a lower profile woman candidate rather than a stronger man as a candidate. As a result, the performance of the legislature is likely to be even worse than at present (Keating 2002). But there is no guarantee that the seats reserved for women will

be those of the badly performing MPs. The usual anomalies of the single member constituency system will continue even if the quota system for women is added on to it. Since there is only one MP from each constituency, it is likely that, due to these gender requirements, minority ethnic groups and political parties will go under-represented, making it another reason for the opposition of the bill.

OBC groups have also strongly opposed the bill. In one such instance the parliamentary proceedings had to be adjourned due to the actions of certain representatives. A member of the Samajwadi Party (SP) that represents OBC interests, S.P. Singh Baghel, snatched a copy of the bill from Union Law Minister Ram Jethmalani as he formally introduced it (*Lok Sabha* 1995). Members from other opposition parties, including the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), which rules eastern Bihar state, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), created enough commotion in the house to force two adjournments. Since 1996, the bill reserving at least a third of seats for women in the *Lok Sabha* and also in the provincial state assemblies has been introduced in Parliament three times, but failed.

Many of the problems that surrounded earlier attempts persist, including patriarchal attitudes, and fears that women from established political families from among the influential upper castes would corner the reserved seats. The amendment clearly provides that the reservation for women is to be at least one third not only in the total membership of the *panchayat* but also within the positions reserved for the SCs and STs. This ensures positions not only for women, but also for women from the lower castes.

However, in reality, with reservations, those who stand to lose their power positions in the reserved seats are not willing to permit women to contest positions not reserved for them. In other words, women are confined to contesting only the reserved seats (Buch 2000). Election Commissioner M.S. Gill suggested a simple way out—make it mandatory for political parties to reserve a third of the seats they contest for women candidates (Buch 2000).

Finally, opponents to the bill from women's groups argued that reservations were a backward step and a violation of the principle of equality (Sharma 1998). From this perspective, reservations were seen as an acceptance of the view that women are weaker than men and therefore need special treatment (Status of Women Report 1974). Separate seats would weaken the position of women, and prevent them from competing with men on an equal basis. Supporters of this view argued that rather than reservations, women should be made aware of their position through education (*Lok Sabha* 1995).

Many of the newer women's groups, including some Marxist Leninist groups, are still skeptical of the electoral process, the State as well as the motivations of the political parties (Shah and Gandhi 1991).

Thus, the opponents of the women's reservation bill came from various perspectives. Parties and party leaders argued that the bill would hurt smaller parties and favor the majority. OBC groups argued for specific provisions within the bill to represent their interests and women's groups argued that reservations would not help in achieving equality for women. On the contrary, reservations promote existing cultural stereotypes of women being inferior to men and therefore need special provisions. Furthermore,

opponents also argued that reservations would further alienate members of the lower castes, and only assist women from the upper castes.

The discussion on the intent of the framers of the reservation bill and the debate surrounding it illustrates that for the supporters, reservations at the very least were as a means to increase participation- i.e. greater numerical representation of women. More women participating in party politics as well as at the state and national level politics would signify women's entry into an otherwise male dominated field. They would challenge the stereotype that politics is a man's game. However, there was also another goal that formed the basis for the introduction of quotas. This goal went beyond numerical representation.

The idea was that once women do enter politics, even at the local government level, they would gather the experience necessary and eventually move into state and national level politics. Moreover, once elected, women would use their power effectively to promote women's interests, create awareness among other women as well as men and ultimately strive towards an equal society. While these are clearly the maximum and idealistic goal that quotas could achieve, supporters could not help but hope that women's entry into politics through quotas would lead to this goal someday.

#### State Conformity Acts to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment

In order for the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to take effect, it was necessary to make certain amendments to the existing State *Panchayat* Acts of Maharashtra, namely the Bombay Village *Panchayat* Act of 1920 and the *Zilla Parishad* and *Panchayat Samiti* Act of 1961. The relevant provisions of these two acts were amended through the Maharashtra Act No. XXI that came into force on April 2, 1994. Although the primary objective of

this act was to bring about conformity to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, it mainly deals with the mandatory aspects of structural changes.

The Bombay Village *Panchayat* Act was amended to include some of the specific features of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. It was amended to provide greater representation to the scheduled castes, tribes and backward classes and women in villages. It also provided for independent election machinery, the state election commission. The divisions of wards according to the population size were reorganized, and finally, seats were reserved for the posts of the *sarpanches*.

Specific features of the act also included the provision to fill seats by direct election to village *panchayats*. Second, the ratio between the population of the territorial area of a *panchayat* and the number of total seats to be filled was to be the same throughout the state. Third, the State Election Commission would determine the number of wards in each village. Fourth, elections were to be held under the direction of the Collector, a state appointed bureaucrat, often a member of the Indian Administrative Service, and the State Election Commission had the authority to determine the number of seats reserved for SCs and STs, and that out of the total number of reserved seats for SCs and STs, one-third of the seats were to be reserved for women of such castes and tribes. Finally, the post of the *sarpanch* was to be reserved for women by rotation, and the tenure of the post was to be reduced from five years to one year.

The Amendment Act of 1994 also provides for at least two mandatory meetings of the *gram sabha* to be held every year. Moreover, the *sarpanch* has the responsibility to ensure that the meetings take place, failure of which could result in the *sarpanch* being disqualified. At the first meeting, the *gram panchayat* is required to provide various

records for the scrutiny by the public such as the annual account statements, administrative reports of the previous financial year, reports of development programs undertaken by the *gram panchayat*, and the most recent audit statements. All of the above issues are to be open for discussion at the *gram sabha* meeting and the *gram panchayat* is required to take into consideration any suggestions and comments made at the meeting.

These amendments to the Village *Panchayat* Act emphasized the general trend towards decentralization and greater participation, involvement and accountability by citizens at the grassroots level. Although many of the provisions made to the Act were not revolutionary, it did clearly state for the first time in legislation the importance given to the *gram panchayats* in the three-tier *panchayati raj* system.

#### *Panchayati Raj* in Maharashtra

Village *panchayats* first developed in Maharashtra as early as 1869, when local committees were formed under the Bombay Local Fund Act. The Bombay Village *Panchayat* Act of 1920 also provided for the formation of village *panchayats* as elected bodies with voting rights limited to male members (Joshi and Mitragotri 1994). This act was amended several times between 1920-1960, when Maharashtra first became an independent state. Women could participate as early as 1934, a time when women's participation in politics in other states was low to non-existent, making it an unusual phenomena. Maharashtra is the only state in which the *panchayati raj* system has been based on direct elections since its creation (most other states had originally based their system on nominations). In 1990, Maharashtra implemented a 30 percent reservation for women within the *panchayati raj* system, three years before the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment. It was

also the first state to implement the mandated *panchayati raj* reforms after the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment.

#### Structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions

The important features of the *panchayati raj* system adopted in the state were that a strong tier at the district level was created in the form of a *zilla parishad*. This was followed by the creation of *panchayat samitis* at the *taluka* level as the second tier. The village *panchayat* was the third tier at the village level.

#### Gram Panchayat

The village *panchayat* was constituted according to the Act of 1958. It consists of both elected and appointed members. Seats are reserved for SCs and STs as well as women. The number of members in *gram panchayats* is based on the population of the village. For example, a village with a population of 1500 would have at least seven *gram panchayat* members. Similarly, a village with a population between 1500 and 3000 would have at least nine members. Of these seats, 33 percent are reserved for women, while 27 percent are reserved for SCs and STs. The term of the village *panchayat* is five years.

The *gram panchayat* is responsible for a number of functions such as road construction in the village, water schemes, protecting common lands from encroachment, collecting taxes, setting up *balwadis* and *anganwadis* (day care and pre-school centers respectively), registering the births and deaths in the village, and implementing national programs such as the employment scheme and the food distribution schemes.

In order to carry out these functions, every *gram panchayat* sets up a number of committees and allocates specific responsibilities to each of them. The committees are made up of the elected *gram panchayat* members and sometimes the *gram sevak*. An

important point to note here is that membership to the committees is based on nomination and not by election. As such, memberships to some committees are seen as more prestigious than others. For example, the tax committee is higher on the prestige and importance scale than the education committee. The other committees include the women and health committee, the works committee (for construction purposes), and the agricultural committee.

The committees are to hold regular monthly meetings, present their proposals to the *gram panchayat* and work in consultation with it. The proposals are then forwarded to the *panchayat samiti* level and the *zilla parishad*. It is only after the *zilla parishad* approval that most funds are sanctioned for a particular project.

#### Panchayat Samiti

This tier also has both elected as well as appointed members. The *panchayat samiti* is more of an administrative body in Maharashtra. The functions of the *panchayat samiti* are quite similar to that of the *zilla parishad* regarding development programs. The *panchayat samiti* functions under the guidance of the *zilla parishads*. The *panchayat samitis* are constituted according to the Maharashtra *Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti* Act of 1961.

The *panchayat samiti* is composed of the elected representatives from the various wards of a particular *taluka*, the *zilla parishad* representative from that block. In addition, one chairperson of the co-operative society involved in agricultural production is elected as an associate member. The *panchayat samiti* does not have subject committees, but has a committee of all the *sarpanches* of the *taluka*.



The primary functions of the *panchayat samiti* involve the execution and implementation of various development plans sanctioned by the *zilla parishad* at both the *samiti* and *panchayat* levels. Preparing the budget and allocating funds is one of the most important functions at this level. Although the *panchayat samiti* functions directly under the *zilla parishad*, it provides a link between the *gram panchayat* and the *zilla parishad* due to the fact that most financial matters relating to the *gram panchayats* have to be approved at the *panchayat samiti* level.

### *Zilla Parishad*

The *zilla parishad* membership ranges from a minimum of 50 members to a maximum of 75 members. One member is elected for a population of not more than 35,000. SCs, STs and OBCs have reserved seats in the *zilla parishad* and these are in proportion to their population in the district and one third among these seats are reserved for women in the same category. Also, one third of the total seats are reserved for women. The chair and the deputy chairpersons are elected for one-year terms. The general meetings are held once every three months and whenever required otherwise.

The membership of the committees ranges from ten to seventeen and includes committees of finance, works, agriculture, social welfare, education, health, animal husbandry and dairy, women and child welfare and the standing committee. The president, vice-president and the chairpersons of the committees are directly elected members.

The development functions of the *zilla parishad* include providing funds for agriculture, health and education. The *zilla parishad* also approves development proposals for the entire district. It functions primarily through the committees mentioned

above. The administrative functions include supervision over all *panchayat samitis* as well as *gram panchayats*. More importantly, the *zilla parishad* in Maharashtra controls the budget for all the *gram panchayat* and *panchayat samitis*. Thus the *zilla parishad* is the strongest and most influential among the three tiers in Maharashtra. Although the power to take policy decisions lies with the elected members of the *gram panchayat* and *panchayat samiti*, since the *zilla parishad* controls the budget, it controls the implementation of the policies.

#### Government Appointed Secretaries

At every level of the *panchayati raj* an appointed secretary exists to assist in the everyday functioning of the *panchayat*, *samiti* and *zilla parishad*. The appointee at the *gram panchayat* level is known as the *gram sevak*, while the Block Development Officer (BDO) is the secretary at the *panchayat samiti* level. At the *zilla parishad* level, the state government appoints the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and one or more deputies.

Table 1 : *Panchayati Raj* Institutions in Maharashtra

Tiers	Total
<i>Gram Panchayats</i>	26,584
<i>Panchayat Samitis</i>	296
<i>Zilla Parishads</i>	29
Members of GP	220,856
Members of PS	4,308
Members of ZP	N.A

Source: Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi 2000

## Electoral Rules and Statutory Bodies in Maharashtra

As noted above, Maharashtra had a reservation policy for women even before the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment. In 1990, there was a two-seat reservation policy regarding women in the *panchayati raj* system. However, there was also a provision that allowed the co-option of women members if the seats failed to get contestants, although women tended to get nominated rather than elected. A majority of the women came from upper caste/class (Stree Adhar Kendra 1995). Studies conducted on women's positions in the *gram panchayat* prior to the implementation of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment have mixed results. According to D'lima and Gavankar (1993), women representatives were rarely informed of meetings or male family members would attend instead. The registers were often sent to their homes for their signatures or thumbprints.

Two other aspects are noteworthy. First, the state government created a Commission for Women in 1993. The next year, the state government also announced a policy on women considered as a progressive move towards women's empowerment. Although the State Commission for Women exists, scholars question the effectiveness of the institution. A study done by a women's NGO in Pune found that the state policies considered as progressive for women existed only on paper and did not translate into any real changes for Maharashtrian women. Nonetheless, existence of a women's commission is an important step (Stree Adhar Kendra 1995).

A second unique feature of women in *panchayati raj* institutions in Maharashtra is the existence of all-women *panchayats*. In the 1990s, there were thirteen such panchayats in Maharashtra. One reported reason for this phenomenon was the migration of males to Bombay in search of labor (ISS 1996). Women in these *panchayats* emerged as effective

leaders in dealing with various *panchayat* issues and other issues that related to their lives such as water, health and sanitation. A study done in the Brahmanagarh *panchayat* reported that the elected women assumed power because the men were away in Bombay. The women took decisions relating to the water supply and land allocation. Furthermore, the incidence of alcoholism also declined as a result of strict laws (ISS 1996).

#### Maharashtra State: Historical Context

The present state of Maharashtra was created on May 1, 1960. This included a bifurcation of the bilingual state of Bombay. Maharashtra is the third largest state in India in terms of area and population, with an area of 307,690 square kilometers, which is 9.36 percent of the Indian land mass. It is bounded on the west by the Arabian Sea and has is 720 kilometers of coastline. To the northwest is the state of Gujarat, to the north and northeast, the state of Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh borders the state to the southeast. Karnataka is directly to the south of Maharashtra and the coastal state of Goa is to the southwest.

Maharashtra is divided into six large administrative regions based on geographical location, 30 districts and 303 talukas. There are 307 city and town units. The population of the state, according to the 1991 census figures is 78,937,287, or 9.3 percent of the total population of the country. Maharashtra is predominantly an agricultural state, with 64 percent of the people dependent on agriculture. Yet it is also one of the most industrialized states in India.

The state has a fairly large population of *adivasis* (tribal groups indigenous to Maharashtra). They are mostly concentrated in the Sahyadri and Satpuda regions. The resident tribes of this region are the Warlis and the Kataris. The Thakurs reside in the

Thane and Kulaba (Raigad) regions, the Bhils are in the Dhule region and the Madias, Gonds and Kolams are in the Bhamragad and Chandrapur regions. The tribal population accounts for 5.6 percent of the total state population. The Marathas constitute about 35% of total population in Maharashtra. The next largest groups are the Mahars, a Scheduled Caste community with about 10% of the population. They do have some political influence (the Nava Buddhist movement and the Dalit Panthers, for instance, are mainly Mahar in their leadership and composition), but they are not in any serious way rivals to the Marathas for dominance. The result is that Marathas determine the political leadership of the state.

Nine districts comprise Western Maharashtra: Nasik, Dhule, Jalgaon, Ahmednagar, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Sholapur and Kolhapur. This is the most agriculturally and industrially developed region of the state due to the flourishing sugar cane industry. Hence, it is known as the “sugar belt” of the state. Along with the growth of the sugar industry, another noteworthy aspect of economic and political development in the state is the creation of the sugar cooperatives, discussed in the following sections.

Politics in Maharashtra has its roots in the state’s unique political and cultural history. The political development of the state is closely linked to the historical origins and development of a particular set of ideas, linked in turn to a particular group, the Marathas. Maharashtra, like most other Indian states, has its roots in a language, Marathi. It also has a distinct cultural identity (including a saint-poet religious tradition), a regionally distinctive social structure and since the seventeenth century, a common historical experience. (Rosenthal 1977, 22). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Maharashtra was the center of an empire, built by the Marathas, which spread

its influence throughout the country. Rosenthal argues that although the creation of the modern state in 1960 was the immediate result of a national policy, and both the creation and its character are influenced by its cultural and political cultural history (1977). Since the influence of the Maratha culture continues to permeate regional and local politics even today, it is important to discuss the historical and political context within which the Maratha culture emerged.

The entire state (except for Bombay) was part of the Maratha Empire until the British took over. The Marathas were warriors, known for their courage, strong sense of nationalism and administrative skills. Joshi (1968, 178) writes that the rise of the Maratha power was due to the first beginnings of the process of nation building. Moreover, it was not the outcome of an individual ruler, but rather was influenced by an entire population, bound together by a common language, race, and religion.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Maharashtra witnessed a social, cultural and religious reformation, led by non-Brahmin saints and prophets. They protested against rituals and ceremonies that discriminated based on caste, as well as against class distinctions based on birth. Over the next five hundred years, about fifty saints and prophets contributed to what has become a very unique and distinctive part of Maharashtrian culture, the reformist tradition and strand of Hinduism. Joshi (1968, 179) draws a parallel between the history of the Protestant Reformation movement in Europe and that of the work of these saints and prophets who flourished around the same time in Maharashtra. According to him, like the reformers who argued against papal authority, the saints in Maharashtra protested against the ancient caste-based authority and tradition that had been dominated by the Brahmins (179).

The reforms were not limited to religion and soon reformers addressed social issues, which led to further introspection and reevaluation of norms and customs in Maharashtrian society. Reformers such as Dr. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, and Justice Ranade reexamined and influenced discussions on caste and class. They preached equality among castes and classes and also demanded the abolition of social practices harmful to women such as child marriage and sati. Furthermore, they also campaigned for the remarriage of widows and emphasized education for women. This history with social reform is one of the unique factors that enabled Maharashtrians to be receptive to new political ideas of liberalism and secularism that were gaining popularity in the west (Joshi 1968, 180). The reformers emphasized the need for social reform along with the political struggle for freedom, arguing that without it, political freedom would result in dominance by the upper castes (180). Although the reformers did not succeed in eliminating caste, they did influence lower castes by raising consciousness and mobilizing groups to fight for their rights.

Another significant development in the history of the state was the rise of the Maratha leader, Shivaji, the warrior and ruler who established the Maratha Kingdom in the late seventeenth century. Although he belonged to the upper agrarian caste of the Marathas, he was also instrumental for establishing a council that included members of other castes. Shivaji's kingdom was ruled after his death by persons from a variety of castes (Rosenthal 1977, 24). This laid the foundation for the future political dominance by the Marathas in state politics. Shivaji is also an important historical figure because he consolidated the sense of a Maratha identity among the people that continues to influence state and *panchayat* level politics even today, as is evident with the creation of the "Shiv

Sena” (literally translated as the army of Shivaji). This sense of Maharashtrian identity/distinctiveness has more recently surfaced with Shiv Sena demanding greater economic opportunities and a larger voice in the politics of Mumbai for the “sons of the soil” of Maharashtra<sup>7</sup>.

Maharashtra was also at the center of the nationalist struggle seen through the contributions of some of the most prominent leaders such as Tilak and Ambedkar. Tilak constructed a type of nationalism based on elements of Indian culture and tradition, including appeals to Shivaji’s memory and legacy (Rosenthal 1977, 25). With the rise of Mahatma Gandhi, many Maharashtrian Brahmins became followers and committed themselves to the nationalist struggle, holding important positions in the Indian National Congress.

So far this discussion has highlighted the emergence of the Maratha identity and its influence on modern day politics. Next, I will discuss two other features unique to Maharashtra that also affect *panchayat* politics: the cooperative movement and the employment guarantee scheme. Both these have also influenced rural development in the state.

#### Rural Development in Maharashtra

The sugar cooperatives are an outstanding success story in rural development. Started in the early 1950s, they now process the overwhelming majority of a steadily increasing sugar crop in the state, provide immense direct benefits to their members, and exercise a large influence in the state as a whole (Baviskar 1980). Various reasons can be cited for their success such as the peculiarities of sugar cane production that make it

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Ram Joshi. November 1970. “Shiv Sena: A Movement in Search of Legitimacy”. Asian Survey, vol 10: 967-978.



relatively easy for cooperatives to maintain a close linkage to their growers (Baviskar 1980, 34). The major demand these days is for refined white sugar that sells at a considerably higher price. Refining is a highly sophisticated technology that requires a large investment.

Cooperatives also became influential because they had the means and resources to process sugar. Farmers realized that it was in their best interest to sell to the cooperatives, and in turn they were given loan concessions. In other words, this system had a mechanism for recovering loans, a feature that allows the cooperatives to remain functional. Secondly, sugar is highly perishable. After cutting, the cane begins immediately to lose its sucrose content and it spoils easily. Thus it is also economical for farmers to sell the crop to the nearest cooperative. Moreover, sugar also needs a lot of water, and thus the crop is dependent upon good irrigation.

The state government has intervened in a number of ways. For example, the state provided considerable subsidies to the sugar cooperatives. These subsidies came in several forms such as large-scale loans provided to help sugar cooperatives raise the start-up capital required. The water supplied through the various irrigation schemes was also priced to farmers at a fraction of its true cost. Furthermore, electricity used to lift water for sugar was also heavily underwritten by the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (Baviskar 1980). Thus water has been a massively subsidized input provided by state at high cost.

The connection between the rise of the sugar cooperatives and state politics in Maharashtra is that the cooperatives have used a portion of their profits to back candidates for political office, and have then put pressure on those elected to obtain and

maintain massive subsidies to sugar (Baviskar 1980). Also, political elites (both elected and others) also hold influential positions in the cooperatives, thus strengthening the link between the cooperatives and political power. For example, a number of the prominent political leaders in Maharashtra, including an ex-chief minister (Sharad Pawar) have been owners of several sugar cooperatives in the state.

The Employment Guarantee Scheme known as EGS is another remarkable institution in Maharashtra. In effect for almost fifteen years, it virtually assures a daily job in unskilled labor at minimum wage to anyone in the rural areas of the state who asks for one. However, it is subject to the condition that the demand for agricultural labor in the area is already met, and the wages paid by EGS may not be higher than those prevailing in the local agricultural sector (Baviskar 1980). Nonetheless, there is evidence of this system being misused.

For example, in his study of political elites in Maharashtra, Rosenthal (1977) argues that the EGS itself can be seen as a mechanism promoted by the elites in order to keep the thousands of rural population in the countryside and away from the metropolitan areas of Bombay and Pune. Moreover, he also argues that there is considerable political pressure on officials to employ the program to assist their own their constituencies (Rosenthal 1977, 42). This scheme is nonetheless unique for the fact that it can be seen as another state sponsored mechanism for the rural poor, and one that does not exist anywhere else in the country.

Both these particular aspects in Maharashtra are relevant to *panchayat* politics in general and to reservations and women's participation in particular. As I will demonstrate in the subsequent chapters, dominance in *panchayat* politics in Maharashtra is closely

linked with the existence of the sugar cooperatives, with the leaders of the former often being the owners of the latter. Women's participation is also affected by government schemes such as the employment guarantee scheme as will be demonstrated throughout the rest of the dissertation. Both these aspects of the State will be explored in more detail later.

Overall, Maharashtra represents an interesting case study. Historically, it has always been progressive about social issues and women's rights. Several factors contributed to Maharashtra's unique political culture. First, Maharashtra witnessed a strong social reform movement as discussed above. The influence of the reformers was most visible in raising awareness about caste conflict and women's rights. The reformers also emphasized education for all, and particularly for women. Thus Maharashtra has had higher literacy levels compared to other Indian states.

Second, the growth of the cooperative sector also worked as an advantage for farmers. In the absence of a *jajmani* system characterized by patron-client relationships, existing in other parts of India, the cooperative system allowed greater economic mobility and flexibility among classes.

Third, Maharashtra women historically were politically active. Beginning with their involvement in the nationalist movement, to more recent involvement in forming trade unions, women have had a certain degree of awareness and a history of activism throughout the state.

### Conclusion

The objectives of this chapter were to provide the reader with the background to the issue of reservations for women in Indian politics. By describing the government laws

and resolutions regarding the *panchayati raj*, I have set the stage for the actual functioning and performance of *panchayat* institutions as demonstrated through my case studies. Furthermore, the discussion on the background of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, which resulted in the reservation of seats for women in the *panchayati raj* will also be useful in making my case for the reasons for success and failure in women's participation.

The discussion on the historical and cultural context within which the *panchayat* system in Maharashtra was created is also important as a precursor to understanding the linkages between the factors of caste, parties and political leaders, as well as to the discussion of how the social/economic/political infrastructure of Maharashtra affects women's participation.

In this chapter, I began with a background to the *panchayati raj* system in India. Although there exists a legacy of village governance, the extent of its effective functioning is open to debate. Through the years, various attempts towards more effective governance and functioning, as seen through the recommendations of the Mehta Committees, has resulted in positive changes in some areas, but there remains a constant struggle to maintain a balance between centralization and decentralization. The village *panchayat* units in particular are caught in this struggle. Due to the lack of decision-making powers and resources, particularly financial resources, *panchayats* continue to remain at the bottom of the hierarchy. Moreover, *panchayats* do not always function as units of self-governance as a result of it.

With the introduction of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments, states became key players in this struggle. On the one hand, the amendments mandated a uniform system to be implemented throughout the country. However, many aspects of the

actual implementation of specific articles were left to the discretion of the states. As a result, there is considerable discrepancy in the functioning of the *panchayati raj* institutions among the states.

The women's reservation bill ensuring 33 percent of seats in *panchayati raj* institutions is one of the most remarkable achievements. It has certainly provided the entry point for women in politics, particularly at the local level. In the past ten years, millions of women have been elected to positions in the *panchayati raj* throughout the country. While numbers are impressive, a systematic evaluation of women's performance in these institutions is also needed in order to understand whether reservations have resulted in substantive changes both for women as well as for the system of governance in general. This is the question I will address in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER III  
PARTIES, PATRONAGE AND GENDER  
INTRODUCTION

With the implementation of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Indian states began to rethink the relationship between state and local governments. A renewed emphasis on decentralization of economic and political functions was evident in the changes and reforms initiated by states, especially Maharashtra, which was the first state to implement the reforms outlined in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment.

Commenting on the role of the state, Pradeep Chibber (2002) argues that the state in India occupies a primary role in the economic and social transformation of the nation (48). State governments have been key players in the political process. Local governments have no real power and owe their existence to the state governments (Chibber 2002, 49). As a result, local governments are unable to make decisions because they lack authority and financial resources. Chibber argues that the nature and structure of the state has influenced the development of the party system, which emerged as an executive-centered, state-based system in which the national party could influence the states and state parties controlled local parties (49).

This argument is applicable to state and local level politics in Maharashtra. Until the 1990s, the dominance of the Congress Party throughout the state provided the basis for most of the policy creation and implementation at the state as well as the *panchayat*

levels. This is particularly true in the Sangli District, considered a traditional Congress stronghold. The fact that one of the most prominent chief ministers of the state was from Sangli further consolidated the relationship between the Congress at the state level and the three levels of the *panchayati raj* in the district. In addition, other factors such as the influence of the political elites and party leaders also influence decisions and policies in the district. Women are not exempt from these influences. Rather, women's participation at all three levels is influenced by their party affiliation and relationships with the local elite.

However, since 1995, other parties such as the BJP and the Shiv Sena have also been influential in *panchayati raj* politics in the district, as they have to some extent weakened the Congress hold. The split within the Congress Party has also created space for other parties to claim their stakes in *panchayat* politics.

In this chapter, I discuss the role of parties in local politics; specifically, the nature of the relationship between party leaders and policy-making in the Sangli District, the site of my case studies. By presenting evidence from interviews and proceedings of meetings, I argue that decisions are commonly made along party lines and that party leaders, both elected and informal, strongly influence policy. Women are thereby constrained in their ability to successfully participate in decision-making unless they follow the party line.

However, party competition can also work in favor of women. In instances where intense party competition and rivalry exist, women have been successful in making their voices heard, and men have taken them seriously. On the other hand, in some instances where one party dominates the *gram panchayat*, *panchayat samiti* or *zilla parishad*, women have been less successful in influencing policy, while in other instances of one-

party domination, women have had more success. What this suggests is an interesting relationship between parties and women's participation. While women benefit from the support of the party, they also seem to be more effective at times when they are not part of the majority. Thus I argue that parties and the influence of political elites can both foster as well as hinder women's participation.

This chapter will first discuss the emergence of the major political parties active in *panchayat* politics in Maharashtra. Next, I discuss the historical role of the Congress Party in India and specifically in Maharashtra. The Congress dominated *panchayat* politics throughout the Sangli district until the early 1990s, and although other parties have since gained greater influence in the area, the Congress influence continues in direct and sometimes indirect ways. Third, I discuss the role of political elites, both formal/elected and informal elites in *panchayat* politics. Finally, I discuss specific cases and instances in which parties and elites have influenced women's participation at all three levels.

### Party Politics and the Political Atmosphere in India

In recent years tensions both within Indian politics and between India and neighboring Pakistan have escalated sharply; domestic and international politics in India are tightly intertwined. Domestic politics in India had become so tense by late 2001 that India's highly popular Prime Minister Vajpayee offered to resign in August of that year due to his inability to lead the coalition government and his own BJP party.

The Hindu-Muslim conflict that is symbolized by the long-running violence in Kashmir is the main reason for tensions in the region. Tensions with Pakistan over the war in Kashmir continued to climb through 2001 and reached a crisis following a terrorist



attack on the Indian Parliament. India and Pakistan were on the verge of war, with conventional and nuclear forces placed on the borders, and it was only through international efforts that the crisis was diffused. Another domestic crisis erupted during 2002 when Hindu-Muslim riots paralyzed Gujarat state beginning in late February and continuing through April, as many as 2000 people lost their lives.

India is a parliamentary democracy in which citizens have the right to select their chief executive through electoral mechanisms. During the first three decades after achieving independence from England, the Congress Party dominated both the Federal and regional governments of India. Congress achieved this success by drawing on its nationalist legacy, the extensive use of state patronage, and the accommodation of numerous class and communal interests inside the party structure (Chibber 2002). The Congress Party suffered its first electoral defeat in 1977 following the two-year state of emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. During the past twenty years the hegemony of the Congress Party has weakened. While Congress still remains a primary force in Indian politics, non-Congress prime ministers have governed this country on seven different occasions since the lifting of the state of emergency in 1977. In 1999 Atal Vajpayee led a 25-party coalition (headed by his Hindu nationalist BJP) to electoral victory over the Congress Party and numerous other class- and regional-based parties.

Under the Indian Constitution executive power is formally vested in the president but, in reality the prime minister holds these powers. As is the case in most parliamentary systems, the prime minister is directly accountable to the national assembly. In an effort to hold together the fragile coalitions that have characterized India politics in the last 20

years, India's prime ministers have been forced to compromise on major issues in order to maintain the confidence of a majority faction in the *Lok Sabha* (Chibber 2002).

#### Parties in Maharashtra

Like most other Indian states, the state of Maharashtra encompasses a wide range of political opinions and ideologies represented in the form of political parties. The parties are national, regional and caste based. The Congress, including both the Congress I, and the Nationalist Congress Party, and the Bharatiya Jananta Party (BJP) are the dominant national parties represented in Maharashtra, while the Shiv Sena is the largest regional party in the area. Caste- based parties such as the Dalit party are also present. Religious based organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh also influence parties. The BJP in particular is closely allied with both these religious organizations, and all three have interlocking leadership making the relationship even stronger.

While the Congress party has dominated both national and regional politics, a dramatic shift occurred in 1996, with the rise of the BJP, a right wing religious party. Another significant event was the formation of a series of coalitions among parties that began in the late 1990s and continue to exist today. After 1996, various regional political parties have governed India and are key elements of the coalition that brought the BJP into power in 1998. Caste-based parties have also played an important role in creating the coalition. As Chibber (2002) writes, it was the first time since independence that the Indian party system, which had been dominated by the Congress Party, was fractured along regional, caste and religious lines (1).

### The Congress Party

The Congress party remains one of the most, if not the most influential parties in Indian political life. No discussion of parties is complete without an understanding of the origins and structure of the Congress party. Much of the literature on the nature of the Congress Party prior to the 1990s focused on its “all encompassing” qualities (Kothari 1964; Joshi 1968; Weiner et al 1968). This body of literature emphasized the party’s strengths based on the fact that it began as a nationalist movement and thus had a built in philosophy that included secularism. It was able to promote itself as the alternative to the religious movements emerging at the time of independence. Another strength of the Congress Party came in the form of its original founders and leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, who continued to emphasize the inclusive nature of the party in an effort to win over Muslim votes.

Currently, the Congress party consists of two major branches: the Congress I and the Nationalist Congress party (NCP). The Congress I is part of the original Congress Party founded by Nehru and others and later led by Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv. The split within the Congress occurred in the mid 1980s, due to a power struggle for leadership positions. This was further intensified in the 1990s, after the death of Rajiv Gandhi, when a vacuum in leadership was created. One of the major points of contention among members was support of or opposition to Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv’s widow, an Italian-born woman who is now the leader of the Congress I.

### The Congress Party Rule in Maharashtra

Since 1935, the Congress has dominated politics in both urban and rural areas. Congress was successful also in part because of the strategies employed by leaders to co-

opt members of different castes and the sugar cooperatives in the state. The first chief minister of Maharashtra, Y.B. Chavan, was instrumental in strengthening the relationship between the Congress and the majority of rural Maharashtra. As a Maratha from Kolhapur (the adjacent district to Sangli) and a prominent leader of the then Nationalist Congress Party, Chavan was seen as one of the original “sons of the soil”, a term indicating his caste and hence close ties to the region, destined to take Maharashtra to new heights. It is interesting to note that early on Chavan was aware of the caste dynamics within the emerging political elite. He built up the Congress Party with non-Brahmin elites and as a result acquired the support from other caste groups as well (Rosenthal 1977). Thus the party was viewed as one representing various groups, keeping in line with the secularist agenda of the Congress Party at the national level.

The Congress has also had a long-standing relationship with the *panchayati raj* in Maharashtra. Singh, Lele, Sathe, et al (1992) argue that, through the control of rural areas, the Congress has successfully dominated institutions of local government. This is evident through their control and influence over the sugar cooperatives. Often the Chairman of the cooperative is also the Chairman of the *zilla parishad* or *panchayat samiti*, and in most cases is also a local Congress leader (Singh, Lele, et al 1992, 66). For example, Vasantdada Patil, another key figure in both the Congress Party and Maharashtra State politics, effectively combined the offices of the President of the Maharashtra State Congress Committee and the chairmanship of the Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank for several years.

Additionally, various boards related to the major cooperative credit institutions were also reorganized in such a manner that top positions were taken by the leading

actors in the Congress Party (Rosenthal 1974). Since then, holding an office position in these cooperative structures has been seen as a prize and a matter of prestige in Maharashtra. Rosenthal further suggests that almost by definition, the successful rural politician is likely to hold a seat on a major credit institution (Rosenthal 1974, 421).

Thus the Congress Party consolidated its power in the state by achieving both economic and political control. Economic power was gained through the control of the cooperative sector. Similarly, political power was consolidated through the control of *panchayat* institutions in the state. This has proved to be a successful strategy for the party overall.

#### Zilla Parishad Elections of February 2002.

The elections to the Sangli *Zilla Parishad* and all eight *panchayat samitis* took place on February 17, 2002. There were a total number of 61 seats at the *zilla parishad* level, all of which were contested. The Rashtrawadi Congress party of Sharad Pawar came out as the majority in the district.

From the time of Vasantdada Patil, the Sangli area has been a stronghold of the Congress Party. In 1999, the Congress party nationally, with Sharad Pawar and others protesting mainly the decision to nominate Sonia Gandhi as the President of the party. Sharad Pawar and group formed another party called the Rashtrawadi Congress Party. Some others who joined him were Vishnu Anna Patil, Jayant Patil and R.R. Patil. This had an adverse effect on the Congress stronghold in the Sangli district.

Prominent members of Congress I such as Dr. Patangrao Kadam, Shivajirao Deshmukh and Prakashbapu Patil, held a rally to mobilize people to vote for Congress I.

The response was tremendous with large numbers of people attending the rally, promising to carry on the Congress name in this area.

However, in this election, the Rashtrawadi Congress gained a clear majority in the district. Moreover, Congress I received a further blow as at least two of its most prominent members were defeated. Mr. Mohanrao Kadam, the chair of the Congress Committee was defeated, as was Mrs. Prakashbapu Patil, the wife of Prakashbapu Patil and the daughter-in-law of Vasantdada Patil. Among the Congress I incumbents, Maya Pawar, and Sameer Deshpande were reelected. The elections of 1990 changed the power structure of the Congress in Maharashtra. The alliance between the BJP and Shiv-Sena (the regional, Hindu, Maratha caste based party from Maharashtra) resulted in the entry by opposition parties into *panchayat* politics for the first time. Also for the first time, there were more competition, more takers for the political space and more opportunities at the rural level in the district. However, before launching into an analysis of elite influences, a discussion of precisely who constitutes the elite is in order.

#### Political Elites in the Sangli District

The Congress Party played an important role in enhancing the interests of the political elites. By providing them with economic and political opportunities, the party received loyalty and the political support of the rural masses. This relationship is also very useful for the elites. The power of the ruling elites is enhanced by the fact that the Congress ideology of secularism provides them with an effective political formula (Sirsikar 1995, 133). The elites were able to convince the people that their welfare was safe as long as it was in Congress hands. This ideology was firmly rooted in rural Maharashtra until the 1990s.

For this study, I define elites to include both political elites and bureaucrats. Within the category of political elites, I include elected officials both at the state level (including members of parliament and members of the legislative assembly), political party leaders (again at all levels), and informal elites. The category of informal elites includes local village leaders, as defined by their socio/economic status, and also the traditional *goondas* (local ruffians, often on the payroll of the informal elite, to enforce authority when needed).

Although this definition of elites is fairly narrow, there is a clear hierarchy within it, with the state-level elected politicians at the top and the informal village elite at the bottom. Moreover, the hierarchy also exists at all three levels of the *panchayati raj*, with the state-level elites exercising power over the *zilla parishad*, and the district-level elites in turn exercising power over the *panchayat samitis*, and so on. The hierarchy is seen in all the major political parties such as the Congress I, Nationalist Congress, the BJP and Shiv Sena, perhaps in varying degrees, but nevertheless always present, orchestrating nominations, elections, agendas and most importantly policies.

Village elites in their turn exercise control over the lower orders through the customs of establishing patron-client relationships, money-lending, sharecropping, wage labor, and dominance over institutions of local self-government (Rosenthal 1974). In the villages surrounding Sangli, the village elites usually belong to the Maratha caste, because it is the majority caste in the area. They are always men, from landed families or from political families. Due to the fact that the area was home to two of Maharashtra and Congress' prominent leaders, the extended families of Y.B. Chavan and Vasantdada Patil are very powerful and command respect and authority in the political functioning of the

*panchayats*. For example, it is very common to find members of these political families invited to sit in on *panchayat* meetings, otherwise restricted only to the elected members and the *gram sevak*. In other instances, informal political leaders, or party leaders at the local level, also manipulate their way into the meetings.

#### Role of Parties and Elites at the *Gram Panchayat* Level

I have studied five *gram panchayats*: Bharatpur, Bhimagaon, Kapsewadi, Sakharwadi and Tulsapur<sup>8</sup>. Among the five *gram panchayats* studied, party leaders played an important role in decision-making and influenced women's participation most clearly in three cases: Kapsewadi, Bhimagaon and Bharatpur. In Kapsewadi, one party, Shiv Sena, dominated the *gram panchayat*, Bhimagaon was evenly divided between two parties – BJP and Congress I – while in Bharatpur, and Congress I dominated. The picture that emerges from these three villages is one that suggests that in these cases of one-party domination, it was easier for women to initiate and implement policies favorable to them, while in other cases where intense party competition exists, women had a more difficult time initiating policy.

Kapsewadi is a small village with a population of 6,000. It lies on the outskirts of the town of Malegaon, which is also the closest *panchayat samiti*. Most of the people in Kapsewadi work in the service industry. The village is located within the larger Maharashtra Industrial Developmental Corporation (MIDC) area; a government undertaking that assists industries, so a number of people are employed in the factories. In fact, the village itself was created as the result of a relocation program when the Koyna dam was built on the Krishna River. The government compensated people with a plot of

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<sup>8</sup> The names of the *gram panchayats* have been changed.



land in order to relocate them to this area in the 1960s. At that time, about 80 families moved there.

The composition of the Kapsewadi *gram panchayat* is very homogenous along party lines. It is virtually controlled by the Shiv Sena. With a total of seven members, including five men and two women, it is one of the smaller *gram panchayats*. One of the two women belongs to the dominant Maratha caste, while the other belongs to the *Kumbhar* caste (a scheduled caste). The male *sarpanch* also belongs to the Maratha caste. The Kapsewadi *gram panchayat* is also one of the more organized in terms of record keeping and holding regularly scheduled meetings. I was welcomed at the first *gram panchayat* meeting that I attended and promised “full cooperation” during the course of my research.

Observations based on attendance at *gram panchayat* meetings in Kapsewadi for six months and on interviews with all the *gram panchayat* members and some of the local informal political elites indicate that decision-making and policy-making at the *panchayat* are determined along party lines, and most often according to the wishes of the informal elites. This became evident when I analyzed records of the meetings that would document decisions not taken at *panchayat* meetings. Additionally, since it was a *gram panchayat* dominated by one party, the voices of dissent were few and soft. Members of the dominant party were united in their agenda for both the party and the village. On more than one occasion, I was informed about the positive changes the party had implemented since taking power. The unanimous decision making along party lines was also seen as an asset. Moreover, Party officials from the *taluka* level would sit in on meetings and ensure that appropriate decisions were being taken.

Party dominance affected women's participation as well. Although one of the women members was very active, she also belonged to the dominant caste and was recruited by the Shiv Sena to run for elections. She won virtually unopposed. She was the female deputy *sarpanch* and was one of the most active and articulate women in the *gram panchayat*. She single-handedly started a *balwadi* (a kind of a pre-school often assisted by the government) in the village and currently worked there as well. She convinced the rest of the *gram panchayat* that the village needed the *balwadi* and campaigned vigorously for it. She was educated, having completed high school and also a one-year teacher-training course and outspoken on issues during meetings.

This deputy *sarpanch* came from a family with political ties to the Shiv Sena party. Her brother in law had been the *sarpanch* in Kapsewadi for the past five years. When he finished his term, in her words, "it was decided that I should be nominated for the post of the deputy-*sarpanch*, since my husband was not interested in getting involved". Although her husband is not formally involved in the *gram panchayat*, he did attend some of the meetings during my time there, and was initially always present when I met her. Also, the *sarpanch* of Kapsewadi is a good friend of her husband and I often witnessed the husband accompanying the *sarpanch* on his trips to the *panchayat samiti* or *zilla parishad* offices.

As the deputy *sarpanch*, she took her job seriously. She was proud of her achievements that including both the *balwadi* and the creation of two bore wells in the village. Securing water is a problem that she was concerned about and towards that end; she successfully allocated funds so that additional wells could be built in Kapsewadi. While clearly she was a motivated and dynamic personality in her own right, the political

backing she experiences from the Shiv Sena was also crucial to her success. The fact that the Shiv Sena dominated the entire gram panchayat made it easier for her to speak up, given her political affiliation and background. Although her husband and brother-in-law were never far from the scene, she was considered one of the success stories of the party in the area.

The other female member in the Kapsewadi *gram panchayat* belonged to the *kumbhar* caste. The *kumbhars* are traditional potters. They make various pots and other household items from clay and mud. One of the specialties is making mud statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. This is a particularly lucrative business during the festival season. When I first visited their home, she showed me the statues that her husband was getting ready for the up coming Diwali season, which began in early November.

This representative came from a different socioeconomic background than the deputy *sarpanch*. Her house was very modest, consisting only of two rooms, with very sparse furniture. But she and her husband owned a small plot of land outside their house, where they grew vegetables. Her husband worked in a garment factory as a line supervisor. They had been married for the past eleven years and had two children, both girls, ages nine and seven. The mother-in-law also lived with them. She moved to Kapsewadi with her husband nine years earlier.

She has served on the Kapsewadi *gram panchayat* for almost five years now. She recalls the time that she was first approached to contest the elections: “the *sarpanch* and two other men from the village came to meet with my husband. They told him that I should enter my name on the ballot, as they needed a woman from our caste to fill the seat. They assured my husband that I would not have to do anything. They would take

care of all the formalities. All I needed to do was place my thumbprint on the papers that they would send”.

The kumbhar representative rarely attended *panchayat* meetings, and when she did, she usually sat on the floor in a corner (to maintain her caste status). She only attended a couple of meetings when I was present. Both times she did not speak, and interestingly, was not asked to vote. During one of the meetings, a vote was taken on the decision to hold a special *gram sabha* to discuss the village cleanliness campaign. Kapsewadi had been a strong contestant the previous year, and enthusiasm was high to do better this time around. As various options were being deliberated, the deputy *sarpanch* and the men made the decisions, while the kumbhar representative remained silent. When I brought it up with her in a later interview, her response was: “but how can I speak? I am a *kumbhar*, they are all Marathas. If I say the wrong thing, the Shiv Sena *goondas* will hurt my family”.

The Shiv Sena recruited both the female representatives. Hence on paper, it would seem that both would be given equal opportunities. However, in reality, the deputy *sarpanch* has successfully used her party connections to achieve results, while the kumbhar representative remains bound by her caste and economic status. The Kapsewadi *gram panchayat* presents a case in which one-party dominance creates for a very amicable atmosphere. Alternatively, from another perspective, it represents a *panchayat* where the party and party leaders control the decision-making and the opposition is almost invisible. The one opposition member in the *gram panchayat* belonged to the Congress I and on several occasions, when he tried to question a decision, he was silenced both by the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak*.

Similarly, Bharatpur also represents a case of one-party dominance in the *gram panchayat*. This village is outside Sangli, in the heart of the sugar belt, close to one of the major sugar factories. Bharatpur has a unique political history and is known as the hometown of Vasantdada Patil, one of the most prominent ex-chief ministers of Maharashtra. In fact, he was referred to merely as “dada” (which means older brother in Marathi). The village population is used to being in the political limelight, as they have been exposed to numerous television and newspaper interviews. As such, the villagers are politically aware and actively support Congress I campaigns throughout the district.

Within the extended family of Vasantdada Patil there are two factions. These factions are directly linked to the personal life of the famous leader. Vasantdada Patil was married with children in the 1970s when he became acquainted with another woman, also an activist for Congress I. Their friendship over the years resulted in his companion adopting Vasantdada’s last name (for all practical purposes, she became known as his second wife, although they did not formally marry). She moved into Bharatpur and the couple has one son. Although Vasantdada recently passed away, his former companion and his son are active members of the Congress I, while Vasantdada’s son from his wife is also in politics, in the opposition Nationalist Congress Party.

Thus Bharatpur is divided between people who are loyal to his companion and her son and people loyal to his first wife. Yet, while the two political factions have serious differences, they also come together and unite against what they see as any outside opposition. As a result, they have successfully prevented any other political party from entering into the *gram panchayat* politics.

The *gram panchayat* in Bharatpur also has the unique distinction of being the only all-women's *panchayat* in the district. It is made up of nine women, all from the Congress I party. While the phenomena of all-women's *panchayats* is not new to Maharashtra, it is new to the Sangli District<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, it is also a *panchayat* with no opposition member. It was created directly by the Congress Party. In an effort to promote Bharatpur in the district and the state, the local Congress I leaders, i.e. members of Vasantdada's extended family, decided to nominate an all-women's panel for the 2000 elections. The women were carefully chosen from the prominent families in the village and the announcement was made that this was the panel endorsed by Congress I.

The panel won an uncontested election. Bharatpur not only became the first village in the Sangli District to boast an all-women's *panchayat*, but it was also the first all-women's *gram panchayat* to be nominated, created and supported solely by a political party. Studies on all women's *panchayats* in Maharashtra indicate that in most cases, social movements, women's organizations and semi-political groups such as the Shetkari Shramik Sanghatana have been instrumental in the creation of *panchayats* (Datta 1998; Singh, Lele, et al 1992). Other research also demonstrates the impact of influential individuals such as in the case of Ralegaon Siddhi, the native village of the famous social activist, Anna Hazare (Omvedt 1990).

However, in Bharatpur, the creation of the all-women's *panchayat* was a carefully deliberated choice by the ruling party in order to support the party position on the women's reservation bill and the general party position on women's participation in politics. In other words, the *panchayat* did not come to power on the initiative of women.

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion on all women's *panchayats* in Maharashtra, see Datta, Bishaka (1998). "And Who Will Make the Chapatis? Calcutta: Stree Publications.

With the Congress I traditionally considered as the moderate, progressive, secular and inclusive party in India (Chibber 2002; Sirsikar 1995; Rosenthal 1974), the all-women's *panchayat* in Bharatpur portrays the image that party leaders were attempting to promote in the district.

Bharatpur had a female *sarpanch*. I first met with her in her home one evening. First impressions indicate that she comes from a well-to-do family, evident from the location of her house, the nicest one on the block. She belonged to a politically connected family. Her husband is the nephew of Vasantdada Patil, and is currently MLA from the Rashtrawadi Congress party. Her husband was the *sarpanch* for the previous 10 years.

She was articulate about the issues facing the *gram panchayat*, stating that water was the primary concern for women in the village, as there is only one tank and it was not enough for the village. As *sarpanch*, she had also initiated a plan to increase the water supply to the village, by reallocating to the village some of the water supply intended for the nearby sugar fields.

She was quite enthusiastic about the all-women's *panchayat* and also about the fact that its members won the election unopposed. She also mentioned that prior to that *panchayat* elections were usually not contested. The women worked closely with the *gram sevak*, as I observed from the meetings. The *gram panchayat* meetings in Bharatpur operated under a power dynamic completely different from that of Kapsewadi. With the *gram sevak* being the only male present in the room, he was usually the one sitting in a corner, answering questions, as theoretically required of this role. All nine members attended meetings most of the time. The women were all vocal and deliberated on whatever issue was being discussed.

When asked why Bharatpur had an all-women's *panchayat*, she responded that "the men wanted to give us an opportunity to participate in politics". When asked about women's participation in the *gram sabha*, she said that women did not attend the meetings. They did, however, attend the monthly meetings. Although the *gram sabha* was designed to include and increase citizen participation in politics through deliberation, in reality, women tend to be absent from most *gram sabhas*. The *gram sabhas* are held in the evenings, when most women are busy cooking the evening meal. Furthermore, *gram sabhas* are seen as meeting where men get together, sometimes drunk. They often lead to shouting matches and fights among different political groups in the village. In other words, a *gram sabha* is not seen as a place where women feel comfortable, as they would be exposed to such situations. Most of the other women members are older than her and less educated.

The issues discussed at the *gram panchayat* meetings reflect the gender composition and interests of the members. More time and sensitivity was given to women-centered problems such as day care and solving domestic disputes. One of the members recalled a recent incident in which the *gram panchayat* had successfully intervened and solved a domestic dispute.

One of the young, newly married brides in the village had been requesting her in-laws to allow her to visit her parents in the neighboring village. For various reasons, the in-laws and her husband refused to let her go. Finally, frustrated, she decided to run away on her own. A male acquaintance agreed to give her a ride on a two-wheeler (the most common mode of transportation in urban areas). However, some people saw her with this man. Upon her return from her parents' village, her in-laws refused to accept her into the



family, accusing her of having an affair with the man who gave her the ride. They physically removed her out of the house and humiliated her in front of the entire village.

Several members of the *gram panchayat* heard about the incident and decided to help out the young girl. They summoned an emergency *panchayat* meeting and decided to pay a visit to the in-laws. According to witnesses, the in-laws were given a harsh warning that criminal charges for harassment would be launched unless they agreed to take back the daughter in-law. According to the *sarpanch*, a male *gram panchayat* would not have been as successful in handling this case because “men do not understand the pressures that women face”. Another member also aptly summarized women’s positions in the villages when she stated, “Village women have a tough life. They have to take care of the house, family, and animals, get firewood, water, cook, clean, wash. Where is the time to have an affair?”

The situation in Bhimagaon is different from those of both Kapsewadi and Bharatpur. First, Bhimagaon has a larger *gram panchayat* with 17 members, including six women. Second, it has also a *gram panchayat* that is divided almost equally between two political parties, thus creating a different political scene overall, especially regarding women’s participation. Third, although Bhimagaon also has a female *sarpanch*, her role in *panchayat* activities can be described at best as minimal.

The two major parties represented in the Bhimagaon *gram panchayat* are the Nationalist Congress (also known as the Rashtravadi Congress) and the Vikas Aghadi Party (an opposition party). Members from both parties are in constant conflict with each other and as a result the *gram panchayat* meetings are quite chaotic. Most of the meetings I attended in Bhimagaon can be described as shouting matches among the members.

Also, the *gram sevak* was in control of the agenda, and not the *sarpanch* – unlike the meetings in Kapsewadi and Bharatpur, at Bhimagaon, the *gram sevak* ran the show.

The Bhimagaon female *sarpanch* belonged to the Nationalist Congress Party. She too had political connections. Her husband was the personal assistant to the local MLA from the Nationalist Congress Party. She rarely attended meetings, and when she did, she was a silent member. On one occasion, she spent the entire time reading the newspaper. At another time, she answered phone calls throughout the meeting.

The Bhimagaon *gram panchayat* had another active female member. She and her husband owned a piece of land and both worked on the farm. She had completed high school. Like most village women, she was married at an early age and came to Bhimagaon as a bride. Our first meeting was at her house. She spoke to me as she covered the floor with cow dung. This method used by the rural poor in India to cover floors, is often an indication of the economic status of a family. Although her family own land, they were not among the upper classes in Bhimagaon.

There is a tremendous contrast between these two women. As a *sarpanch*, one was in a position of considerable power. The other female representative on the other hand, was a member of the opposition party, constantly at odds with the majority party. However, she was the more active member of the *panchayat*, constantly questioning, challenging, initiating, and demanding. According to her, all the decisions in the village were made from the outside. Nothing happened inside. Previously people were ignorant about the *gram panchayat*. She argued that the *sarpanch* had a lot of power and was aware of what went on. The previous *sarpanches* of Bhimagaon came from rich families.

This representative was the one who had also accused the previous *sarpanch* of corruption.

An analysis of the proceedings of the Malegaon *Panchayat Samiti* also indicates that, on more than one occasion, both the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak* from Bhimagaon were summoned and questioned about misappropriating funds allocated for specific development schemes. For example, they were charged with forging names and signatures on beneficiary lists to entitle people below the poverty line. However, according to the records, they were only warned and no further action was taken.

Decisions were often predetermined at meetings. The *gram sevak* would read out an issue during a meeting. If opposed, the issue would be tabled for later. But then a different decision would be taken by the *gram sevak* and the *sarpanch*. Moreover, if a decision was taken during a meeting, it would often be changed later. This was due to the fact that the political parties would order the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak* to change the decision according to their wishes. The majority party's decisions would ultimately hold up. It was also common to see the local Nationalist Congress Party leaders attend the meetings and support their party members.

The cases of Kapsewadi, Bharatpur and Bhimagaon suggest various ways in which parties and elites have influenced women's participation both in positive and negative terms. In Kapsewadi, Shiv Sena provided space and opportunity for one woman leader to succeed, while in Bharatpur, Congress put up an all-women's *panchayat*. Whatever the motives behind these actions, the results have been favorable (at least to some extent) to women members in these villages. However, in Kapsewadi, the situation is complicated due to the lack of participation by the female *panchayat* member from the

lower caste. Her caste is an important variable, one that will be dealt with the next chapter.

In Bhimagaon, on the other hand, party rivalry and competition also show mixed results. Chaya Kamble uses her position in the *panchayat* to question alleged misdoings. However, the party is clearly using the female sarpanch as a proxy. The members of the Bhimagaon *gram panchayat* are strictly divided along party lines for all decisions. A similar outcome is seen at the next level, in the Malegaon *Panchayat Samiti*.

#### Role of Parties and Elites at the *Panchayat Samiti* Level

The Malegaon *Panchayat Samiti* represents the strongest case for party involvement in the functioning of the committee. Over the years, it has acquired the reputation of being one of the more corrupt and politically unstable institutions. The record for women's participation is also not positive. In fact, during my case selection process, bureaucrats at the Sangli *Zilla Parishad* discouraged me from choosing this particular *panchayat samiti*, stating, "it was not the best case, given its history and the level of outside influence on it." However, since my cases at the *gram panchayat* level were part of this particular block, I did not have much choice. This was also the only place where I had to show documentation regarding my credentials as well as an introduction letter from the chief executive officer of the *zilla parishad*.

The *panchayat samiti* and the *zilla parishad* also differ in the types of women members represented from the *gram panchayats*. Although *gram panchayats* also favor women from certain castes and family backgrounds (see chapters four and five), there is more room for other women to contest elections, if supported by the "right" party.

However, at the other two levels, factors such as political involvement in local and state level politics become more crucial.

The composition of the female members in the Malegaon *panchayat samiti* reflects the political party in power at the time and also reflects the influence of other political elites. For example, the *sabhapati* (chair) of the *panchayat samiti* was the wife of a prominent member of a nearby village. Her husband often accompanied her to the *samiti* meetings and although a silent member during the meetings, he was nevertheless a source of influence.

My several attempts to interact with the *sabhapati* proved to be less than successful. At first, she was cautious to the extent of being suspicious about my motives for talking to her and studying the functioning of the *panchayat samiti*. Later, she requested that I hand her written questions to be handed to her to study, and then she agreed to talk to me. Our interview was short, and the picture that emerged was that she was chosen for this position by the party and was fulfilling her role according to the party's wishes. This experience was in sharp contrast with my usual interviews with women. For the most part, women were eager and enthusiastic to talk and our sessions would last more than an hour each time (of course, some of our time together was spent discussing other aspects of their lives, and mine). *Gram panchayat* representatives were the most accessible, as I would go to their homes, or to the fields where they worked, to meet with them. Representatives at the other two levels came to the *taluka* and *zilla* for the meetings, so these interviews were more planned. Women at both the upper levels of the *panchayati raj* were more vocal about their roles as representatives. I observed this at meetings as well. Women at the *zilla* level, in particular were vocal at meetings. I was

never asked to submit my questions. On the other hand, the women were more than eager to talk. I make this comparison to illustrate the fact that the female president at the *taluka* level was an exception with regards to the manner in which she perceived my motives. It was also an indication of the intense party politics and factions that existed at the *samiti*, characterized by suspicion.

The block development officer, who is the government civil service appointee at the *panchayat samiti* level, has an important role in the functioning of the committee. Although he or she is supposed to remain neutral and objective, and merely to assist in administrative matters, the story in Malegaon suggests otherwise. The block development officer exemplified the stereotype of a seedy, corrupt government official. This characterization was confirmed by the number of corruption allegations against him currently under investigation at the *zilla parishad* level. He remained very powerful in the Malegaon *Panchayat Samiti*, as was evident from observing their monthly meetings.

For example, according to the State Act, all checks issued, deposited, or cashed require two signatures, one from the elected official and one from the appointed official. On several occasions, I watched elected officials ask the block development officer to sign certain checks, along with overt hints of benefits he could derive as a result of it. Bank accounts are also in the names of the government official and the elected official. While this system was designed to provide checks and balances, it is blatantly misused at the *samiti* level. Attempts by certain female members in requesting his transfer were met with resistance from other male members of the *samiti*, as well as from local politicians.

Another female member of the *panchayat samiti* recalled the problems she faced during her election campaign. "There were numerous difficulties I had to face. The

family members of the previous *sabhapati* (chair of the *panchayat samiti*) made an all out effort to stop me from contesting. Just a week before the election, some other contestants framed a false case against my husband for illegal possession of *ganja* (marijuana), and he was imprisoned. I had to run around to resolve the matter. Besides being a psychological shock, this incident had severe financial implications. I had to take a loan from my relatives and friends to bail him out.”

According to her, most opposition comes from other male members of the *panchayat samiti*, who conspire to gain personal benefit from government funds. When she tries to question their activities, they indulge in activities to undermine and defame her. For example, during a recent construction of a link road to a village, there was disagreement about who should acquire the tender for the construction contract. This happens to be a very important issue, as construction companies do their best to promote their cases in order to acquire government contracts. She claimed that the block development officer gets a hefty commission for promoting certain companies and ensuring that they get contracts for construction.

Women’s voices are rarely heard at the *panchayat samiti* meetings. The block development officer in this particular case clearly ran the show. The members of the committee were equally divided among the Congress I, Nationalist Congress, BJP and Shiv Sena. The *panchayat samiti* represents a case in which political elites and male party members make decisions, and women’s seats are considered as necessary quotas to be filled in order to ensure the party majority. It is interesting to note that while party elites influence decisions, the role of the block development officer at this level was also important.

### Role of Parties and Elites at the *Zilla Parishad* Level

In Maharashtra, the *zilla parishad* is the most powerful of the three levels in the *panchayati raj*. As a result of various factors, the *zilla parishad* has dominated *panchayati raj* politics throughout the state. The Maharashtra *Zilla Parishad* and *Panchayat Samiti* Act of 1961 differed from the provisions of the Mehta Committee with regards to the specific powers and functions allocated to the *zilla parishads* (Shrader and Joshi 1964). One such break with the recommendations made by the Mehta Committee concerns the role of the president of the *zilla parishad*. According to the Maharashtra *Zilla parishad* and *Panchayat Samiti* Act, district political leadership is provided with the Chief Executive Officer (a civil service ranked officer) as the chief administrative aide, responsible in most matters to the president, although a member of the state's civil service (Shrader and Joshi 1964, 145). This provided the president with greater power and flexibility to act independently of political pressures from above.

Theoretically, this empowers the presidents of the *zilla parishads* and protects them from party pressures. However, in reality, party leaders, and more importantly, the MLAs and MPs maintain close ties with the presidents of *zilla parishads* and their chief executive officers, thus creating a relationship among the *zilla parishad* leadership different from that originally envisioned by the framers of the State Act.

The Sangli *Zilla Parishad* had had a female president since 1999. Prior to this, she was a member of the *zilla parishad*. She belongs to the Congress I Party and she is also a close political ally of the Minister of State for Education, having been born and raised in his native village. She also spoke of him as her mentor. She represents a case of a strong and effective female leader, who is nonetheless not independent in most of the choices



and decisions she makes. In order to illustrate this complexity, it is necessary to discuss her achievements while in office.

For the past two years, the government of Maharashtra has implemented a cleanliness program in the villages called the “*Sant Gadge Baba Gram Shwachetha Abhiyaan* (Gadge Baba Village Cleanliness Campaign)”. The basic goals of the program were to provide an incentive for the villagers to come together and participate in the cleanliness program as well as to educate and increase awareness about cleanliness and hygiene in the villages.

As the president of the *zilla parishad*, she was closely involved in this program from its time of inception. She presided over numerous training sessions held for *sarpanches* and members of *panchayats* as well as for members of the block *panchayat*. Each member was given a booklet with detailed instructions about the program. Furthermore, special *gram sabhas* were called for women to make them more familiar with the program. In fact, women were encouraged to actively participate in the program.

She visited all the villages last year and gave speeches about the importance of sanitation, children’s health and nutrition etc. Promoting the use of clean drinking water in the villages was also on the agenda, and she demonstrated how to handle drinking water to the women in the villages. Various health camps were also held. She also visited various *anganwadis* (government run pre-schools) to check children’s diets and food preparation.

A unique aspect of this program was the fact that it was self-financed by the village *panchayats*. Village members raised funds through contributions. People eagerly donated both money and, more importantly, their time and efforts, to improve the

cleanliness in their villages. It was an example of true “team spirit” and community participation.

The *zilla parishad* president believed in allocating greater powers to the lower levels of the *panchayati raj* institutions, as well as to the *gram sabhas*. The idea that rural problems are to be solved at the rural level was also important to her. Towards this end, she organized various workshops for newly elected *sarpanches*, women representatives, *anganwadi* workers etc, to educate them about their rights and responsibilities..

She encouraged people to participate in *gram sabhas*. Specifically she emphasized women’s roles in *gram sabhas*, and has presided over numerous *gram sabhas* held only for women in a number of villages. Additionally, she also reminded *sarpanches* and *gram sevaks* of different villages to encourage women to attend *gram sabhas*, so much so that she warned them that they would be held responsible if women did not attend and participate in *gram sabhas*.

One of the most common complaints that citizens have about government and bureaucracy is that there is nobody to listen to their problems. The president instituted a complaint window at the *zilla parishad* office so that people would have a place to voice their concerns. The window is open during office hours and a response is guaranteed within a week either in writing or on the phone or in person, depending on the nature of the complaint. This has been very successful, as the office has received a number of complaints. She also instituted another facility for the public, where people can call the *zilla parishad* office once a month on a set date and have their questions answered by a *zilla parishad* employee.

She also initiated and set up a center at the *zilla parishad* office to assist women with issues relating to any form of abuse. The center has a full staff of two female social workers, with masters' degrees in social work. The center also works closely with the police department and seeks their help when necessary. Such a center provides a safe and confidential place for women to report abuse, at times when it might be difficult for them to speak to anyone else.

She founded a women's organization to collect and distribute milk throughout the *taluka*. This organization is for women only and is run by women. Moreover, women are trained to use computers and perform all transactions on the computer. The organization is based on the principle that women are important earning members of a household and thus need support.

As part of an effort to educate parents, she held workshops and spoke to parents about caring for their children. She also spoke to pregnant women and mothers with newborn babies. Pregnant women were given eggs and lentils as protein supplements. She also increased awareness about family planning, especially among rural women, by holding special meetings only for women. As a member of the State of Maharashtra's AIDS Control Society, she has also been involved in increasing awareness about AIDS in the Sangli District. This is a particularly relevant issue because Sangli District has the second highest incidence of HIV positive cases in the state, after Bombay.

The *zilla parishad* president was the founding member of *Mahila Vikas Pratishthan*, an organization with an emphasis on girls' education and literacy awareness. Through this organization, girls are given incentives for attending schools. Girls are also

given free clothes and books. Moreover, the organization also helps women with filling out the necessary paper work required to apply for various government schemes etc.

All this reads like a glowing resume of the president's achievements. While it is an accurate description of her achievements, it is also equally important to note is that she was carefully chosen and groomed for this post by the Congress I and particularly by the local MLA. Her decisions are in line with the general Congress I perspective. At times, her actions have directly reflected the power hierarchy within the party structure. In one instance, the above-mentioned MLA influenced a decision regarding the suspension of one of the *sarpanches* in the district on corruption charges. He made a personal visit to the *zilla parishad* office to meet with the president to request her not to suspend the *sarpanch* in question. She complied, although the official reason given was the lack of evidence to prove his involvement in corruption activities.

Moreover, her husband, also a member of the Congress I and a local informal political elite in their native village, was closely involved in the MLAs re-election campaign and viewed her position in the *zilla parishad* as a means for gathering support for the Congress I.

The relationship between the president and the chief executive officer of the Sangli *Zilla Parishad* illustrates the links to the party and political elite. In an attempt to maintain objectivity and non-partisanship, the chief executive officer often found himself at odds with the majority party. It was a common sight to see local politicians barge into his office, uninvited, and demand that he change a particular decision. I witnessed several of these meetings, where politicians would make a case for a particular issue or person, and attempt to pressure the chief executive officer to change his mind. The issues were

most often related to allocation of funds for developmental activities. Since the *zilla parishad* controls the budgets for the other two levels of the *panchayati raj*, this is perhaps one of the most contentious issues.

My analysis based on observing *zilla parishad* monthly meetings for six months and reading through the proceedings dating to the start of the term of the committee reveals less than democratic scenarios. Issues raised in the meetings, especially monetary issues, almost always resulted in very contentious debate, shouting matches, among men and women. Decisions were often made without a vote, with the chief executive officer exercising his rights to take matters into his hands. However, the proceedings do not capture the full picture of the debates and the deliberations. Much of the evidence regarding the influence of party leaders and other elites comes from my interactions with and observations of *zilla parishad* members. This is not surprising considering that it is at this level that decisions affecting the other two levels are made.

The *zilla parishad* level in Maharashtra is the most important of the three levels. Control over the members and policies of the *zilla parishad* are a goal that all major political parties strive towards. It is an avenue for politicians to exercise power, to strengthen their vote base and sometimes also to gain personal benefits. However, this also works to the advantage of women. Members like Maya Pawar, although considered protégés of a party or a politician, have managed to carve a space for themselves and have succeeded in effective policy making.

### Conclusion

Parties play a crucial role in *panchayat* politics at all three levels. According to the *Panchayati Raj Act*, the *gram panchayat* level, elections are not supposed to be

contested along party lines. However, the majority of the members who contested and won filed their nomination papers with the support of political parties. I observed several instances of resistance to women's entry into politics. Party members would throw lavish parties or openly offer monetary support to candidates and woo them to their side. Thus women running on an independent ticket had almost no chance of winning.

Parties also play an important role in another very popular practice- passing "no confidence" motions to remove *sarpanches* from their posts. This is often seen in cases where members are divided into groups along party lines (Bhimagaon's example). This affects women, as they become easy targets for rival party members. Moreover, it is one of the reasons for lack of cooperation among members.

Furthermore, political leaders are also involved in *panchayati raj* politics at all three levels. They use their influence to nominate members for positions, as well as to remove them. Political leaders also influence government officials such as civil servants to pass certain bills or resolutions. This contradicts the Maharashtra State *Panchayati Raj* Act, which prohibits direct influence of MLAs (member of legislative assembly) from intervening in *panchayat* politics. In reality, members vote along party lines, parties control nominations and MLAs have considerable influence in *panchayat* politics.

As seen through the example of the Sangli *Zilla Parishad*, the MLAs continue to monitor closely decisions made and the elected members of the *zilla parishad*, particularly the president, continue to maintain close ties with the state level politicians. This contradicts the original intent of the state-level act, which was designed to isolate the MLAs from the *panchayati raj* institutions in the state.

The Congress party in particular has been influential in *panchayat* politics in Maharashtra. From its inception, the party has successfully penetrated into rural areas and has established a firm base due to two major factors. First, with its links to the sugar cooperatives, the party at the state level has created loyal leadership at the local levels. As office holders of the cooperatives are also often involved – directly or indirectly—in *panchayat* politics, the Congress has solidified its position in the area.

Second, the influence of individual Congress leaders such as Y.B. Chavan and Vasant Patil also continue to generate a loyal Congress following. The influence extends beyond the members of their extended families participating in *panchayati raj* politics. New and emerging leaders at the local level desire to be associated with these political families and thus a new form of patronage is created, with the older more experienced political leaders and families providing the support to the newer leaders.

Since the 1990s, opposition parties have also started the process of consolidating their power base in the area. With the rise of the BJP and the Shiv Sena, and the Nationalist Congress, the original Congress I faces serious competition in an area where it previously enjoyed an unchallenged monopoly. This has the potential to produce in a change in the power structure within the Congress. On the one hand, it could result in greater involvement by political elites into the affairs of the *panchayati raj*, or it could also result in greater decentralization of actual decision making abilities of leaders, especially women, and eventually create a new group of leadership.

Political parties in Maharashtra can be generally categorized as highly fragmented and competitive. The split within the Congress Party began a trend that continues with the emergence of other smaller, regional parties. Party competition is also evident in

*panchayat* politics, at all three levels. Parties recruit and nominate candidates for elections and once elected, members are expected to vote along party lines. The consequences of dissent can sometimes be harsh, and can include social and political isolation, and even violence.

Although it is difficult to measure the exact linkages between political parties and violence, the role played by some of the informal political elites, the *goondas*, indicate that physical threats and violence is sometimes used as a tool to achieve desired political results. As noted in interviews with several female members, especially at the *gram panchayat* level, and especially those from lower castes, this type of threat is quite real. I commonly heard phrases indicating the fear, such as, “but if I go against the wishes of the party, the *goondas* can hurt my family,” or “they will ruin my reputation and the reputation of my family.”

However, along with the fractional and competitive approach to party politics, there also exists some room for accommodation of different interests that is absent in the more vicious “winner take all” politics. In Maharashtra political winners are expected to reserve some share of rewards for losers, or at least to keep the losers working within the system. Winners in Congress Party factional struggles do not try to eliminate losers from all rewards of political life, because today’s losers are expected to stay in the game, and maybe even to win later on. For example, in 1985, the main political issue of the time centered on Sharad Pawar, a former chief minister who had earlier left the Congress to form his own party, a group which had lost badly in the parliamentary and assembly polls. Instead of trying to eliminate him completely from political life, the winners in Maharashtra were negotiating with him on the terms of his readmission to the Congress



Party. This eventually occurred in late 1987, but did not last long, as Pawar eventually split again from the Congress I to form the Nationalist Congress Party. An episode such as this could be a measure of the strength of the Congress party in the area, where it was comfortable with the idea of trying to make deals with dissidents.

Party fragmentation both works to the benefit of and becomes an obstacle to female members in the *panchayati raj* at all three levels. On the one hand, as seen through the example in Bhimagaon, it was the female member from the opposition party that held the rest of the *panchayat* accountable for certain actions and demanded transparency and openness. However, in Kapsewadi and Bharatpur, both places with a clear majority of one party, women from the dominant party were more successful. This was certainly the case also at the other two levels, particularly in the Sangli *Zilla Parishad*.

Moreover, the cases under study suggest that party fragmentation is also a variable that works more to women's advantage at the higher levels in the *panchayati raj*. Although Bhimagaon presents a clear example of this at the *gram panchayat* level, women at the *taluka* and *zilla* level from opposition parties were in a better position to negotiate and discuss issues.

The nature of political participation in India is complex. The influences of class, caste, religion, language, and regional identity are constantly creating cross-pressures that threaten to bring down the institutions of democratic governance. While the secular and inclusive nature of the Congress initially served to strengthen the institutions of democracy in this society, during the last twenty years the weakening of Congress

influence has been associated with the increasing factionalization of both the party system and the society at large (Hasan 2002).

So long as the Congress Party was able to integrate the diverse interests of Indian society into a centralized institutional framework, the democratic system was able to operate in a highly regulated manner. The locus of political power was at the federal level and class-based politics were institutionalized through party competition. While the institutions of Indian democracy remain strong, nevertheless, in recent years they have been increasingly challenged. Hence decentralized political competition, serious and recurring political violence, the rise of Hindu nationalism and caste politics is more prominent today. Caste politics and caste identity in particular pose a great challenge to *panchayat* politics, as will be seen in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV  
CASTE, POLITICS, AND GENDER  
INTRODUCTION

Rural politics in India is characterized by among other factors, caste structures and caste identities. Disputes within a caste and among castes are also a recognizable part of rural politics. Historically, the concept of a *panchayat* itself meant a gathering of the village elders, typically upper caste men, to settle disputes (Matthew 1994). While lower castes have been traditionally blocked from participating in *panchayat* politics, the emphasis on decentralization in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments was in part an attempt to include lower castes in *panchayat* politics. Large groups of people had access to the political process as a result of these reforms. Similarly, women from various castes – including lower castes – were given opportunities to contest elections and hold political positions.

This chapter deals with the relationship between caste and gender so as to highlight the ways in which both variables intersect. This relationship between caste and gender is further explored in the political sphere through women's participation in *panchayat* politics. Through a discussion of upper and lower caste women's experiences in *panchayat* politics, I argue that caste identity is an important variable that influences women's participation. Furthermore, caste simultaneously augments and limits women's participation because it forms the basis of identity. Caste also affects upper and lower caste women differently.

The chapter is divided into three sections: In section one, I discuss the structure and organization of the caste system in India. I also explore the ways in which Hindu ideology and institutions in ancient India shaped the lives of women. Included in this section is an examination of the social structure and setting, as a part of the culture that influenced the role of Indian women. In section two, I discuss caste conflict in Maharashtra as seen through the examples of Tulsapur, Bhimagaon and Sakharwadi. I also examine the differences between upper and lower caste women in the *panchayat raj*. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how caste identity impacts women's participation.

### Caste System in India

The traditional social system in India was organized around caste structures and caste identities. Caste is a many layered social hierarchy developed several centuries ago. Hindus believe that people are born with a place in the universe. The Hindu caste system is divided into two broad categories: the *varnas* and *jatis*. Historically, *varnas* were seen as ideological groupings and *jatis* were the social groupings (Unnithan-Kumar 1997). The *varna* system consists of four categories, each ranked according to their social honor: the Brahmins (priests and scholars), the *kshatriyas* (warriors), the *vaishyas* (merchants), and the *sudras* (laborers). Below these four categories are the “untouchables”, those in the lowest position. Today former untouchables are commonly ranked as *sudras*. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were viewed as outside the caste system. Thus the Brahmins represent the highest and most honorable position and the untouchables, the lowest in the *varna* system. *Jatis* are subcategories within the *varna* system. *Jatis* also include groups based on kinship and marriage, but refer mainly to traditional occupations.

There is much scholarship on the origins of the caste system and its influence in Indian society. The literature is divided among those who argue that the caste system is at the heart of the Indian social structure (Hocart 1968; Dumont 1960; Kolenda 1978 et al), and those who view the caste system as part of a larger class system (Srinivas 1955; Beteille 1974). Pauline Kolenda's (1978, 40-41) summary of the caste system is useful for the purposes of this study. She argues that " 1) caste as a system operates only within a limited locality, a single village or a few linked villages or regions, 2) a dominant caste has political and economic power over others in that locality, 3) each caste has an occupational specialty and offers this to other castes in exchange for food, products, or services, 4) each caste tends to live in its own quarters".

For the purposes of this study, I use the term caste to include both the four *varnas* as well as the numerous *jatis* that exist in the Sangli District. In some cases, I use the term "lower castes", to refer to the category within the *varna* system known as the "untouchables".

The untouchables are further categorized into 3 categories: scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs) and other backward castes (OBCs). Among these, the SCs and STs form the majority of the untouchables; therefore, the majority of the reservation policies apply to these two groups. The terms "scheduled castes" and "scheduled tribes" refers to a list of castes prepared in 1935 by the British Government (Kolenda 1985). All of these groups are beneficiaries of "protective discrimination", a term applied to the laws reserving seats in legislatures, seats in government employment, seats in schools and universities, as well as certain types of financial assistance.

The untouchables have historically suffered discrimination in the public and private sphere. The reform of the caste system began as early as 1942, when India was still under British rule; a law was passed ensuring 8.5% of all seats in the national government be reserved for members of the lower castes. The political system that evolved during the period of British control was shaped by two contradictory objectives: emphasis on unity of the country for legitimacy and the use of divisions of Indian society for political control (Kak 1990). The British attempted to solve the problem of inter-ethnic tensions by the application of quotas. Subash Kak (1990) notes that entry into the British army was based on preferences for certain groups. Muslims lobbied for separate electorates, followed by Sikhs and untouchables, led by Ambedkar. The British organized and recognized separate electorates for Muslims and Sikhs in an attempt to weaken the system. Thus the institution of quotas by the British served their interests of control. In 1947, when India became independent, quotas were increased to 12%. Similarly, since then several laws regarding reservations for untouchables have been passed in the fields of education, employment and in the Constitution.

The Constitution of India of 1950 abolishes untouchability and prohibits discrimination in access to shops, restaurants, hotels and places of entertainment, or in the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads, and places of public resorts, or in admission to educational institutions (Kolenda 1985). Article 23 forbids forced labor, commonly part of the dominant caste or feudal system. Article 25 allows for entrance to Hindu educational institutions. In addition to these protections in the Constitution, in 1955, the Parliament also passed the Untouchability Offences Act. In 1952, a law was passed mandating 20% of all seats in public institutions of higher learning to be reserved for SCs

and STs. In 1970, a similar law was passed regarding employment in the public sector, according to which 16.66% of jobs were reserved for SC's and ST's.

### Castes in Maharashtra

As noted above, castes in India are localized, in that the system works within a limited locality. Different regions of India have their own sets of castes and ranking. The most numerous castes in Maharashtra have been the Brahmins, Marathas and the *mahars*. While there are numerous other castes in the state, this discussion will be confined to these castes because they have played a significant role in *panchayati raj* politics. The Brahmins are at the apex of the *varna* system, being the priestly class, and have provided leadership in social, cultural and political life in Maharashtra (Sirsikar 1995, 60). Brahmins also dominated administrative life under the British, because they were often employed for their teaching and record keeping skills. They adapted to modernization fairly easily through Western education and soon formed the backbone of the middle class (Sirsikar 1995).

As noted in the previous chapter, the Marathas form the backbone of the agricultural community throughout the state. They were once the rulers of Maharashtra, and as such are stereotyped as having a sense of superiority (Sirsikar 1995, 61). The Marathas are also the largest caste of landowners, giving them considerable economic and political power in the rural areas. Traditionally, the Marathas occupied most of the important positions in the village, such as the Patil (village chief) and this further gave them access to and contacts with government officials and the administration at all levels of the *panchayati raj* (Baviskar 1996).

Similarly, the *mahars* also have had a long history of caste consciousness in the state as well as a long history of conflict with other castes, namely the Marathas. The *mahars* historically were part of the untouchables, the marginalized lower castes. They provided cheap agricultural labor for the Marathas in the villages and also performed menial tasks such as cleaning and sweeping. They were also village watchmen and messengers. The majority of the *mahars* were landless and depended on the Marathas for their living (Sirsikar 1995). It was largely due to the efforts of the *mahars* and nationalist leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a fierce advocate of the abolition of the caste system, that the *mahars* and other lower castes became a politically conscious group (Kolenda 1978). Many *mahars* converted to Buddhism as a protest of Hinduism and the caste system. Ambedkar attempted to organize the lower castes into a cohesive political group at the height of the nationalist movement, but failed to see the end results of his mobilization efforts due to his premature death (Sirsikar 1995). The *mahars* did follow in his footsteps, however. Ambedkar also chaired the committee that wrote the Indian constitution.

He led a mass conversion to Buddhism that took place three months before his death. Along with a mass conversion to Buddhism, lower castes also began to view themselves as having a new identity, expressed through the term “dalit”, translated as “the downtrodden” (Kolenda 1985). Over the years, dalits have gained considerable political influence and have also formed separate political parties to represent their interests, including the Bahujan Samaj Party, a national level party. The Dalit Panther Party is another political party associated with lower castes. There have also been mass conversions of dalits to Islam and Christianity for similar reasons.



While the Brahmins, Marathas and the Mahars constitute the largest castes in the state; there are also several other castes, particularly in the Sangli District. Named according to their occupations, there are the *malis* (gardeners), *sonars* (goldsmiths), *shimpis* (tailors), *kumbhars* (potters), *kolis* (fishermen), *bhangis* (sweepers), and the *mangs* (responsible for removing dead animals from the streets).

### Women and Caste in Ancient India

An assessment of Indian women's political participation today involves a brief resume of the cultural background of Indian women through the ages. The Indian woman is part of a culture whose practices are rooted in ancient traditions. If she has a particular conviction or acts in a specific manner it is due to the pattern that has been ingrained in her by the fairly stable social structure which has been developed over a thousand years (Khanna and Varghese 1978, 1). Therefore describing the cultural traditions and representations of women in India is a useful avenue for understanding the role of Indian women today. The role, status and position of women in Indian society has been far from static, changing from what was thought to have been a position of considerable authority in ancient times to one of considerable subservience (Jain 1975). Along with a historical change, variation also exists by caste. For example, in the matrilineal community of Nayers in Kerala, women enjoyed greater social and economic freedoms.

Women in India have a unique cultural heritage. It is not always easy, however, to trace this history, since the best-preserved stories are normally those of the groups who achieved dominance. Sources are limited; most contemporary scholarship on women in ancient India is based on two categories of sources, both of which date back to colonial times (Desai and Krishnaraj 1987; Mies 1980). One category is comprised of the works

of religious scholars, who, in the face of a cultural threat from Western religion and ideas, revised and reinterpreted the classic Hindu texts in order to glorify its past (Desai 83). The other category is the works of the "Orientalists," colonial scholars who sought the "source of civilization" in the ancient cultures of the East but nonetheless examined it through lenses furnished by the European cultural and intellectual tradition (Jayawardena 1986).

All of these works draw primarily on the classic Hindu texts composed in Sanskrit that include the four *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Upanishads*, the epics, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, the *Puranans* and the *Tantras*. Although these texts reflect the ideals of a small Brahmin elite, they continue to influence the beliefs and practices of women even today.

#### Gender Roles in Hindu Ideology

Hinduism grew and evolved from a variety of cults and beliefs (Thapar 1966, 132) and is not derived from a historical person or any divine revelation. Some of these beliefs had their origins in the Vedic traditions of the Aryans who came to India from Central Asia around 1500 B.C. while others reflect the beliefs of the indigenous people, the Dravidians.

Hinduism assumes a single supreme power that manifests itself as many different deities including the trinity of gods: Brahma, the creator of the universe, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. Accordingly, the trinity reflects the natural cycle of birth, life and death that is determined by the doctrine of karma. Hinduism propounds that a person's Karma or actions in this life determines his/her status in the next life. Further a person's actions have to be good in order to secure a good next life. In other words, they

have to be in conformity with dharma or the sacred law. Good Karma ultimately leads to *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of birth, life and death. The sacred law details rituals, social obligations and norms that vary according to the caste status. Thus, the inherent inequality and hierarchy of the caste system is justified by the doctrines of karma and dharma (Desai 84).

Hindu ideology presents a dual conception of women. On the one hand, may be fertile and benevolent; on the other, she may be aggressive and malevolent (Wadley 1977, 113). Thus the female is *shakti* or energy and *prakriti* or nature. According to Wadley, a woman is benevolent only when the control of her sexuality is transferred over to men, otherwise uncontrolled *shakti* is potentially dangerous (Wadley 1977, 115). Liddle and Joshi 1986) and Wadley (1977) further note that while this conception of women was used to restrict and subordinate upper caste Hindu women, among the lower castes it led to the belief of women as givers of life and strength. However, throughout the Vedic period women were given a status equal to men to participate in rituals and to uphold the dharma. They could fight wars, join in festivals and take part in philosophical discussions (Khanna and Varghese 1978).

In the Hindu culture, several symbols relating to women provide models for values and society itself. Sandra Robinson suggests two dominant images in Hinduism, which she argues are particularly useful in study of Indian women. The first is the image of the Hindu goddess, and the second relates to the epic heroine (Haddad and Findly 1983, 182).

Goddesses in Hinduism are a symbol of the female as powerful but often also as subordinate. On the one hand, goddesses such as Durga symbolize power; yet on the other hand, goddesses such as Laxmi symbolize female subordination to the male.

The second image emerges from the roles of epic heroines. In particular the heroines from the two great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, serve as role models for most Indian women. The *Mahabharata* story of Savitri, whose devotion finally resurrected her dead husband, illustrates the concept of women as life givers, whose primary duty is faithful service to their husbands (Haddad and Finly 1983, 188). Further, Savitri is portrayed as the self-sacrificing woman whose sole purpose in life is to serve her husband.

The heroine Sita, from the epic *Ramayana*, is also associated with similar attributes. She is portrayed as the ideal wife who continues to remain faithful to her husband during her long exile when she is abducted by a demon king. Further, after she is rescued, she has to prove her purity to her husband by stepping into a sacrificial fire, from which she emerges unharmed because of her virtuous nature.

While Hindu goddesses do not necessarily to serve as overt role models for women, they do demonstrate certain suppositions about female behaviors, powers, desires and character (Courtwright and Harlan 1995).

With the passage of time there was a gradual deterioration in women's status. During the period from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., the lawmaker Manu completely changed the status of Indian women. His social codes and sanctions have permanently left a mark on women's status. Based on the need to control women's sexuality, he rationalized his laws by saying that because of their passion for men, their temper and their natural

heartlessness, women would become disloyal to their husbands, and thus had to be constantly guarded. *The Laws of Manu*, which are the most famous of the ancient Sanskrit laws, clearly demonstrate this male perception of the female. These laws detailed the rules of conduct, the privileges and obligations of each division of society (castes), and penalties for inappropriate behavior (Mitter 1991, 87).

Manu's laws regarding women were particularly harsh. Marriage was never to be dissolved, divorce was unthinkable and widow remarriage was never permitted for "respectable" high-caste women. As for adultery, if the man involved was from a lower caste, the woman was to be torn apart by dogs (cited in Buhler 1964). Women's nature was used as a justification for restricting upper caste women's mobility, sexuality, property rights and ability to take up productive roles outside the house (Desai 1989, 86). Upper caste women were secluded in the home and were prohibited from productive work outside the home. Marriages were arranged for young girls and widows of certain caste groups were encouraged to practice *sati*, the act of self-immolation on a husband's funeral pyre. The word *sati* means "the virtuous one", and by committing *sati*, women became virtuous. The first incident of *sati* was reported in 510 A.D. (Thapar 1976). Because widows were not accepted socially and were treated badly, many women might have chosen *sati* over a life of misery.

Many scholars argue that the subordination of women in India was strongly linked to the development of the caste system (Liddle and Joshi 1986, 50). Liddle and Joshi (1986) argue that caste is both a structural and a cultural system. The structure consists of a hierarchy of in-marrying groups, organized into hereditary occupations. The cultural

system comprises belief in karma, commitment to the caste occupation and lifestyle and belief in a hierarchy of values.

Although the Government of India today prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, the caste system has survived for almost 2,000 years. Reformers may have succeeded in decreasing the dominance of the upper castes, but the concept of caste and the basic structure remains intact and continues to dominate Indian society. Women in particular have been strongly affected by this system, as increased control over women is one of the factors that emerged as a result of the influence of Manu's laws and socially constructed gender roles.

#### Caste and Gender in the *Panchayati Raj*

Caste plays a prominent role in politics, given that nominations for seats are determined along caste lines. Due to the fact that there are provisions for members of the lower castes within the general reserved category for women, often women from the lower castes are pressured into running for office. However, in most cases, they have no real power once elected. The party leaders make the decisions, and the women are told to sign off on the papers. Dalit women (from the lower castes) thus encounter both gender and caste discrimination. The majority of the dalits in general and dalit women in particular live below the poverty line. Upper caste men do not favor reservations for dalits, and especially do not favor reservations for dalit women. Most dalit women have very little (or no) education. Moreover, they are very uncomfortable about dealing with upper caste men and women at meetings, because traditionally they have been social outcasts. On several occasions, I observed dalit women sitting at the back, behind other

members during meetings, almost as if they were afraid that they would be asked to leave.

Interestingly, upper caste women also face constraints of mobility. Traditionally, upper caste women were not allowed to leave the house and/or to work outside, as it was not considered proper for them to engage in any work. Now that upper caste women (Brahmin women, in particular) are entering politics, they continue to be viewed as traditional wives and mothers. The result is that the husbands often accompany the female members to the meetings and speak on their behalf. Sometimes, husbands also take care of some of the responsibilities assigned to the female members such as traveling out of town to *panchayat samiti* meetings or to a *zilla parishad* meeting. This illustrates the fact that even upper caste women face constraints imposed by orthodoxy and patriarchy.

My case studies also indicate that the approach of *gram panchayat* women members from the lower castes differs from the approach adopted by upper caste women from affluent backgrounds. Though poor women were more preoccupied with taking care of subsistence needs, there was some sense of commitment to their role as elected members. This was seen in Tulsapur, a *panchayat* whose female members were predominately from the lower castes, while the case of Bhimagaon, whose women members were mostly from the upper caste, reflects the attitude of women adhering to traditional gender roles that limit their participation to the house and family.

#### Caste Politics and the *Panchayat* in Tulsapur

Tulsapur is a small village with a population of 4,000 located ten miles from Malegaon. It is a village that came into being as a result of a migration to the area by

people in search of labor. It is situated off a highway that connects Malegaon to Pandharpur (an important holy place for Hindus). Since Malegaon is an industrial area, most of the people living in Tulsapur are employed in factories and work in the service industries. Few of the families own and cultivate land. Such land owning families often employ other villagers, especially women, to work in the fields. Tulsapur has one elementary school. Children travel to Malegaon to attend middle school and high school.

The village has electricity and water supply. A medical clinic the neighboring town provides medical services once a week. For emergencies, villagers travel to the government hospital in Malegaon.

One of the notable features in this village is its caste composition. The Marathas are the dominant caste in Tulsapur. Within it, the Patils are in a majority. Marathas own most of the land, and landownership among other castes is marginal. The other castes represented in Tulsapur are malis, kolis and kumbhar (all three are SCs). There is also a Christian presence in the village, due to the influence of American Missionaries, who came to the village in the 1980s and built a small church. There are also a few Muslims in the village. The Tulsapur *Panchayat* is composed of nine members, six men and three women. At the time of my field research, the *sarpanch* was from the kumbhar caste. Among the female members, two were from the lower castes and the third was from the Maratha caste.

Tulsapur's geographical proximity to the Malegaon *Panchayat Samiti* has resulted in it being the beneficiary of several government schemes such as micro-credit programs designed to support women's self-sufficiency and school lunches. The international NGO World Vision is also active in the village. In the past five years, it has provided several



houses, built public restrooms and also supplied school materials for children. It is through the various projects and schemes initiated by both the government and the NGOs that caste conflict has intensified, as illustrated through the experiences of Seema Mane and Laxmi Koli.

Seema Mane was in her early thirties. Her education level was only up to Standard Five. She was married very early at sixteen years of age. She has two children, a ten-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter. Both children study in the Marathi medium school. She wants her daughter to study and get a job.

Seema Mane belonged to the *Mang* caste, one of the scheduled castes. She and her husband did not own land. Her husband was a wage laborer in the construction business, while worked in the fields cutting grass for Rs.30 a day. She usually worked for six to eight hours, after which she did all the housework. She was one of the three female council members in Tulsapur. Her husband was also interested in the *panchayat*. But he lost the last election, so she stood instead of him, contesting the elections against another woman from her ward. She was very active and wanted to make a difference in the village. She enthusiastically volunteered her time in assisting World Vision set up its projects in the village. The organization used an empty classroom in the local primary school as its office. Seema Mane was in charge of opening the office and cleaning it before the officials arrived during the assigned days. She was also an effective mobilizer, physically knocking on doors to inform women about World Vision meetings (word of mouth being the most effective means of communication in the village).

At the time of this research, Seema Mane was interested in training to become a community health volunteer for the weekly clinic run by the Wanless Hospital in the

village. The hospital, located in Malegaon, organized a team of doctors, nurses, and social workers to spend one morning a week in Tulsapur, providing basic out-patient treatment and immunizations free of cost. The goal of this project was not only to provide immediate care, but more importantly to educate the villagers about preventive care. This was carried out by focusing on education about issues such as sanitation, nutrition and family planning.

Seema Mane recognized the importance of educating women about health issues and planned to enroll in the short training program to qualify as a community health volunteer, in order to make daily visits to women's homes within a designated area to teach them about primary health care. However, her plans changed because another opportunity opened through a reserved seat in the *gram panchayat* and she decided to contest the election. During her campaign, she persuaded women to vote for her. She also campaigned vigorously from door to door. She claimed that her entire family - including her husband - supported her. She attended the monthly meetings. The *panchayat* responsibilities did not take up a lot of her time.

According to her, the key issues that were important and needed to be discussed at the *panchayat* meetings were sewer problems, construction of houses, and the development of schemes for people below the poverty line, the cleanliness of the village, and clean drinking water. Seema Mane believed that health issues underlie all other issues in the village and need to be addressed first. Particularly for women, she believed that unless women were made aware of health issues, they would not make any social progress. As women were the primary care givers for children, educating them about health was important. She stated that women's priorities differed from those of men. For

example, “men are not bothered about the difficulties we face in collecting water”, she said. “All that they care about is that they have enough water to drink and bathe. It is the women who have to figure out how and when to collect water, in between doing all the other housework”. Clean drinking water is directly linked to good health and sanitation, and Seema Mane argued that this was a crucial issue for the entire village to consider.

Seema Mane was given training at the *panchayat samiti* in Malegaon before she started her duties as a council member. The training sessions were organized by the *zilla parishad*, and carried out at the *panchayat samiti* levels for all new members elected to the *panchayats* within the *zilla*. The two-day workshops focused on providing the new members with an introduction to the *panchayat* system in general and on teaching them about their roles and responsibilities as *gram panchayat* members. The workshops were conducted by a group of experts representing both the government and the non-government sectors, and included officials, elected representatives, and social workers from the community.

A comprehensive book that outlined the structure and the functions of the *panchayats* was published by the Maharashtra State Government and given to each member. Included in this book were chapters on the history of the *panchayati raj*, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, the process of elections, descriptions of the three levels of the *panchayati raj*, the role of the *gram sabha* and a description of the various government sponsored schemes and programs available to the citizens. Additionally, rules regarding decision-making about financial matters and other powers held by the *panchayat* were also discussed in detail. This book utilized different teaching techniques such as pictures and figures and role-playing in order to educate new members. For a majority of the new

members, this training was their first exposure to the functioning of the *panchayats*, and therefore was a very useful workshop. There was additional material pertaining to SC/ST and BC members also distributed at this workshop.

Among the goals of the workshop, dissemination of information and education about the functioning of the *panchayats* was just as important as another goal of providing the new members, especially female members, with an opportunity to get some experience. . Through role-playing and mock *panchayat* sessions, women were given the opportunity to practice, among other things, speaking in public and, more importantly, speaking in front of men (something that a number of women had never done before, as often the only contact with men was restricted to the male members of the family). While talking in front of other people, or even sitting in a chair (as opposed to sitting on the floor) might sound insignificant, it was in fact new and unique for some women, such as some of the SC/ST/BC women, for whom discrimination translated into an exclusion from everyday activities often taken for granted.

When asked if she found the training sessions useful, Seema Mane stated that it was useful to the extent that she gained knowledge about how a *panchayat* should function. As a woman who was clearly not afraid to speak up, Seema Mane was an active participant at *gram panchayat* meetings. She asked questions. For instance, at one meeting, as the minutes of the previous meeting were read out by the *gram sevak* (as was the rule), an issue discussed previously but not yet resolved about purifying drinking water in the village was mentioned in passing. While the *gram sevak* attempted to move on to the next issue, Seema Mane stopped him and wanted to discuss ways in which water could be purified. She spoke about diseases spreading through water and asked the

*gram sevak* about what kind of assistance was available from the *panchayat samiti* to purify water. There was in fact a program in place adopted by other villages for water purification through mixing certain chemicals (TCL) in tanks and wells. The *gram sevak* promised to look into the matter.

Seema Mane's body language at the meetings further indicated the ease with which she interacted with the rest of the *gram panchayat* members. Although from a lower caste, she sat on the chair, looked straight at the men when she spoke and sometimes forgot to adjust her sari so that her head was exposed. She talked a lot at the meetings, and was not shy or intimidated by men. When asked about her own experience as a *gram panchayat* member, she simply said that she planned to make the most of the opportunity. "If women are confined to the home, their knowledge will also be limited to household matters. It is not their fault. Do men know how to cook and manage the home? No, because they never applied themselves to this work. Similarly, unless women step outside the home and take an interest, they will not succeed."

However, she also thought that reservations for women were not effective. She believed that the *gram panchayat* did not possess sufficient power to take action and that the *panchayat* members were too bogged down in caste conflict and power struggles. An experience she recently underwent further illustrates her views.

Seema Mane was involved in a government scheme set up for women in the form of a savings plan. This was part of a larger program included under the rubric of "self-help groups", or SHGs, as they are known, designed to promote self-reliance among women. As an active female member of the *gram panchayat*, she was given the responsibility of heading this program. She had to report all the activities to the

*panchayat* as well as to the higher authorities in charge of implementing the programs at the *panchayat samiti* level.

This particular program assisted women in making brooms and candles, both of which were then sold for a profit. The women got to keep part of the profits. The rest was used to buy more raw materials needed for the candles and brooms. Through the savings plan, the women had also collectively rented a truck in order to have the raw materials delivered to the village on time. The savings plan had twenty-five female member participants, most from the lower castes. So this particular project was designed to empower lower caste women.

At the time this research was conducted, Seema Mane experienced a serious threat to her work and stood to lose not only her position in the *panchayat*, but also her role in the self-help group. She stated that she was approached by some of the male members of the *panchayat* (who were also of the Maratha caste) and informed that she was expected to share the profits made with them. When she questioned them, she was reminded of her caste status in the village and was also informed that it was only because of their mercy that she was even in a decision-making position.

When she refused to comply with their requests, she found herself the target of an accusation involving misappropriation of funds intended for the self-help group. She was accused at the *gram sabha* meeting and her caste became an issue, as the audience was reminded about the negative stereotypes associated with her particular caste. A proposal was discussed to pass a vote of no confidence against her if she insisted on continuing in her present positions. She was also accused of making arbitrary decisions, not taking into

consideration the views of other committee members, and not being efficient in implementing resolutions and programs.

However, since these charges were never proved and since Seema Mane was aware of her rights, she insisted on taking up the matter with the *panchayat samiti*, as per the protocol. When she demanded a formal investigation in the presence of the authorities from the *panchayat samiti*, the accusers backed down and the matter was resolved.

Laxmi Koli, another female representative from the Tulsapur *Gram Panchayat*, found herself in a similar situation. She was elected in the year 2000, hence was a new member when I met and interviewed her. She was a member of the Koli caste, also an SC. Her family situation was similar to Seema Mane's. She had two daughters and one son ages ten, eight and six, respectively. Her husband was a construction worker, but worked on a contract basis and thus was often unemployed. They lived in a joint family with the husband's mother, brother, and his family.

She was also very interested in doing something for the women in the village. She initiated a micro credit savings plan, sponsored by the *gram panchayat*. The plan became effective shortly before my visits to the village. However, they had to wait another three months before they could withdraw any of the cash from it. There were fifteen women involved in it. They each contributed Rs.20 to a bank account every month. The amount was to be given as a loan to one of the women. The loan was meant for women who were interested in starting some kind of business. Laxmi Koli specified that it was not meant for household expenses. A fixed amount was to be paid back every month. The account in the bank was under three names: the *sarpanch*, the *gram sevak* and hers.

In order for Laxmi Koli to make any withdrawals, she needed the signatures of the other two people. However, whenever she asked to see the balance or bank statements, she was told that the money had not yet been deposited. Long after the deadline for the deposit, when she asked again, she was informed that the money had already been allocated to the “deserving” women. She concluded that the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak* together had predetermined the beneficiaries of the loan and had distributed the money without her or anyone else’s consent.

While this case might not directly appear to be related to caste, it was more than a coincidence that the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak*, as well as the beneficiaries, all belonged to the Maratha caste. Both Laxmi Koli and her husband insisted that the Tulsapur *gram panchayat* was dominated by caste politics. According to her, “the Patils controlled everything in Tulsapur”. She and her husband believed that they were left out of the decision-making solely due to the fact that they belonged to the Koli caste. While there might not be a direct causal relationship between caste and the issue at hand, the fact that the Kolis resorted to a caste explanation suggests that caste was an important factor to them, regardless of whether or not it was true in this case. What this indicates is also the salience of caste and gender prejudices that are reinforced among lower castes (and lower caste women) over time. For lower caste individuals such as the Kolis, getting bypassed as beneficiaries for various government schemes is understood as caste prejudice. Moreover, the consistent preeminence of the upper castes, in this case the Patils, in decision-making positions over the years has further strengthened lower caste belief that it is due to caste that people are privileged and that caste more than any other variable explains success and prosperity.



Moreover, Laxmi Koli thought that she posed a threat to the *gram panchayat* composition, and thus was deliberately isolated. The fact that she was a relatively new member, unfamiliar with *panchayat* procedures added to it. Although the *panchayat samiti* had seminars for the new members, she did not find the training very useful and concluded that caste conflict and corruption were at the heart of the problems in Tulsapur. When asked her about her future plans and whether she would run for the election again, she replied that she would do it only if she could run for the *sarpanch* seat since all the important decisions were made by the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak*.

#### Caste Politics in Bhimagaon

The situation in Bhimagaon is somewhat different. As described in the previous chapter, Bhimagaon had a comparatively larger *gram panchayat*, with seventeen members. The members were almost evenly divided between two political parties (the Nationalist Congress Party and the Vikas Aghadi Party). The monthly meetings reflected the intense rivalry between the groups, as did the elections and the campaigning that preceded it. The *gram panchayat* elections of 2001 were also an indication of this rivalry. Both parties put up respective panels of candidates for the elections. The Marathas (the Nationalist Congress Party) led one of the panels and the Mahars led the other along with representatives of some other lower castes. The elections created tremendous bitterness between the groups. The results were mixed, with the Marathas gaining an edge over the Mahars who felt they had been manipulated and were bitter about it.

Added to this mix was the fact that the post of the *sarpanch* was reserved for a woman (according to the rotation system). Since the Marathas had the edge, they nominated someone from their caste and party. The female *sarpanch* in Bhimagaon can

best be described as a proxy for the party and individual leaders. The men were the ones who tried to control the decisions through manipulation and backseat driving. This infuriated the Mahars and clear lines were drawn between the two groups. The political situation also affected social interactions and there was a complete breakdown of social interactions even among the other members of the respective castes. People stopped attending each other's social events such as marriages and funerals.

The hostile atmosphere also affected the functioning of the *panchayat*. The *gram sevak* and the *sarpanch* were accused of misappropriating funds. The *sarpanch* was ineffective, with her husband and other members running the show. Decisions were stalled due to the fact that there was absolutely no trust among the *panchayat* members. Caste identity linked to the political party identity superseded all thought and action at this time. Members viewed each other with suspicion along caste lines, apparent through comments such as, "what can you expect from *those* people? After all, they are used to stealing for a living", thereby perpetuating certain stereotypes about castes.

One of the female opposition members who tried to question the actions of the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak* belonged to the lower caste. Her active participation resulted in her being physically threatened. She recalled more than one occasion when *goondas* (hired muscle) from the village came to her house and threatened the family if she did not back down from her inquiries. Instead of giving up, she persisted and with the support of her husband, continued to pursue the issue of the misappropriation of funds in the *gram panchayat*.

According to her, "the men were deliberately attempting to suppress women from taking an active role in *panchayat* matters, because they were the one who were

threatened.” She suggested that, had she belonged to one of the upper castes, the same people who were threatening her family might have offered her husband a share of the profits made by the misappropriation of the funds; but because she belonged to a lower caste, it was out of the question.

Another tactic used is to promote upper caste women as proxies, as was seen in Bhimagaon. The female *sarpanch* in Bhimagaon was clearly not effective in carrying out her responsibilities, and had consciously or unconsciously delegated them to the male members of the *panchayat*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the female *sarpanch* in Bhimagaon often attended the meetings but rarely participated. On more than one occasion, she was seen reading the newspaper, taking phone calls, and even looking through photo albums while the meeting was in process. The *gram sevak* appeared to be in charge. My first interview with her took place in the Bhimagaon *gram panchayat* office. She insisted that the *gram sevak* also be present. When I asked her some basic questions about the gram panchayat, she kept deferring to the *gram sevak* for answers. He in turn, kept telling her to talk.

The *sarpanch* belonged to the Nationalist Congress Party and her husband was the personal assistant to the local Congress Party MLA, two factors that further suggest that she was seen as a proxy for power to remain with the Nationalist Congress Party.

But here again is a contradiction. The female *sarpanch* was ineffective despite being a member of the upper caste (Maratha), while it was the lower caste member who consistently made an effort to question and participate.

The situation in Bhimagaon illustrates the fact that caste identity, while a constant presence, escalated to the forefront at the time of the elections and in the composition of

the *panchayat* thereafter. The role of caste in the *panchayati raj* was also evident at all three levels through the implementation of the various rural development programs.

### Rural Development Programs and Caste Politics

The Government's commitment to empowering SCs, STs and OBCs is evident through the various rural development programs created and implemented throughout the country. Two of the programs deserve special attention because both have had a role in influencing relations between certain castes, and have affected the political atmosphere at all three levels of the *panchayati raj*. The *Jawahar Rojgar Yojna* (the employment scheme), the *Indira Avas Yojna* (the housing scheme), and the Public Distribution System (PDS) are three of the most important of the rural development schemes because they deal with providing employment, shelter and rationed food to the needy, respectively. These programs are also part of the greater poverty alleviation scheme undertaken by the state governments.

The *Jawahar Rojgar Yojna* assists in providing technical and other educational skills needed for employment. The *Indira Avas Yojna* allocates money to be used towards building or repairing houses. The Public Distribution System (PDS) is seen as the most important instrument for the distribution of food, thus ensuring food security in India. The targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was first introduced in 1997, with the aim of providing subsidized rice and wheat to those most vulnerable to food security, households living below the poverty line (BPL).

Eligibility for all three schemes is determined at the *panchayat* level and often becomes a source of conflict and tension within the *panchayat* and the larger community. The problems experienced by women with the PDS system were similar in the Malegaon

*Panchayat Samiti* and the Sangli Zilla Parishad. One of the major problems identified was related to the issue of eligibility. Several female representatives complained, that in the villages that were part of their constituencies, the poor and needy were not included in the BPL list and were excluded from obtaining rationed food. They claimed that people who were in a better financial position were the ones benefiting from the PDS. Women argued that there was a need to change the schemes to ensure fair and equitable food distribution. Since a majority of the poor population in the rural areas is also part of an SC, ST, or OBC group, eligibility for the development programs is a means for both economic and social upward mobility.

Misuse of food distribution by selling the grains on the black market was another problem. A delegate from the *panchayat samiti* claimed that people in her village did not get their fair share of grains, because the dealers were selling large quantities on the black market. Women also argued that there was a need to appoint female dealers. Furthermore, there was only one ration shop among five villages, so this also made it more difficult for people to get access to food.

Accessibility was another problem. Several delegates from the *zilla parishad* complained that they needed more shops in order for everyone to get access to food. In most districts, there was one shop among two or three villages. Another delegate discussed a similar situation in her village. In this case there were only two shops among twelve villages that were part of the *panchayat*. Thus women argued that there was a need for more shops and that the number of shops should be proportionate to the growing population in the rural areas. Additionally, lower caste delegates stressed the need for opening ration shops in lower caste neighborhoods so that lower caste women would

have access to the shops. One delegate narrated the difficulty lower caste women from her constituency faced in getting to the shop. Because the shop was located in the upper caste section of the village, low caste women not only had a challenging walk physically, but also had to walk barefoot with their *chappals* (sandals) on their heads as soon as they entered the upper caste area, as a sign of respect and deference to the upper castes. The delegate emphatically argued about the humiliation these women faced and demanded that it was the *zilla parishad*'s responsibility to ensure that they did not have to endure such hardships to get food to which they were entitled.

However, in some of the villages such as Bharatpur the ration shops were functioning well. Here the female *sarpanch* devised a plan to ensure fair and equitable distribution of the food grains. She formed a committee with two women from the *panchayat*, and one of the village elders to oversee food distribution. The shop needed the signatures of the committee members in order to dispense food. Furthermore, the shop also had to be open for a minimum of three days every month. With this change, the *sarpanch* reported that the shop had been functioning well.

One delegate reported that there was no ration shop in her village, while another said that although there was one shop in her village, people could not buy food there because of problems with the cards. There was a problem with the issuing of cards, similar to the eligibility problem, and due to misuse, the needy were denied access to the ration shops. People had to rely on the food distributed to the children in the schools (*anganwadis*).

Some of the female delegates at a *zilla parishad* meeting also complained that there was misuse of the BPL schemes in their villages. Decisions to include people on the

list were made prior to *gram sabha* meetings, thus leaving the villagers no say in the matter. Moreover, women complained that often *gram sabhas* were not conducted at all.

While rural development programs affect the entire rural population, women have a vested interest in the public distribution system mainly because they are responsible for providing food for the family. Although traditional gender roles classify the man as the family provider, in practice, women are responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the home. It is women who know the cost of food, how much they need, and how they need to stretch it out to last throughout the month. Women are the first in line at the ration shops for oil and grains. Women are the ones negotiating prices of vegetables at the local market.

Food distribution is particularly important for poor women, and many of the poor women are also lower caste women. This concern about having sufficient food for the family was evident even during my interviews. Often they occurred in women's homes. I watched my informants and talked to them as they went about their household chores. Tea would be offered to me as soon as I entered, and often someone would go to the grocery store to buy just enough sugar for my cup of tea. Sugar is an expensive and luxury commodity in poor, rural households, to be used only on special occasions and for guests. I would also be invited to stay for a meal and women would proudly announce that the *chapatis* (bread) had been cooked with oil (again illustrating the fact that oil too was used extremely sparingly).

It is not surprising that women were concerned about the allocation and distribution of food through the PDS. Lower caste women were concerned about the fair and equitable distribution of food. Female elected representatives used their positions in

the *panchayats*, *samitis* and *zilla parishad* to argue for a more equitable distribution of food. They also used their positions to criticize the mismanagement of the programs and complained that the poor and the needy were not the beneficiaries of the programs.

The most common criticism of the PDS was that upper castes benefited the most, while they were the ones who needed the subsidies the least. Lower caste women were especially concerned about this issue, criticizing the structure of the development programs, and arguing that their needs and concerns were not taken into consideration.

Here we see a gendered criticism of the development programs on two levels. Women criticized the functioning of the programs by pointing to the distortions in the actual distribution of food. The complaints about who benefited from the programs illustrate this level of criticism. The second criticism was aimed (perhaps indirectly) at the structure of the programs. A common complaint was that women's (and again lower caste, poor women) concerns were ignored. For example, the number and location of the ration shops in a village often determined the level of access. In villages where physical mobility was determined by caste, lower caste women were not comfortable walking to the ration shop located outside their immediate neighborhood. Women also complained that they needed more than one ration shop in the village. This suggests that women were addressing the issue of "participating" in development, by raising questions about how and why gendered needs could be incorporated into development programs.

#### Caste and Social Status Among *Panchayat* Members

The female delegates at the *zilla parishad* meetings often brought up the issue of the fear that female *gram panchayat* members faced in attending *gram sabhas*, especially those from the lower castes. When they did attend, they hardly spoke. Many of the female



*gram panchayat* members were conscious of their caste and their actions reflected this concern. For example, it was common to see SC, ST and OBC women stand or sit together in a corner, at a clear physical distance from the rest of the *panchayat* members at a *gram sabha*.

This was also evident in the manner in which the villages were structured. Communities were divided along caste lines, so that one could look at a certain section of the village and determine what caste resided there. The geographic distance between castes also translated into social distance. For example, members of the lower castes would hesitate to cross the street if Marathas were present there. One woman narrated an incident where she refused to buy the groceries needed for the midday meal, because upper caste members were in the store. Rather than risk the humiliation of being asked to leave the store, she decided not to enter it and as a result bore the wrath of her hungry husband.

While social conditions have improved, there is still a wide gap between the upper and lower castes. Furthermore, in spite of reservations, SC, ST, and OBC women are treated differently particularly at the *panchayat* level. A SC member reported that she rarely attended meetings because upper caste members were present, and said that when she did, she always sat on the floor and not on the chairs. In fact, this was a fairly common occurrence. Often when I would meet with women from the lower castes, I would be the only one given a chair, while the rest would sit on the floor around me. After the first couple of times, feeling extremely uncomfortable with the set-up, I would also sit on the floor with them.

My point is that the informal institution of caste behavior with all the rules and norms associated with it still persists, particularly in the social sphere of village life. Social interactions are confined to particular castes, and these include everything from friendly visits with neighbors to marrying within one's caste. It soon became clear that the social and political situation in the villages was a delicate one. Intense factionalism existed, and along with it an equally fierce loyalty to one's caste. Any information that was shared was also treated as a very personal matter. The only people with whom such matters were discussed were others from the same caste, and I was repeatedly asked about my motives for seeking the information that I gathered.

Furthermore, despite my attempt to remain neutral in gathering information about various castes and factions, I was suspected of being loyal to the opposing side. For instance, during my initial visits, my movements in the village were watched and I was asked specifically about whose homes I had visited and whether or not I had tea in those homes (offering tea to a guest is perhaps one of the most common social customs in Indian life). Social honor in the caste system is very closely linked with ritual values. Lifestyles held in high esteem are generally associated with certain rituals (Beittelle 1965, 188). Thus it took time to establish trust between the subjects and myself.

#### Upper Caste Women and Politics in Sakharwadi

The discussion so far has focused on the influence of caste rules and norms as they restrain women of lower castes from fully participating in political life. The situation is also complicated for upper caste women. Traditionally, upper caste women had restricted mobility, especially Brahmin women. Although they were given education, they were discouraged from working outside the home and were seen as wives and

mothers. Many existed also in a type of *purdah*, literally segregated from the rest of the world and interacting only with the men of the household.

Maratha women in particular were subject to the social restrictions mentioned above. However, in Sakharwadi, upper caste women were effective in bringing about social and political change, defying historical stereotypes. The majority of the people in Sakharwadi are Hindus who belong to the Maratha caste, the dominant caste group in the area. They trace their origins back to Shivaji, one of the greatest military and political heroes of the Marathas, who among other things, was successful in keeping the Moguls away from Maharashtra. In Sakharwadi, traditionally the Marathas have dominated local politics and have influenced appointments to the posts of the Police Chief and *gram sevak*. Most of the land in the village is also owned and cultivated by the Marathas. Land ownership among other groups is marginal, most who depend on crafts and services for their livelihood.

Marathas traditionally are known for their conservative attitudes towards women. Maratha women have always been secluded from the public sphere, and many of the Maratha women in Sakharwadi continue to follow traditional roles dictated by caste. Working outside the home is frowned upon, unless absolutely necessary, as is higher education. Thus what happened in Sakharwadi was even more unique given this caste background.

#### Case Study of Sakharwadi

Sakharwadi is a village situated in Western Maharashtra in the Sangli District. In 1991, it village had a total population of 5,172. The major crops grown here are jowar, peanuts, soybean, and sugarcane, and the major occupation of the people is farming.

There are 521 wells in Sakharwadi. The major source of water is the Krishna River. There are 34 built homes (permanent structures made of bricks) and 1268 households (Govt of India Census 1991). There are also two grocery stores and two milk dairies. Sakharwadi is 3 km from Mhaisal, the location of the nearest train station as well as a major bus station. So it is relatively well connected. It is about 15 km away from Malegaon. There is a cement factory, rubber factory, a State Transport bus station, and a radio transmission center. There is a high school, as well as a number of private hospitals and a library.

The political situation in Sakharwadi has been fairly stable, because the Marathas dominate local politics. The *gram panchayat* (local government council) in Sakharwadi is made up of thirteen members, nine men and four women. At the time of my field research, the *sarpanch* (chairperson) of the *panchayat* was male. Most of the *panchayat* members (9 out of 13) belonged to the Maratha caste. Of the four female members, three belonged to the Maratha caste, while one belonged to the scheduled caste (backward caste).

Sakharwadi prospered economically from the 1970s onwards for a number of reasons. First, its proximity to Malegaon, the nearest large city, and also a train junction, has allowed for a steady market for sugarcane and other crops. Because this part of the state is also the site for a number of sugar factories, it is no surprise that the major crop grown in the region is sugar cane. With the introduction of electricity in the village about 20 years ago, farmers have been able to improve their farming methods by fixing electric pumps on their wells.

Economic prosperity brought with it other changes, such as the opening of a bank and the upgrade of the school to Standard 12 (high school level). It also resulted in an increase in consumer capacity, evidenced by with the number of TV sets and phones in households. Many villagers found jobs in the nearby city of Malegaon, as wage laborers in factories, etc. However, this did not last for long, and in the past few years there has been an economic slump due to a reduction in the sugar cane crop. Drought and famine are the major causes for this, while wage laborers have also lost jobs in the city. Thus unemployment levels have risen. During my weekly visits to Sakharwadi, I regularly saw groups of men sitting around and talking or gambling during the day, because they did not have jobs. The current economic situation in the village has resulted in a number of social problems, such as alcoholism and domestic violence.

The women in Sakharwadi face many of the same problems of rural women in the rest of the state and country, particularly regarding alcoholism and abuse resulting from it. In the past few years, with the economic decline, many of the men in the village have become alcoholics. As a result, many women have had to step out of the house in search of employment. While it is very common to find rural Indian women working outside of the house either as wage laborers or as domestic servants, it was unusual n Sakharwadi because these women belonged to the Maratha caste, a caste in which women traditionally were secluded from the outside world and activities.

Thus, out of economic necessity, Maratha women have started working, mostly in the fields, where they earn about Rs. 30 (less than a dollar) a day. This income is often the only income for families in Sakharwadi. Typically, women work for eight hours a day, then come home and take care of the family.

The problem of alcoholism in the village is closely linked with poverty and the resulting frustration. Men often demand the wages earned by their wives and spend it on alcohol. If they refuse, women stand the risk of physical abuse. Because of social norms, women often do not speak up about abuse, and some even accept it as part of marriage. Such attitudes are not uncommon in India, given the strong influence of cultural attitudes regarding gender relations, particularly in marriage.

However, for the past couple of years, women in Sakharwadi have increasingly been speaking up against domestic violence and alcoholism, first with each other, then with the female elected *panchayat* members. The four elected members also encouraged women to mobilize and share their thoughts and concerns about their personal lives. While this was done largely outside the parameters of the *panchayat*, it did ultimately have an impact on policy changes that occurred within the *panchayat*.

#### The Village Cleanliness Program and the *Panchayati Raj*

In October 2000, the Maharashtra State Government launched an innovative and unique village cleanliness campaign focused on improving sanitation. This *Sant Gadge Baba Village Sanitation Campaign* was implemented throughout the state. The campaign was formulated with the objective of making villages clean, so as to ultimately improve health standards and the general quality of life. Towards these goals, the campaign also emphasized active co-operation and participation of the village community.

The duration of the initial campaign was limited to two weeks in October 2000. Every village throughout the state was required to devote this fortnight to sanitation-related activities and was notified that its efforts would be evaluated. During the first year, this program was successfully implemented throughout the state. When it was

repeated the following year, in 2001, the results were even better. A study conducted among six villages in the Sangli District concluded that the program had a deep and sustainable impact on the villages (Jalvaani 2000). Furthermore, the campaign had an impact on overall village empowerment. It resulted in increased confidence levels among villagers regarding their abilities. It also improved the confidence of the government in the concept of the *Panchayati Raj*.

The campaign was named after a social reformer, *Gadge Baba*, born in 1876 in a poor family in Amravati in northeastern Maharashtra. He made a living working in the fields as a wage laborer. A chance encounter with a *sadhu* (holy man) changed his life when he realized that what he really wanted to do was teach people the values he held dear, values about self-reliance, honest and hard work and respect for the environment.

He took his teachings on the road, traveling by foot throughout the district of Amravati, and then to other parts of the state. He always carried a broom with him and wore a plate on his head as symbols of his beliefs regarding an individual's civic duties towards keeping communities clean. As soon as he would enter a village, he would begin to sweep the streets with the broom. He relied on donations from people and with the money he was able to build shelters for the homeless, clinics and schools. His campaign became very successful and popular throughout the state until his death in 1956.

In the year 2000, in an effort to raise awareness about the need for cleanliness among villagers, the Minister for Rural Development, Mr. R.R. Patil, instituted the cleanliness campaign. This idea was prompted by the result of a survey done on the extent of the use of sanitation facilities built by the government. The survey revealed that

between 1997 and 2000, of the 61,000 toilets built in Maharashtra, only 57 percent were in use (Frontline 2002).

The report suggested two reasons for the lack of use of public toilets. First, there was no integrated approach to sanitation, and second, there was little community involvement. The lack of sanitation and inadequate personal hygiene has had a major impact on the quality of life in rural Maharashtra. In the past three years, over 2,840 people have died in epidemics. Many primary schools suffer from sanitation-related diseases such as scabies, dental problems and worm-related diseases (Jalvaani 2000). State governments have been struggling to improve the coverage of rural sanitation in the country, which is estimated at a total of only 16-20 percent. The cleanliness competition was designed to address all these issues, with the hope that it would inspire people to take on development as an entire community.

#### Program Structure and Organization

“Clean water, my duty, and safe water, my right”, were the kinds of messages promoted during the campaign. Communities were mobilized around issues like full recovery of sanitation and water charges from beneficiaries, managing water schemes, minimizing expenses for repair, and the use of local material for toilet construction. Visits to nearby villages that adopted these practices were also organized as part of the campaign.

Meetings were organized at the state, district, block and village level that were attended by government officials as well as elected members. A *gram sabha* (village meeting) was held in each participating *panchayat* to constitute a village sanitation



committee, which would include various groups such as backward classes, women and youth. Government staff assisted these committees.

Included in the campaign were activities such as redecorating households and the surrounding areas. Separate days were allocated for activities covering different aspects of sanitation such as garbage clearance, cleaning and constructing soak pits, and whitewashing the local school. Other activities included seminars organized by the *zilla parishad* on education about sanitation and personal hygiene. In an effort to create awareness and to involve women and youth, slogan and essay writing competitions were organized.

The villages were judged on the basis of a number of criteria chosen by the State Government. Drinking water was assessed in terms of cleanliness, waste water disposal, water quality monitoring, cost of repairs of household connections and public stand posts, and performance of the village water and sanitation committee. Under the category of personal hygiene, the sanitation environment around houses and schools, children's personal habits, medical reports in schools, and performance of day care centers (*anganwadis*) were also evaluated. For the evaluation at the grassroots level, three of the best villages were selected and ranked within respective *panchayat samitis* (blocks). Next, at the block level, three villages were chosen from all the *panchayat samitis* to represent the entire district. The villages were given cash prizes of Rs. 500,000, Rs. 300,000 and Rs. 200,000 respectively.

During the competition held in 2001, the three best or cleanest villages chosen from the Sangli District were Tung, which came in first, Kavathepiran in second place and Sakharwadi in third place. While all three villages demonstrated excellent results in

terms of meeting the criteria of the competition, I shall focus on the experience of Sakharwadi, as it was unique. Although Sakharwadi stood third in the overall competition, something unexpected occurred during the process of mobilizing for the campaign that resulted in an unprecedented move initiated by the women in the village.

Before the campaign, the female elected members had attempted to raise the issue of alcoholism during regular *panchayat* meetings, but their concerns were dismissed. With the exception of the chairperson and the *gram sevak* the men on the councils believed this to be a personal issue that needed to be solved within the private sphere. Interestingly, both the chairperson and the secretary encouraged women to speak out about the issue at the semi-annual *gram sabha* meetings. However, the women did not get much support from the rest of the villagers at the *gram sabha*. On the contrary, some of the women faced the wrath of their husbands for speaking out in public.

Furthermore, women (both elected and others) were discouraged from attending *gram sabha* meetings in Sakharwadi, as there had been instances in which discussions at *gram sabha* meetings had turned into physical fights among members.

Then the state initiated the cleanliness campaign and the entire village community in Sakharwadi became involved in it. As required by the campaign, regular *gram sabha* meetings were held, in which decisions were made and responsibilities were delegated. Women participated actively in these meetings and initiated several issues that were discussed. Every evening, for the two-week long duration of the campaign, women would gather in front of the *gram panchayat* office to talk about the tasks accomplished and other issues. . It was at one such gathering that a couple of the female elected officials suggested drafting another proposal regarding alcoholism, this time with a request to shut

down the two state-owned liquor shops in the village. This proposal, signed by 100 women, was discussed again at the next local council meeting, but was rejected because it lacked a majority of votes.

By this time, the petition had stirred up enough controversy so that several other groups expressed interest in assisting the female officials and other women involved in this campaign. Most notably, all of the self-help groups in the village (most of which are state-funded) joined in, as did youth groups. A door-to-door campaign began in which women encouraged other women to sign a petition to ban the sale of alcohol in the village

Finally, another *gram sabha* was called on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and almost 1400 women came forward and signed the petition. This time no men were allowed at the meeting, in order to enable women to speak freely. About 80% of the total female voting population signed the petition. This was something unprecedented in the history of the *gram panchayats* in the Sangli district. The women also demanded to speak with the Chief Executive Officer (the highest level government bureaucrat in the district), and staged a protest outside the local council office, until he arrived a couple of hours later.

The immediate result of this initiative was a ban on the sale of alcohol in the village. Both the shops were shut. Furthermore, at the local council meeting the female members put forward another resolution that called for implementing fines for men caught violating the ban. Individuals were to be fined Rs. 1,000 (about \$20) if caught drinking in the village. They also painted a billboard stating the terms of the exact punishment for violators. Besides instituting formal punishment, shaming techniques were also used including shaving men's heads and parading them through town on

donkeys. In the first three months after the ban was instituted, the local council collected more than Rs.50, 000 (approximately \$1,000) in fines.

After the ban, the consumption of alcohol decreased. However, men continued to drink. They traveled to the next village to purchase alcohol. Several women involved in the campaign also reported being threatened by some villagers, and feared that it would be only a matter of time before the ban was lifted.

Nonetheless, the Sakharwadi case demonstrates how women used both the opportunity and space provided by the state effectively to address their specific demands. The cleanliness campaign seemed to be the right opportunity, because there was much pressure on the entire village to succeed and win the competition. Thus, members of the *panchayat* seemed more receptive to new proposals, in the hope that it would lead to better performance in the competition. The women realized this and used it to their benefit. Moreover, they also quite literally used the space provided by holding an all women's *gram sabha*. While traditionally women in Sakharwadi had rarely attended *gram sabha* meetings, they came out in record numbers when given opportunities offered by the cleanliness campaign.

Similarly, the cleanliness campaign worked to their advantage of the female elected members of the *panchayat* because they had the backing of other groups in the village, which otherwise might not have assisted them. Thus it was easier for them to propose the ban on alcohol without the fear of immediate negative consequences. This example illustrates the manner in which women from both inside and outside of the *panchayat* mobilized to achieve their goals. Furthermore, women's groups were successful *because* they had the support of the female elected members, making it

possible for the legislation. In other words, the presence and actions of the female elected members were crucial in getting the legislation passed, something that would have been a tremendous challenge otherwise.

The actions of the Sakharwadi women had four major consequences: democratic decision-making, addressing the issue of caste conflict, empowerment of the *gram sabha* and the attempt to change policy at the *panchayat* level. First, the sanitation campaign that resulted in people's participation in decision-making regarding various development-related issues. Villagers were able to identify and then prioritize their needs and tasks. They also raised funds through voluntary donations to carry out various projects. The successful implementation of the alcohol ban in Sakharwadi indicates that democratic decision-making occurred through people's participation in the campaign. Moreover, the results of the campaign suggest that social mobilization occurred at several levels. It also suggests that the sanitation campaign served as a medium for social change.

Second, the campaign also indirectly addressed the issue of caste conflict, as it resulted in the mobilization of villagers in general and women in particular from all the castes. Maratha women particularly played an important role in this campaign, defying traditional stereotypes. They worked closely with women from the backward castes, often socializing with them, something that was unheard of in such a caste-segregated community.

Third, the campaign also resulted in the empowerment of the *gram sabha*. One of the goals of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment includes the strengthening of the *gram sabha* (ISS 1994). Ideally, the *gram sabha* is the platform through which democratic decision-making can occur at the rural level. It includes concepts of inclusive participation by the

entire village community and of course, deliberation of important issues. However, over the years, in many instances, the *gram sabha* has had only symbolic power, with real power and decision-making limited to the elected members of the *panchayats* (Matthew 1994). Thus the success of the women's only *gram sabha* in Sakharwadi can be seen as a means for bringing the *gram sabha* back to the center of deliberations at the village level.

Finally, the campaign provided women with an opportunity and space to come together and discuss issues. Although women in Sakharwadi started out by discussing issues directly related to cleanliness and sanitation, as mandated by the campaign, nevertheless, they soon focused on a social issue they thought was most relevant. Women successfully changed the agenda in this instance and implemented policy suited to their needs.

### Conclusion

The picture that emerges in this chapter suggests that caste identity is prominent in *panchayat* politics and at certain times precedes gender identity. Caste practice sanctioned by Hindu ideology continues to persist, despite a constitutional ban on caste discrimination. People are identified by their caste, particularly in rural settings. Caste identity forms a prominent part of women's identities. Women face the double burden of caste and gender. Lower caste women particularly are affected and limited by their caste identities. Despite the fact that people have been affected by new ideas and changes that have influenced their interactions and understanding of caste, it remains difficult to let go of cultural norms and behaviors.

While there is no open hostility or resentment against reservation of seats for lower castes (and women), and that people seem to accept this at least superficially, high

caste males use manipulative tactics for keeping women removed from any meaningful decision-making, especially lower caste women. Upper caste men in powerful positions also attempt to hold on to their power by supporting the more compliant candidates from the lower castes. As long as these women do not question anything, conflict is avoided.

This also raises the question of how upper caste women participate. Here again one finds a mixed picture. The female *sarpanch* in Bhimagaon maintained the stereotypes of Maratha women, while the Maratha women in Sakharwadi defied all stereotypes. The *sarpanch* was only marginally involved in *panchayat* activities and did not pursue a specific goal –gendered or otherwise. This can be attributed largely to the fact that the dominant political party in Bhimagaon influenced major decision-making, including nominating women to the *gram panchayat*. So in this case, her upper caste did contribute to her nomination and election to the *panchayat*, but once she had been elected, caste restrictions along with party politics and a perhaps a personal lack of interest contributed to her ineffective behavior.

In Sakharwadi, Maratha women who participated in the village cleanliness program defied traditional stereotypes as a result of a combination of factors. Women experienced a tremendous amount of social energy, released as a result of their entry into the political process. Both reservations and the cleanliness campaign led elected women and others to take up a common problem of the community, in this case- alcoholism. Viewed in this context, traditional caste stereotypes were more than offset by this tremendous social energy.

Women's self-esteem was impacted positively through the experience of both reservations and other state-based initiatives such as the cleanliness campaign. This type

of inclusion of women into the public realm has long-term implications for gender relations in the society and the family.

Meanwhile, lower caste women in particular are conscious of their caste identity, as seen in Tulsapur, where one of them succeeded in her work, while the other one failed. Perhaps the arena where caste identities become most prominent is with regards to distribution of resources and during elections. Because they represent the largest groups to benefit from government schemes, lower castes are viewed with contempt. There has been a constant effort to manipulate the process through which upper caste members select beneficiaries.

Similarly, during elections, caste lines become more divisive, with different political parties representing different caste interests. However, this is seen more at the *panchayat* level as opposed to the *taluka* and *zilla* levels, where party identities take precedence over other identities. *Gram panchayat* elections bring out the centrality of caste. The elections are fought along caste lines where there is a strong contest, and consensus is also reached on the basis of caste.

Thus caste affects both upper and lower caste women. Both groups of women are limited by their caste identities. In the case of lower caste women, the obstacles faced are obvious: lack of mobility, lack of decision-making authority in politics, and attempts to remove them from power once elected through allegations of misconduct and no-confidence motions. Lower caste women also remain marginalized in the allocation of state-funded resources. Caste is the major variable along which marriage and social relations occur. Although caste based reservations have resulted in successful legislative and policy changes favoring lower caste, middle and upper castes are in a better position



to take advantages of the benefits offered by the state in areas of education, employment and government.

Caste affects upper caste women differently. On the one hand, upper caste women are seen as privileged, with the opportunities and resources to succeed in life. However, upper caste women have also been traditionally isolated from the rest of the society. As a result, upper caste women continue to be isolated from the political process, with upper caste men speaking and acting on their behalf.

Overall, caste identity remains powerful and important for women, particularly for lower caste women. This identity combined with their social status results in even more complexities that will be explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### WOMEN, FAMILY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Universally, women's lives have revolved around the family. In India, family and relationships that arise from it lies at the core of an Indian women's identity. The social and cultural construction of gender roles and the broader social structure within which women exist influence all activity, including political participation of women. This chapter explores the role of the family and the household in the lives of women in order to understand how gender roles and power relations that exist within the family are further reproduced in the political arena. The chapter is divided into three sections; Part One presents a brief historical sketch of the status of women in Indian culture and society. Part Two explores the social and cultural construction of gender roles today. Part Three discusses the influence of family and the household on female elected representatives of the *panchayati raj*.

#### Women's Social Status in a Historical Perspective

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Hinduism had the most profound impact on Indian culture and society in general. Other religions such as Buddhism and Islam have also contributed to the construction of various ideologies regarding the roles of women. During the period when Buddhism flourished in India, women were assigned an honored place in social life, although they were still regarded inferior to men (Asthana 1974). They were free to travel and be educated and even to remain unmarried.

The situation worsened with the advent of the Muslim invasion in the eleventh century. Women were forcibly taken away to be slaves or to be married into Muslim homes. Hindus were compelled by these circumstances to further curtail the freedom of their women and also to deny them education. Some scholars also argue that the system of early marriage also owes its origins to this development ensuring that Hindu girls could be placed under the protection of their husbands at an early age (Asthana 1974). Some of the other consequences included the practice of polygamy and infanticide among girls because they began to be considered a burden on parents.

During the Mughal period, the birth of a female child was unwelcome in both Hindu and Muslim families and the practice of female infanticide were prevalent in some sections of society. Muslims also adopted the systems of early marriage and dowry, but these created some complications because of the system of polygamy, especially in a family where widows had children by former husbands. Hindus were mostly monogamous, with the exception of the ruling classes and those in families where a first wife did not bear a son. During this time, two Mughal emperors, Humayun and his son Akbar, tried to prohibit the practice of sati, but were unsuccessful.

Women's positions deteriorated steadily in the later years of the Mughal Empire. The disruption due to the Mughal invasion and the consequent political confusion throughout the country further added to the deterioration of women's status, and as a result, when the British period started in the eighteenth century, the position of Indian women was the worst in the history of the country.

Child marriage was the general rule for all respectable Hindus, and the custom had even spread to some sections of the Muslim population. Sati was widely prevalent

and even the Sikhs practiced it, although it was forbidden by their gurus (Thomas 1964, 285). *Purdah* (veiling) was strictly enforced on Muslim women and on some Hindu women. Literacy for women was seen as a threat and polygamy was widely practiced.

This was roughly the position when the British began to expand their trading colonies in India. The subsequent 200 years of colonization by the British were to have a significant impact on Indian society in general and on women in particular. The most important difference between British colonialism and previous foreign rule was that the British remained aliens, whereas every former ruling group had become Indianised and had integrated itself into India's existing social and economic structure. The result was that the economic benefits accruing to the ruling group were no longer kept within Indian boundaries but were exported, the wealth draining from the soil of India into British coffers (Nehru 1946, 302).

The British systematically destroyed both Indian agricultural self-sufficiency and its indigenous industry. Rural wealth was drained out of India by means of land revenue. The British concept of private property changed the structure of rural land ownership by allowing the *zamindars* (revenue collectors) to evict the farmers whereas previously they had only held revenue collection rights. Further, British practices also destroyed the Indian textile industry. In 1813, Britain imposed a duty of 78% on Indian muslin imported into England, whereas the duty on English cotton imported into India was only 3% (Liddle and Joshi 1986, 24). Thus, the commercial success of the East India Company led to eventual political dominance and the British became the rulers of a large empire.

The era of British rule had a tremendous impact on the status of Indian women. Here it is important to differentiate between official governmental policies and laws regarding women, and the efforts of individuals and organizations. The fact remains that the colonial experience was to forever change the lives and future of Indians.

### The Social Structure

In India, there have been infinite variations on the status of women, diverging according to cultural norms, family structure, class and caste. As mentioned in the previous section, religion served as the primary paradigm for social values and norms for women in this period. These paradigms provided a definition of what it meant to be female and shaped roles for women in Indian society for generations to come. Reformers' efforts to change the status of women in the 19th and 20th centuries mainly revolved around issues such as child and widow marriage, *sati*, *purdah* and divorce.

Marriage as an institution has existed in every society since time immemorial. Besides procreation, it is said to cater to very basic needs of men and women by providing security, companionship and stability, thus forming the nucleus of family life. It is no wonder then that marriage is given such an important place in Indian society. Marriage is a must for most Indian women. The traditional, religious, and sociological aspects of marriage have contributed largely to the definition and role of the Indian woman. Although the Indian concept of marriage gives ample scope to a husband and wife to fulfill their duties to the home, family and community, the patriarchal traditions of Hindu culture gave the husband greater authority and power as the bread earner, with the wife becoming the nucleus of the home (Khanna and Varghese 1978).

The ideology of "*pativrata*", which literally means the "virtuous wife", has dominated the lives of women in Indian society throughout history. It has also sustained the patriarchal structure that gave rise to this ideology in the first place. This ideology provides all the rules and references regarding gender roles in Indian society. It is based on certain assumptions and beliefs regarding the nature of men and women and their interactions. Most central to these beliefs is the assumption that men are ritually pure, physically strong and emotionally mature; women, on the other hand, are ritually impure, physically and emotionally weak and lack strong will power (Dhruvarajan 1989). Manu summarizes this notion of *pativrata* in his now infamous decree on women: "...though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure, though he have no good points at all, the virtuous wife should ever worship her lord as god" (Basham 1959, 180-181).

The most important concept of *pativrata* is that of the woman's unfailing devotion to her husband. A true *pativrata* should be happy to die for her husband, should never expect anything from him, and should be his true helpmate in every aspect of his life. Further, she is expected to be completely obedient to him (Dhruvarajan 1989). These beliefs not only influenced the roles of women for many centuries, but also legitimized women's dependent position on men in Indian society because religious and philosophical leaders advocated them. This ideology also manipulated the structure of society to ensure that women would accept their positions as inferior to men. Most importantly, however, it reinforced the patriarchal structure of Indian society. Other customs associated with marriage, such as the woman having to give up her natal family and life, figuratively, after marriage contributed to the concept of women as subordinates. Indian girls are taught at a young age to play the role of wife and mother. According to one scholar, the

main ambition of even an educated woman is to finish her studies and settle in marriage (Khanna and Varghese 1978, 12). Thus, one can generalize that for most Indian women, marriage is considered to be the most satisfying and fulfilling aspect of their lives.

Although the wife wielded less economic and material power in Indian society, she was the major force behind the domestic security of the home. Furthermore, because India was an agricultural society, women had less access to the economic community outside the home. This particular aspect of marriage can be argued to be the most influential in the construction of gender roles in Indian society, in which women were confined to the domestic or private world while the men took care of the outside or public world. This confinement of women to a private or domestic sphere is generally seen as controlling and further channeling power towards men.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of women's removal from the economic sphere was the system of dowry that, although it had precedents in the ancient Hindu tradition, did not become institutionalized until the modern period. The institution of dowry further reinforced the notion of women as liabilities and strengthened male dominance. The practice of dowry continues to affect Indian society even today.

One of the most important features of the dowry system that applies strongly to India is its link with the socio-economic condition of the families involved and their concerns with maintaining that status. Dowry, then, goes hand in hand with the class system and in order to attract husbands of higher ranks, there is tremendous pressure on a bride's family to endow her sufficiently with wealth. Madhu Kishwar, who has written extensively about dowry for the journal *Manushi*, argues that the Indian dowry system functions to disinherit women and promotes their economic dependence on men, which according to her is the root of the

problem of dowry murders (Kishwar 1986). While dowry may be defined as a form of female inheritance, the system in India does not allow the woman to control any of the materials that are supposedly hers to use. So, the idea of dowry as female property or wealth does not apply here.

Over the last two decades many reports have surfaced about married women who were burned to death by their husbands or in-laws over the issue of inadequate dowry. These incidents of bride burning are a shocking example of the new forms of violence against women arising in even the most modern settings. From what is known about dowry deaths, they appear to be largely, though not exclusively, occurring in Northwest India, mostly among Hindus although other religions also practice dowry. They occur mostly in the case of arranged marriages. There are estimated 2000 dowry deaths per year, with an estimated two deaths per day occurring in the city of New Delhi alone (Stone and James 1995, 127). Dowry and dowry murders continue despite the fact that dowry transactions have been made illegal since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. As a result of pressure by women's organizations, several amendments to the act have further strengthened the laws against dowry.

The practice of sati also originated from the ideologies of Hinduism that regarded the role of wife and mother as the only proper role for women. The image of a woman willingly throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre goes against the universal right of self-preservation. Paul Courtwright suggests two conclusions that might be drawn from the act of *sati*. Either the woman is not human or she is not acting on her own will (Harlan and Courtwright 1995, 184). Nevertheless, the powerful ideology behind the practice of *sati* of the woman being completely dependent on the man, and thus having no



use for her life after his death, is one which has attracted more attention and cause for analysis than the actual physical act of *sati*. Its various interpretations stress the issues of gender and power and connect it to religion and violence in compelling ways. Further, the issue of *sati* has emerged as an important part of the discourse of feminist criticism of Hindu culture's patriarchal structure. Hindu priests glorified sati to such an extent that it became prevalent among the Rajputs but also among the Jats and Sikhs as well as among the Brahmins in Bengal (Asthana 1974). However, not all widows burnt themselves during this time. Those who chose to remain alive were destined to face society's anger.

Widows were regarded as inauspicious and were ostracized from society. Again, it is important to note that many of the widows I refer to were young girls, married to older men whose marriage may have never been consummated. Remarriage was not acceptable, especially among the upper castes, but it was often practiced among women of lower castes. It is no surprise then that many of the young widows became prostitutes in order to survive. The rigidity of the social system left them few options.

The practice of female infanticide seems to have arisen during the middle period of Indian history (Robinson cited in Haddad and Findly 1983, 192). It took a variety of forms ranging from killing newborn infants by methods such as strangling with the umbilical cord to drowning the baby in a river. Although infanticide was not common to every region, it is important to mention its existence because of the re-occurrence of this practice in the modern day period. Some mothers preferred to kill their baby girls rather than subject them to a harsh life. However, in most cases in the modern period as well, the societal pressures of bearing a son were so intense that women were often left with no choice but to kill female babies. The ideas behind such practices have their roots in the

value of devaluation of women in Indian society. Hence, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries women's lives were governed mainly by blind faith, ritualism and traditionalism. The status of Indian women was determined by the verdicts of lawgivers and jurists (Asthana 1974, 10). The ideologies of *pativrata* and the Laws of Manu were particularly influential in shaping the roles and positions of women for years to come.

### Traditional Construction of Gender

The definition and understanding of gender has not been universal throughout human history. It is specific to particular historic periods, cultural backgrounds, and positions within the hierarchies of class and nationality (Mies 1980). In this chapter I have argued that religion and culture had a strong impact on constructing and defining the role of women in ancient India, and that these old constructions continue to remain among the major paradigms for the construction of gender in Indian society today. In other words, the Hindu religious ideology and the family structure have been the strongest influences in the creation and development of gender roles in India. Further, I argue that these in turn have reinforced the patriarchal structure of the greater Indian society, to which women remain confined even today. Indian society has all along been a male dominated one, where the woman's place has been primarily confined to the home, her role limited to procreation, the upbringing of children, and catering for the needs of men (Jain 1975). This has led to an obvious submissiveness of women to men's needs and dependence on male authority.

The concept of gender in India is specific to its class, cultural and national context. Liddle and Joshi (1989) argue that class, or in the Indian case, caste has a definite relationship with the subordination of women. They suggest that women's

subordination in India needs to be understood in terms of controlling their sexuality, which was essential in the development of a patriarchal structure. Further, since the issues of the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries such as *sati* and child marriage mostly affected only the upper castes, control over a woman's sexuality helped the development of a patriarchal caste hierarchy as well. A universal ideology of patriarchy is the belief that women are more sexual than men and that this sexuality is sinful and needs to be controlled.

Patriarchy in the Indian context is defined as a system in which males have complete power in the economic, social, and political arenas, and has designated gender roles that are appropriate to these arrangements. In addressing the issue of patriarchy's meaning for Indian women, Heidi Hartmann's definition is particularly useful. She identifies the material basis for men's power over women as resting on their control over two major features: women's access to economic resources and women's sexuality (Hartmann 1981). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, women's sexuality was controlled by early-arranged marriages with or without her consent, and by the ban on widow remarriage. Forbidding them to work outside the home controlled women's access to economic resources. This was further reinforced by law and custom permitting only males to inherit immovable property, ensuring women's economic dependence on them (Liddle and Joshi 1989).

The traditional construction of gender is embedded in the interlocking of religious, economic and social kinship structures that define the social domains of males and females (World Bank Country Study 1991). These domains are characterized in terms of the public/private or the inside/outside dichotomy. These domains associate

women with reproduction and the family, putting them in the private sphere, while men interact with the government and markets in the public sphere. Thus an extremely significant part of the Indian culture's definition of a female is her association with the inside- the home. For every individual and every family there is a "map" of the appropriate domains of women and men. The definition of the "inside" and the precise boundaries of where a woman can operate vary greatly according to the economic status of the household, caste hierarchy, and social norms prevailing in her community or region. In the Indian context, although the practice of "*purdah*" (veiling) was only practiced by certain wealthier communities, withdrawal of women from the work place was one of the most important symbols of high socio-economic status (World Bank Report 1991).

Summing up, in ancient India Hindu ideology and institutions restricted the lives of women (mainly upper caste women) and further reinforced their subordination to and dependence on men. At the same time, lower caste women enjoyed greater social freedoms but were economically exploited by the upper castes. Moreover, the social structure existing in ancient India enhanced the creation and the development of gender roles that continue to exist today. The women's question of the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries revolving around issues of marriage and infanticide remains, at best, only partially solved. The impact of the patriarchal structure that developed as a result of both the ideology and the social structure has had significant consequences on the roles and positions of Indian women.

There is a vast body of literature documenting Indian women, the secondary social status conferred upon them as a result of an ideology that supports women's

subordination to men and the consequences women face due to it in their everyday lives. However, there is also a growing body of literature that documents the changes that have occurred in women's lives as a result of, among other things, educational opportunities, modernization, employment and urbanization. There are considerable differences in the lifestyles of educated, upper and middle class women living in urban areas and poor rural women, who for the most part have been the subjects of this project. Furthermore, Indian women are dealing with pressures that require choices to be made either through accommodation or resistance. Their life experiences are quite different from their mothers'. So it is not uncommon to see Indian women accepting many aspects of modernity as translated through an acceptance of western pop culture, evident through choices made with regards to how they dress, study and work.

What remains unchanged is the idea that regardless of any other achievements in her life, a woman's success is ultimately measured by whether or not she marries and I would further argue, by the number of sons she produces. "May you be the mother of a hundred sons," is a common blessing conferred on young women by elders. Women's identities are tied to their husbands and their families. Marriage as an institution remains the most powerful basis for women's identities and transcends class and caste. In other words, it is still the goal that the majority of women and their families strive towards. Additionally, girls are socialized from a young age to think that their primary roles are to become wives and mothers and to take care of their families. This norm of a woman's "place" inside the home bears significant influence and to the extent that it is accepted, inhibits women's participation in politics.

## Viewing Women in the *Panchayati Raj* through a Gendered Lens

### Bhimagaon Gram Panchayat

Jayashree Sutar is a member of the Bhimagaon *Gram Panchayat*. She was in her first term as a representative when I met her. Like so many of my first meetings with women, this one took place in her home, over a cup of tea. She lived in a joint family with her in-laws. Her household consisted of her parents in law, a brother-in-law, his wife and two children and her own husband and two children. They belonged to the *dhangar samaj* caste (a lower caste, traditionally associated with shepherds). After initial introductions and learning about the reason for my visit, her first words to me were: “you should really be talking to my husband. He is the one who does everything for me. He campaigned for me. He knows everything”. She was the first woman I met who truly had no idea about her role or the functioning of the *gram panchayat*. It appeared that she was not at all interested in politics. She said that she simply couldn’t afford so much time outside of the house. She already had a full time job working in the field as an hourly laborer. She mentioned something about taking care of the temple construction near their house, but I found out later on that her family was not involved in the temple construction.

She had never attended a *gram panchayat* meeting. Her husband attended the meetings and even signed for her. At other times, I witnessed the book being sent to her house for her signature, indicating her presence at a prior meeting. She said she never thought about politics and did not understand it. But she was part of it because she had no choice in the matter. She was asked to run for the election by the one of the political parties and her husband’s employment depended upon her decision. Very simply, as she

put it, “ if I had disagreed, my husband would have lost his job and I would have been the cause for the loss of the family honor.”

When I asked about whether she was involved in any other activities in the village, she mentioned that there was a women’s credit and savings groups that was part of a government scheme. She was quite frustrated with the other women in the village because they refused to repay their loans. Asked if she would contest the election again, she firmly said no and that it was a waste of her time.

This was the first case of a female representative that I encountered who was not interested in participating in the *gram panchayat*. Initially, I characterized her situation as indicating a lack of interest, which in turn caused me to question the frequent assumption that if women were given opportunities, all women would be enthusiastic participants in the political process. While there is considerable evidence supporting the opposite view that not all women are interested in politics, my initial views changed by the end of my time in the field.

By the end of my field- work, I had a clearer picture of life in Bhimagaon and the dynamics within the *gram panchayat*. I understood that women’s lives in Bhimagaon, like almost every other village in India, were governed by the norms and rules of patriarchy in general and marriage and family in particular. For instance, I became aware that women in Bhimagaon were conscious of their every move, their words and their actions, because these were seen as a reflection on the family. These tacit rules applied to both upper caste and lower caste women. Attending the *gram patnchayat* meetings and watching interactions between men and women further illustrated this point. Although there were exceptions (Chaya Kamble), most of the elected representatives, including perhaps most

importantly the female *sarpanch*, either did not attend meetings, or if they did, were silent observers much like myself. Several women attended along with their husbands, who either sat next to them, or hung around the room, participating in everything from small talk to actual decisions.

The situation was similar for another representative. Vanita Patil belonged to the Maratha caste. Her husband worked in a sugar factory. She lived in a nuclear family with two children. Interestingly, she had more formal education than her husband. She was educated until class eight, while her husband had dropped out after class four. As part of the Patil (Maratha) caste, she was regarded to have a higher caste and social status in the village. However, this also indicated that she was subject to stricter social restrictions, particularly in terms of her mobility. She said that women in the village were not free to even walk to the shops. They would take a longer route home just to avoid been seen by men.

She too did not attend meetings regularly. When I asked her about her contributions, she said that she initiated the building of roads and sewers. She also helped people secure house schemes. She did not attend *gram sabhas* either, because no other women attended it. She said that she was happy that she was a member of the *gram panchayat*. However, she could not answer why. I asked her why she wanted to enter politics, and she did not have an answer to this question either. At the end of the interviews, I learned that she only signs her name at the meetings. Her husband accompanied her to every meeting. Also, her father-in-law was a member of the *panchayat* for a number of years. She was part of a politically involved family, i.e. some



one else in the family had prior political experience. She saw herself as fulfilling a role in politics required of her from her family

In other instances, women saw their roles as protectors of the family name and honor. As one representative suggested, speaking up and opposing men in meetings would reflect poorly on our husbands and our families. “We would be seen as arrogant and out of control”, she added. Here again the importance of marriage and family is evident. Although elected as a result of reservations, and at times aware of issues relating to gender equality, women saw themselves and men saw women as Mrs. A or Mrs. B. As a female researcher, I also experienced this attitude.

#### Women as Wives, Mothers and Politicians

From the beginning of my field research, I was conscious of the fact that I was a female, traveling alone, visiting villages, and interacting with men. In order maintain friendly relations with the subjects, I was careful not to disregard social norms. So for instance, a male social worker from a local NGO accompanied me on my initial visits to the villages. Although I was very comfortable expressing myself in Marathi, he was the one who “formally” introduced me to people and explained the purpose of my visit. One of the first questions I was asked (by both men and women) was related to my marital status. In spite of the fact that I displayed visible symbols of my marital status (a wedding band and a *mangalsutra*, a necklace worn by married women), I was repeatedly asked this question. After I came to know women better, the questions became more personal. From the beginning, women let me know that they enjoyed my visits and our conversations, but that they were puzzled because I was living and traveling without my husband. More importantly, they repeatedly asked about my husband’s views regarding

the choices I had made to spend an extended period of time away from him. At times, I sensed disapproval because I was not at home caring for my husband, but there was also a hint of envy that I had the freedom to make these choices. For the most part, however, questions like these were an attempt by the women to place a label on me, which in turn would allow them to be able to relate to me on a familiar level. Once the connection was made, I suddenly had access to ask them questions about their roles as wives and mothers.

Hence at least at the *gram panchayat* level, women's identities that linked them to men overshadowed their identities as elected representatives in meetings as well. They were constrained at the personal level by patriarchal norms, customs, and husbands who prevented them from participating in gram panchayat and gram sabha meetings. Their family members and neighbors harassed some of the representatives for their participation.

Family influence was evident in other situations as well, in which women's characters were called in question. "Character assassination" was a common tactic used to discredit female representatives. This was evident at all three levels of the *panchayati raj*. One representative from the *panchayat samiti* recalled the personal trauma experienced during her election campaign. As a member of the Muslim community, she was already in a minority, competing for a seat at the *panchayat samiti*. She was educated with a high school diploma, had been involved in social work for a number of years and was interested in participating in the *panchayat samiti* elections. Her professional resume made her a good choice for a candidate: female, minority (Muslim), educated, socially active. However, she soon discovered that she had a handicap that would later become a

constant obstacle: she was a single woman in her forties. She had never been married. She lived with her parents, and although she was the only earning member of her family (she was able to pay for the weddings of two younger sisters), the fact that she herself had never been married became the issue around which the opposition focused.

Although she got elected, her single status continued to define her identity. Both men and women viewed her with suspicion. Her actions were closely watched during meetings. Whispers of “look at how she behaves, how she walks and talks” were commonly heard. According to her, the social stigma of being single remained with her at all times.

As I have argued in previous chapters, women’s participation at the *panchayat samiti* level was low overall. Many representatives simply did not attend meetings. Those who did were mostly silent. The few who did speak and ask questions shared similar qualities. They were the ones with higher levels of education, higher caste, and of course, higher family and social status. Married women from politically connected families in particular were more active. However, here one notices a contradiction. Married women are given more respect, as their identities are linked with their husbands and in some sense they are viewed almost as an extension of their husbands. In so far as women’s views are concerned, they too are seen as an extension of their husbands. However, it is also precisely because of this view of women as part of their husband’s identities, that they are also not treated as equals, as individuals, and rational thinkers, independent of any other identity.

A husband’s support was crucial to a woman’s success. In Bhimagaon, Chaya Kamble was successful in part due to the support she received from her husband and her

son. She had time to focus on *panchayat* activities and reiterated the fact that she would not have been able to maintain her position in the *panchayat* without her husband's support. Similarly, at the *zilla parishad* level, the female president's success was also in part due to her husband's support. She too had the freedom and mobility to travel and spend time away from the home, discussing matters relating to the *zilla parishad*. As one of the more active and articulate elected representatives, she summarized the problem of women's participation as follows:

“Another problem is that we need a social approach to the issue of women's status in society. Such an approach is currently missing. This should become our political motto. People lack such a mentality, thus although various policies favoring women's empowerment exist, they are not adequately implemented. This is an unfortunate tragedy. The effect is that even when a woman is elected, she has no value. She is seen as an object. Her physical appearance is given more importance. Moreover, she is considered as nobody when she enters politics and is nobody when she leaves. In other words, she fails to make any kind of lasting impact. Her substantive role is ignored. Women are considered to be weaker than men, and thus less effective in every respect. This is perhaps one of the most important reasons why there is no empowerment.”

Moreover, she argued that as long as women continued to be objectified in the public sphere, they would never be taken seriously. She discussed the manner in which male and female representatives are judged differently. According to her, men were judged by their words and their actions, while women were judged by the way they dressed and by their physical appearance.

Stereotypes based on gender roles were visible in the interactions between women and government officials as well. At every level, female representatives sometimes had difficulties dealing with either the *gram sevak* or the block development officer. Women viewed the men as authority figures, and although their roles were meant to provide

assistance, in reality, women deferred decision-making authority to them, asserting that the men were obviously more qualified and capable to make important decision.

Logistical realities of women's participation also were an issue. Women had to leave home to attend meetings. This meant leaving their children in the care of others, usually the mother-in-law. Representatives of the *panchayat samiti* and *zilla parishad* traveled to the respective offices by public transportation. Attending meetings also meant interacting with other men, with officials, and speaking publicly, things that made it difficult for family members to accept. And if it meant leaving home and expecting the husband to take care of a woman's duties, it was all the more difficult to accept. The title of a study on all women's *panchayats* in Maharashtra, undertaken by the NGO Aalochana, aptly sums up a common male response: "And Who Will Make the Chapattis?" (Datta 1995).

Moreover, allowing women to contest elections was a sure way of inviting uncomplimentary remarks from neighbors. Such remarks were usually aimed at the husband and questioned his role as the head of the household. A female representative from the Sangli *Zilla Parishad* narrated an incident that occurred soon after she won the election: "our neighbors started taunting my husband, asking him if he would be the one staying at home and wearing bangles, since I got elected." Wearing colorful glass bangles is a popular custom among Indian women, particularly rural women, and indicates beauty and femininity. Comments such as the one above suggest men's roles being questioned. Moreover, suggesting that a man wears bangles or presenting him with some is a major insult.

Women are not united as a group in politics. They are often prevented from mobilizing themselves, particularly at the village level. Men fear that if women were to become united, their power would vastly diminish. Male members also use often women as proxies. There are numerous examples where husbands take decisions on behalf of their wives and also attend meetings. However, in spite of these obstacles, some women have been quite successful.

Among the reasons for their success, the support of the husband is an important reason. These women also tend to be well educated and young. They have the support of their entire family. They also tend to be experienced in social work. These factors also help women develop an interest in politics. Successful women have also benefited from training workshops. Such women tend to have more self-esteem and confidence about their leadership abilities. Women's ability to become self-reliant economically is another factor contributing to greater self-esteem.

#### All Women's *Panchayat* in Bharatpur

Another example of successful participation was evident among *gram panchayat* members in Bharatpur. As previously discussed, Bharatpur had the only all-women's *panchayat* in the district. A deliberate effort by the Congress I party resulted in the election of nine women to this *panchayat*. The members were a lively and enthusiastic group. My first meeting with them was a memorable one, particularly because it was the first time I saw *all* the women talk and engage in a discussion, without any inhibitions about how they were being perceived. Clearly the women were comfortable in their all-female environment and felt safe to speak up in the absence of men.

The representatives in Bharatpur successfully intervened in a domestic dispute and supported a young woman who had been thrown out by her in-laws. As discussed in Chapter 3, by doing so, some of these women risked the anger of their own husbands and families. As one representative narrated, “My husband was furious when he heard that I had marched to the in-laws house and threatened to call the police if they did not comply with our demands. ‘How could you do this’, he yelled. “What will everyone think... that I have no control over you?” But comments like these did not stop the women and they were determined to seek justice for the young bride.

The women in Bharatpur certainly had the advantage in being part of an all women’s *panchayat*. They were aware of the publicity it had created and were pleased to be part of a group that was so different from others in the entire district. Bharatpur does represent a unique case in that regard. It was the only example of an all women’s *panchayat* in the district at the time the research was conducted. Although there have been several other all women’s *panchayats* in the state, Bharatpur was hailed as an ideal example of success in the *panchayati raj* experiment. The women were not only comfortable with each other, but also respected each other’s points of view. The *sarpanch* was seen as one of them; she regularly invited the other representatives to her house for social events and get togethers.

In addition to the friendships and camaraderie that existed in Bharatpur, the female representatives were successful in altering agendas to suit their interests. The decision to intervene in the domestic violence dispute was an example. Another example was the decision to host an informational meeting on women’s legal rights. The *gram panchayat* members organized a *mahila* program (women’s meeting) along with the

district court in Sangli. The chief guest was a woman judge from the high court in Bombay. About twenty women lawyers and judges from the Sangli district attended. The *gram panchayat* members publicized the event to the other women in the village and they had high attendance for the meeting. The lawyers provided basic information about constitutional rights of women and also discussed social issues affecting women such as dowry and bride burning. The lawyers encouraged the audience to speak up against dowry and domestic violence.

The dynamics among the representatives and the *gram sevak* were also interesting. In many other cases, the *gram sevak* presided over meetings and often “suggested” what issues were to be discussed. Although supposed to serve only in an assistant’s capacity, in reality, he (most *gram sevaks* are male, although there are instances of female *gram sevaks*) was more involved in the day-to-day functioning of the *panchayat*. However, in Bharatpur, as mentioned in previous chapters, the *gram sevak* was often the only male present with the exception of a husband or two who would accompany his wife to the meeting and remain there at least until the tea and snacks were served. The women asked to see the record books, because he was responsible for keeping records and they demanded explanations about unclear issues from the books.

For example, at one meeting, the *gram sevak* began as usual by reading out the proceedings from the previous meeting, in which an issue about sanctioning a building permit to an individual had been discussed but not resolved. He mentioned the issue and informed the members that it had not been resolved and moved on to the next item. One of the representatives interrupted him rather sternly and asked why they could not discuss it that day. His response was that the person requesting the permit had not submitted the



necessary paperwork, to which the same member responded, “Why don’t we ask him to come to the office today and submit the paperwork, so that we can resolve this issue?”

Such examples illustrate the assertiveness of the women in Bharatpur to take matters into their own hands and make decisions, however minor they might appear.

#### Women at the *Panchayat Samiti* Level

Women’s participation at the *samiti* and zilla levels was similar to women’s participation in Bharatpur to a certain extent. Many of the women who attended the meetings did speak. However, the problem at the *panchayat samiti* level was that most women did not attend meetings. One reason was because it was inconvenient for them to travel to Malegaon from their respective villages. Although they were reimbursed for their travel, many of the women I interviewed commented upon the logistical difficulties of coming to the meetings. As was the case for some of the female *gram panchayat* members, these women had to leave their children and household responsibilities to others in order to attend meetings.

Another problem was that the *panchayat samiti* meetings sometimes turned into shouting matches between men from opposing political parties. The BDO did little to intervene and this environment made some of the women uncomfortable. The *panchayat samiti* was highly fractionalized, with almost equal numbers of representatives from both Congress parties and from the Shiv-Sena. One representative shared the fact that she was contacted by party officials prior to the meetings and asked to vote a certain way. Other representatives explained that they would come to the office, sign the attendance book and leave, without attending the meeting. My research supports this, as I noticed almost

perfect attendance records for women in the book, but did not see many of them at the actual meetings.

The *sabhapati* at the *panchayat samiti* was no exception. She followed the lead of the block development officer and relied on him to conduct the meetings. Although she attended most meetings, she rarely spoke during them. However, she did meet several people in her office everyday. People would meet her on a walk in basis and air their grievances about specific issues. She would note them and then pass them along to the BDO. My interviews with her occurred in her office, where I was also asked to submit my questions in writing. When I returned the second time, she was more prepared to talk, but wished to do so in the presence of the BDO. However, he got a phone call and left, and we continued talking, but with a few other men watching.

She had been in office as a *sabhapati* of the Malegaon *Panchayat Samiti* for a year when I met her. Asked how she felt about being in such a powerful position, she replied that she saw herself as a wife and a homemaker first. This was a job she had to do. She complained that she was not well paid for the time she had to spend away from home, but nonetheless, she did enjoy the respect she received from members of her family. The family also enjoyed other benefits such as the use of the official jeep. Overall, she did not see any significant changes in her family environment as a result of her position. She said that her husband was the head of the household and made all the decisions, including the one to “allow” her to contest the election.

#### Women at the Zilla Parishad

The situation was different at the *zilla parishad*. Most women were comfortable speaking at the *zilla parishad* level. One reason could be because the president was a

woman, and an active participant. She called on other women during meetings, encouraging them to come to the microphone at the front of the room and make themselves heard. She also started *mahila mandals* (women's groups) in order to get women together on a regular basis. According to her, the government needed to do more in terms of providing women with the adequate skills and training to become equal participants in the political process.

The presidency of the *zilla parishad* was a powerful position. It was also a position that came with several perks – an official bungalow, a car, servants in the house, plus a considerable stipend. I visited the president's home several times for interviews, as she was often too busy to talk at the office. It was interesting to witness her in different roles – as a wife at home and a leader at the *zilla parishad*.

I observed her work for several months. I watched her preside over meetings at the *zilla parishad*, such as the Standing Committee meeting and the General Body meeting. She was effective in maintaining order at the meetings and managed to quiet the discussion a couple of times. In fact, on one occasion, two male members were arguing at the top of their voices. After several attempts to get them to stop, she finally yelled "*shant rhava*" (quiet) into the microphone and got their attention. I heard her give speeches on various topics such as women's empowerment and education. While it was possible that she did not write the speeches herself, she was able to communicate her ideas to the audience effectively.

She clearly displayed leadership qualities. She had experience in public speaking on a wide range of social, national, and scientific issues such as national integration, population problems, literacy, human values and the dropout rate among students in

primary schools. During her tenure as president, she has delivered numerous speeches on the above-mentioned topics. She has attended and participated in seminars held throughout the state and country.

At home, she was the traditional, dutiful wife, waiting on her husband and other guests who constantly dropped by to talk to her. Her husband was supportive of her involvement in politics. He informed me that he had no role in her decision to contest the election, and that he would continue to support her if she decided to run for a second term as a member. It was also interesting that the husband had asked his mother to move in with them and run the house, so that his wife could devote all her time to the *zilla parishad*. The president's situation appeared to be close to an ideal situation – a combination of personal interest, ability, political connections, the right caste and above all, complete family support to pursue a political career.

Of course, it helped that she was the head of the most powerful tier of the *panchayati raj* and had decision-making authority. Unlike many of the women at the lower levels, frustrated at not being able to get things done, the position of the president of the *zilla parishad* was arguably one of the most powerful in the district. In that sense, she was privileged and to compare her achievements with those at the lower levels is inaccurate. But the point here is that she successfully combined both her roles – as a wife in private and as a leader in public effectively. She effectively managed to opt out of certain responsibilities at home (and transferred them on to her mother-in-law).

#### Government Initiatives to Combat Patriarchy

In an attempt to “empower women” and provide them with education and skills for a better life, the government has been involved in various developmental programs in

the fields of education, health and nutrition, information technology, human right and governance

Among the 170 lakhs of people below the poverty line in India today, 80 lakhs are women. There are many reasons for this: lack of education, opportunities, resources, and women's financial dependence on men. The government has also begun several programs to empower women economically. For example, the initiative to form self-help groups is an important step towards economic empowerment.

In order to promote health awareness, the government has also held numerous camps throughout the state. These programs focus on personal hygiene, sanitation, cleanliness and family planning. It is believed that if a woman is educated about health and hygiene, then she will take on the responsibility of educating her entire family, especially her children. Thus women need to be made aware of health and sanitation issues.

In the education field, the government has also provided incentives for educating girls, by providing them with free education up to Standard 12. In the rural areas, girls in the past were often discouraged from attending school due to financial constraints. With free education, girls now can make the most of the opportunities provided by the government.

I observed that women's participation in self-help groups resulted in greater awareness about their political roles. Such self- help groups provided a forum for women to come together and discuss various problems, as well as to generate income for themselves. The groups are often government- funded, with loans given to the women to start small-scale businesses. Decisions about loan beneficiaries are made by the women

themselves and hence are also a good exercise in deliberation and decision-making. The women I interviewed stated that they had all been very prompt about repaying the loans.

As stated earlier, a number of government schemes and policies are focused on women's empowerment, there appears to be a gap between existing policies and implementation. The government has also taken initiatives to promote women via the media. There are informational videos about women's lives. Various seminars and workshops have been held.

With regards to human rights, the government has opened support centers for women. Here women who are abused can get help. Domestic abuse is a serious problem and women need all the support that they can get in order to deal with such problems. Such support centers are staffed with qualified people to help women in crisis situations.

As one can see from the discussion above, the role of the government in creating a support network for women has been only partially successful. While the infrastructure exists, it is not always implemented. In other words, there is considerable literature documenting the various programs, schemes and projects designed by the government to be implemented at the *panchayat*, *samiti* and *zilla* levels. Most of these programs, when they occur, take place at the *zilla* level. Women from the villages have a difficult time attending the training sessions, as it means losing an entire day's wages or more importantly, leaving their homes and children for an extended time.

Any initiative to combat the influence of patriarchy must take into account the freedoms or lack thereof enjoyed by men and women. Sharon Kemp's analysis of Maharashtrian women in which women compare themselves to bullocks, addresses the freedoms men enjoy (Kemp 1998). She writes that women see themselves as bullocks

because of the kind of work they do. Bullocks are the animals most commonly used for transportation as well as working in the fields in India. She calls attention to the double burden women face in the home and in the fields, and the lack of credit they receive for it (Kemp 1998, 235). Men, on the other hand, have the freedom to do anything they wish. Furthermore, they do not have the social restrictions on mobility that women do.

She argues that men's freedoms provide them with a license to beat their wives, leave them, take mistresses, or to take a second wife without considering the consequences of their actions on women (Kemp 1998, 236). Women are denied these freedoms. Their lives are governed by a strict code of behavior that requires them to guard and protect themselves and to preserve the family name under all circumstances.

This explains to a certain extent why women remain in abusive relationships and marriages in Indian society, particularly in rural Indian society. A representative narrated her own experience with a drunken husband who regularly abused her. She was a member of the Maratha caste and her husband's family was well known in the village. The woman was afraid to leave him because of the social and economic consequences she would endure. After her marriage, she was cut off from her natal family, as she had become a part of her husband's family. She had never worked, nor did she have any formal education. Although fairly stable economically, she worried about what would happen if she was on her own. Here again we find the powerful influence of marriage on women. For this woman and many others, marriage happens once in a lifetime. Moreover, the woman was responsible for maintaining the marriage, regardless of the husband's actions.

## Conclusion

Throughout the chapter, I have argued that marriage more than any other institution has been instrumental in shaping women's identities both inside and outside the home. Women who are married and bear sons have some negotiating power within the household. The degree and extent to which women can make a space for themselves within their families depends on, among other factors, their ability to see themselves as more than just wives and mothers. Women's political participation in turn depends upon the extent to which women are able to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside, the private and the public.

This chapter has focused on the role of the family in shaping women's identities and influencing their participation in politics. I began with a discussion of the historical evolution of Hindu ideology that greatly contributed to the creation of gender roles. These were further enforced by the development of the social structure within which women live. Although women's social status has undergone considerable changes, they are still faced with numerous constraints, many of which stem from their positions in their families.

At the personal level, women are rooted with problems of illiteracy, a lack of skill and experience and patriarchal customs and traditions. In addition to these, restrictions placed on women by their families and husbands prevented them from attending *panchayat* meetings. Additionally, women's characters were questioned. Most women had to deal with the conflicting interests of family and politics. At the family level, women "obeyed" their husbands and in-laws in an attempt to maintain peace in the family and struggled with balancing their time between responsibilities at home and in



the *panchayat*. Problems such as the existence of a patriarchal system, political pressure from males, and the objectification of women in politics contributes towards a lack of empowerment of women in politics. The few women who do manage to achieve power, also face a number of obstacles such as non-cooperation from male leaders, obstacles from society, family, character assassination and charges of corruption

Women continue to be inhibited by men. Since they are not used to dealing with men outside their home, it is difficult for them to speak up at meetings. Often women told me that, although they had something to say at the meetings, they would hesitate because of the presence of males in the room. In such instances, the influence of patriarchal values about gender relations in rural society becomes quite evident. Indian women for the most part, continue to be subjected to a patriarchal system that subscribes them to the private sphere of the family and the house.

Women lack experience in politics. Most of the women I interviewed have been in office only for a year or two, and still seem to be in the process of learning the rules and regulations of the gram panchayat. Although the *panchayat samiti* in Malegaon has a training session for newly elected members, no systematic training is provided for the rest of their tenure. Women were given instruction booklets, but sometimes required their husbands' assistance in reading them.

At the *taluka* level, results were not that different. Women representatives hardly attended the *panchayat samiti* meetings. When they did, they were silent. I observed the level of participation to be the greatest at the *zilla parishad* level. Here most of the women attended the meetings regularly and asked questions. The representatives at the *zilla* level were also usually the most educated and had the most leadership experience.

While the majority of the representatives at the *zilla parishad* came from out of the traditional family structure described in this chapter, there was a certain degree of confidence and awareness about their positions and the implications.

Interestingly, men's reactions to the issue of reservations were always very positive. When asked if they favored women's entry into politics through reservations, they answered in the affirmative and often discussed the concept of equality between the sexes. However, when asked what they thought about women heading up *panchayati* and *samitis* and *zilla parishads*, the responses were not so positive. Women's participation was acceptable as long as women continued to conform to stereotypical roles and did not challenge male authority. Some husbands stated that they favored women's presence at meetings, as long as it meant that they (the husbands) and the family would be the beneficiaries. In other words, some husbands wanted power in decision- making through their wives, while others were concerned about monetary benefits they could derive through their wives' positions.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I present some final thoughts on women's participation in the *panchayati raj*. The impetus for writing this dissertation was to ask the question of whether quotas have resulted in successful participation by women in *panchayat* politics. Based on empirical evidence, I examine the nature of women's political participation in the *panchayati raj* and provide an analysis of various factors affecting it. I also discuss the larger theoretical implications of women's participation by linking the topic to feminist theory, theories of institutionalisms and to the larger body of gender and politics literature. The chapter is divided into four sections. First, I look back on the arguments made in previous chapters in order to arrive at my conclusions. Second, I revisit my original hypotheses and discuss whether they were confirmed. Third, I explore the links made throughout the dissertation with the theoretical frameworks of feminist theory and institutionalisms. Finally, I discuss the larger implications of my study and suggest areas for future research.

I began with a background to the creation and implementation of the *panchayati raj* system. I provided a detailed description of the various laws and regulations including the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment that resulted in the reservation of seats for women. I also discussed the implementation of the laws in the state of Maharashtra.

## Chapter Summaries

In chapter three, I discussed the role of political parties in influencing women's participation in the *panchayati raj* at all three levels. By focusing on evidence from my case studies, I argued that party identity and party competition are crucial factors that can both foster and limit women's participation. Parties play a crucial role in *panchayat* politics at all three levels. At the *gram panchayat*, according to the *Panchayati Raj Act*, elections are not supposed to be contested along party lines. However, majority of the members who contested and won filed their nomination papers with the support of political parties. I observed several instances of resistance to women's entry into politics. Party members would throw lavish parties or openly offer monetary support to candidates and woo them to their side. Thus women running on an independent ticket had almost no chance of winning.

Parties also play an important role in another very popular practice- passing "no confidence" motions to remove *sarpanches* from their posts. This was often seen in cases where the members were divided into groups along party lines (Bhimagaon's example). This affected women, as they became easy targets for rival party members. It was also one of the reasons for lack of cooperation among members.

Furthermore, political leaders were involved in *panchayati raj* politics at all three levels. They used their influence to nominate members for positions, as well as to remove them. Political leaders influenced government officials such as the civil servants to pass certain bills or resolutions. This contradicts the Maharashtra State *Panchayati Raj Act*, which prohibits direct influence of MLAs (member of legislative assembly) on *panchayat*

politics. In reality, members voted along party lines, parties controlled nominations and MLAs had considerable influence in *panchayat* politics.

Next, I explored the role of caste identity in women's participation. I found that caste was a dominant variable affecting both upper and lower caste women. Caste plays a prominent role in politics because nominations for seats are determined along caste lines. Due to the fact that there are provisions for members of the lower castes within the general reserved category for women, often women from the lower castes are coerced into running for office. However, in most cases, they have no real power once elected, because the party leaders make the decisions, and the women are made to sign off on the papers. Dalit women thus encounter both gender and caste discrimination. The majority of the dalits in general and dalit women in particular live below the poverty line. Upper caste men do not favor reservations for dalits and especially reservations for dalit women. Most of these women have very little or no education. Moreover, they are also very uncomfortable about dealing with upper caste men and women at meetings, as traditionally they have been social outcasts.

Upper caste women also faced constraints- of mobility. Traditionally, upper caste women were not allowed to leave the house and/or work outside, as it was not considered proper for them to engage in any work. Now that upper caste women are entering politics (Brahmin women, in particular), they continue to be viewed as traditional wives and mothers. The result is that husbands often accompany the female members to the meetings and speak on their behalf. Sometimes, husbands also took care of some of the responsibilities assigned to women- such as traveling out of town to *panchayat samiti* or

to *zilla parishad* meetings etc. Upper caste women faced constraints imposed by orthodoxy and patriarchy.

My case studies indicate that the approach of *gram panchayat* women members from the lower castes differs from the approach adopted by upper caste women from affluent backgrounds. Though poor women are more preoccupied with taking care of subsistence needs, there was some sense of commitment to their role as elected members. This was seen especially in Tulsapur.

Finally, I discussed the role of the family and kinship ties that influence women's political participation. I began with a discussion of Hindu ideology and its influence on women in ancient India. I argued that the social structure existing in ancient India enhanced the creation and development of gender roles that still persist. Furthermore, the impact of the patriarchal structure that developed as a result of both the ideology and the social structure has had a significant impact on the roles and positions of Indian women.

Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that the power relations in the patriarchal structure of Indian society are one of the major causes for the continued subordinate status of women. These power relations exist in abundance in the family life of women transcending caste and class lines. Here I am not suggesting a lack of love or goodness in the Indian family structure. Rather, my emphasis is on the patriarchal values that have been passed down through generations that give immense power to Indian men. Indian women have been socialized to accept this inequality of power.

As I have demonstrated, there does exist a supportive legal environment and a women's movement in India, both of which should be able to promote change in the lives of women. While significant changes have occurred in areas such as education,

employment and political involvement, these changes do not seem to have significantly affected the patriarchal system. Such obstacles further devalue the idea of reservations. Women face the double burden of managing the family and their career. Sometimes they are faced with the question of choosing one or the other. They are forced to choose between their family and involvement in politics. Traditionally in Indian society as in patriarchal societies in general, women are seen as wives and mothers. Their primary role is seen as that of the caretaker of the family. Due to such an attitude, women are not taken seriously in politics, because politics is seen as a man's domain.

### Empirical Findings and Hypotheses Re-Examined

#### Hypotheses 1 & 2

- 1) *With the introduction of quotas, there is increased representation of women which leads to change in agendas that favor women's interests.*
- 2) *With the introduction of quotas, there is increased representation of women which leads to change in policies that favor women's interests.*

Both these hypotheses were partially confirmed. Clearly, women's numerical representation increased as a result of quotas. Women in some cases effectively changed agendas to better suit their needs, as were observed at both the *gram panchayat* and *zilla parishad* levels. Women were especially successful in changing agendas when they perceived themselves to be "empowered", as seen in the case of the all women's *panchayat* in Bharatpur. The issues discussed at this *gram panchayat* reflected gender concerns such as domestic violence. Similarly, women changed the agenda in Sakharwadi to include the issue of alcoholism. At the *zilla parishad* level, several women, including the female president, regularly demanded resolutions to gender-

specific issues, such as better provisions for day- care facilities and access to water and food rations. However, women were less successful in changing agendas at the *panchayat samiti* level, where as I have argued in previous chapters, agendas were often determined informally prior to the actual meeting.

These findings suggest that women were most successful in changing agendas under certain conditions. First, women were able to articulate their own agendas in situations when they were in a numerical majority. The Bharatpur *gram panchayat* is a fine example of women's strength in numbers. As members of an all-women's *panchayat*, the Bharatpur women altered the agenda regularly. The unanimous decision taken to mediate in the domestic dispute involving the young bride further illustrates the emphasis given to issues considered important by women. Several representatives risked the wrath of their husbands and family members for taking such a decision, but nonetheless followed through with it successfully.

Second, women were successful in instances when numerical strength was combined with an effective use of opportunity and space provided. Here the Sakharwadi case is an example of women effectively using a political opening and space to alter the agenda. This village had a high incidence of alcoholism. Alcoholism affected women because men would come home drunk at night and abuse them, as well as demand money from them to buy alcohol. Several women's groups mobilized themselves with the help of the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak*, and began an anti-alcohol campaign. The campaign was part of the larger village cleanliness campaign already in progress. Nonetheless, it was remarkable that about 1400 women from the village participated in a protest and forced the closure of both the government run liquor shops in the village.



Beginning with organizing a special women's *gram sabha*, the collecting hundreds of signatures on the petition to ban the sale of alcohol, the staging a protest until the policy was implemented, women succeeded in changing both the agenda and policy to suit their needs.

As I have suggested in previous chapters, this success was a result of a combination of factors: namely solidarity among women, opportunity provided by the state through the cleanliness campaign, and most importantly, the use of this opportunity by women. Quotas in general and the cleanliness campaign in particular allowed women to articulate their needs and issues at the grassroots level. Quotas provided women with legitimate representation on the *panchayat*. The cleanliness campaign also provided women with a platform. Women used this platform both literally and figuratively by organizing a *gram sabha* and speaking out about their roles and rights as representatives respectively. Thus the space was transformed by the strategies women used to redefine their agendas, and perhaps their roles as representatives in the *gram panchayat*. They directly confronted the men on the *panchayat*, who were forced to deal with the issue.

Third, the findings indicate that personal characteristics such as leadership abilities played a role in women's successful participation in the *panchayati raj*. Several women representatives at all three levels of the *panchayati raj* displayed strong leadership abilities. The ex-president of the *zilla parishad* was an effective and assertive leader. Although she had other factors in her favor, such as belonging to the majority party backed by the prominent political leader in the area, and having the seat of the presidency being reserved for a woman, her success was nonetheless also due to her own interests and abilities. During her tenure as the president of the *zilla parishad*, she stood

up effectively to the challenges and responsibilities demanded of her. Her formal educational level, self-confidence, and aspirations were other indicators of her leadership abilities. As a woman with a master's degree, she was already at a much higher education level compared to other female representatives. Moreover, she had political aspirations to remain a member of the *zilla parishad* even after her tenure as president and spoke of the possibility of contesting elections at the state level as well.

My findings demonstrate various other situations in which women's leadership abilities came to the forefront. At the *gram panchayat* level, two of the female representatives from Kapsewadi and Bhimagaon were good examples for illustration. In Kapsewadi, the female representative was also the deputy *sarpanch*, again in a greater decision making role. She was effective in changing the agenda and implementing policy. She single handedly started a *balwadi* (a kind of a pre-school often assisted by the government) in the village and worked there as well. She convinced the rest of the *gram panchayat* that the village needed the *balwadi* and campaigned vigorously for it.

In another instance, one of the three female members from the Tulsapur *gram panchayat* initiated a *mahila mandal* (a women's group) and started a savings program for village women. She personally handled the financial matters of the savings program and encouraged other women to join in. She believed that financial independence was a key factor for women's empowerment. Furthermore, in Bhimagaon, one of the six female *panchayat* members regularly questioned the *gram sevak* and the *sarpanch* regarding the budget and other issues. She was very actively involved in the decision-making of the *panchayat*.

Hence women's leadership is certainly emerging and evident in these situations. Evidence regarding women *panchayat* members' perceptions about themselves, confidence levels, increased political awareness and aspirations are all markers of an empowering process.

Hypothesis # 2 with regards to policy changes occurring as a result of quotas was also only partially confirmed. While a policy change would indicate the most tangible evidence that quotas were indeed resulting in successful participation, this hypothesis was difficult to confirm fully due to the fact that it is too soon to observe such a change. Quotas have been in place only for the past ten years. Moreover, it has taken some states several additional years to conform to the reforms and to make the necessary changes. At the time my research was conducted, a majority of the female representatives were in their first term, that is they had been in office for less than five years. Small changes in policy nonetheless resulted because of the change in the agendas described above, such as allocation of resources towards education; building of bore wells for water, allocation of loans for women to start small-scale businesses, and the creation of self-help groups to support women's efforts towards self-reliance and economic independence.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, development activities were high on women's agendas. Among these, health and nutrition and sanitation issues were especially important. While these issues affect the entire population, they were of particular concern to women, who viewed themselves as the primary care takers and caregivers in the home, and thus responsible for the general welfare of the entire family.

Women were vocal about their problems with the public distribution system and successfully changed policy to improve the functioning of the food shops, as seen in

Bharatpur. Water scarcity was another issue that the female representatives in Kapsewadi addressed; and a policy change followed, resulting in an increase in the amount of the water supplied to the village on a daily basis.

Hence, while I did find some policy changes, the hypothesis was only partially confirmed mainly due to the time factor. With women barely completing their first terms in office, it was simply too soon to observe policy changes. However, this hypothesis was based on the assumption that change might not be visible and therefore the observations and evidence on agendas was used as a surrogate to measure policy outcomes.

Thus far the discussion has centered on evidence indicating successful changes in agendas and policies as a result of quotas, partially confirming hypothesis 1 & 2. It is time to turn to the other half of the question: why are quotas are not working in some cases? My research demonstrates that this question is a complex one and depends on issues detailed in previous chapters such as the role of political parties, caste and family and kinship networks.

In several of the examples I studied, women were not actively involved in the *gram panchayat*, due to a number of reasons. One of the most common reasons given during interviews related to the existing political rivalries between members. Women felt caught in the middle of political tensions, as is the case in Bhimagaon. Because of this, they felt unable to initiate change. In most village *gram panchayats*, the members were divided into various political parties and voted along party lines on every issue. Those in the majority controlled all decisions.

Intense party competition and party fragmentation have long been considered as characteristics of Indian politics (Chibber 2002). The scene is no different at the

*panchayati raj* level. Party identity is prominent in considerations for nominations and elections. Because parties nominate candidates, women's nominations particularly are dependent on parties. Although some women do contest elections as independent candidates, women for the most part are recruited and nominated by parties. I have shown that party identity and party fragmentation work both to facilitate and limit women's participation. At both the *zilla* and *samiti* levels, parties nominated and backed female candidates for the chair's positions, as both positions were reserved for women. At the *zilla* level, the female president utilized the opportunity effectively and has been one of the success stories throughout this project. However, my findings demonstrate that the president at the *panchayat samiti* level failed to utilize this opportunity and was an example of a "proxy" candidate. This dual role of party identity and party fragmentation was also evident at the *gram panchayat* level.

As mentioned above, women in Bhimagaon were limited in their abilities to initiate change due to the nature of party competition in the village. Women were required to choose sides and party loyalty was expected for them to remain in office. One of the active members of the Bhimagaon *gram panchayat* was further limited because of her membership in the opposition party. In other cases where one party dominated the *panchayat* such as Kapsewadi, women had greater flexibility in carrying out their responsibilities.

Parties also pose an obstacle to women's participation through the passing of "no-confidence" votes against them. A common practice intended to remove a person from an elected position, parties lobby to get the minimum number of votes required to remove selected female representatives viewed as potential threats to their own political

aspirations. Independent candidates at the *gram panchayat* level are often targets of this method along with female *sarpanches*. Since a number of women lack information and awareness about the rules and procedures of governing, they often become victims of such no- confidence motions. Thus parties limit women's participation. Most women were not formal members of parties prior to their nominations. Moreover, the selection criteria employed by parties was also subjective. Required to fill a certain number of seats in order to maintain a majority on the *panchayats*, parties identify and choose wives and relatives of prominent male party members. As a result, women unqualified for the position have been elected. Moreover, because seats have to be filled, women who are not interested come to power and then become ineffective.

Similarly, caste also affects women's participation. Caste identity is prominent in *panchayat* politics. Despite a constitutional ban on caste discrimination and caste-based reservations, people especially in the rural areas are identified primarily by their caste. Furthermore, caste affects both upper and lower caste women differently. Lower caste women are bound by their caste identities that prevent them from fully assimilating into the village community in general and the *panchayats* in particular. The social restrictions placed on lower caste women regarding mobility and interactions were clearly evident in the examples I studied. The presence of lower caste women who had been elected as part of the reserved quota for caste was often viewed as necessary and therefore tolerated.

Upper caste women are affected by caste in two ways. Upper caste women are certainly more privileged in terms of their socio-economic life. However, because upper caste women traditionally were isolated from public life, upper caste women in the *panchayats* continue to be viewed as wives and mothers. Upper caste husbands

accompany them to the meetings and speak on their behalf. What this indicates is that caste restricts upper caste women from full integration into the political sphere. It is important to note that some women have overcome the barriers of their caste identities in clever ways. In Sakharwadi, the success of the anti-alcohol campaign highlighted the role that Maratha women played in it. Traditionally a very conservative upper caste, Maratha women came out in record breaking numbers and supported the campaign. This suggests that while caste identity is prominent in *panchayat* politics, people are affected by new ideas and change in perceptions regarding caste relations.

Another important reason that helps account for the nature of women's participation deals with women's roles and relationships within their families. The family plays a crucial role in women's lives. Young girls are socialized to become wives and mothers. Women's identities are constructed around families in general and husbands in particular. Hence, marriage as an institution is extremely important. My research demonstrates the manner in which these norms are transported into the political sphere and affect women's participation in *panchayat* politics.

Moreover, the social construction of gender roles that assign the highest value to marriage and family permeate all the discussions in previous chapters. This affects all individual representatives interviewed and discussed previously in one way or another. It affects both how men view women and how they view themselves. Not only do men see women as wives and mothers, women too have a similar view of their roles. So for example, a female representative confronted with a choice between attending a *panchayat* meeting or having dinner ready for her husband did not even consider the fact that she had a choice in the matter, and stayed back to attend to her husband's needs.

Traditionally women are expected to fulfill their roles within the household even when they are also working outside their homes. For women representatives who worked outside the home, either in fields or as wage laborers in factories, the responsibilities required of them in *panchayats* was another burden—a third burden. As mentioned in Chapter Five, women who found ways to delegate part of the responsibilities at home were most successful in balancing the three roles—wife, worker and representative. Among the reasons for their success, the support of the husband seems quite important. In instances where the husbands supported women’s political aspirations, women’s participation and performance was evident. It is important to note that the support of a husband also at times worked against women. Several of my initial interviews were conducted in the presence of the husbands. I commonly heard them affirming how much they supported their wife’s efforts in politics. When I would begin questioning the wife, the husband would interrupt stating that he was in a better position to answer the question, because his wife was merely a woman.

The link between women’s identities and that of their husband and family was also evident when women participated in meetings. Husbands accompanying wives to the meetings were a common occurrence. In some cases, women would defer in answering questions to their husbands themselves, while in other cases the other male representatives would bypass the women and talk only to the husbands. This phenomenon was more common at the *gram panchayat* levels, which was also the arena where women were most likely to be inexperienced and unaware of their roles as elected representatives.



Education was another obstacle for women. Most of the women I interviewed have an average education of Standard Seven. The major reason for this is because in most villages, the school is only up to Standard Seven. After this children have to go to a neighboring town to pursue their education. Parents were reluctant to send daughters to towns to study; hence girls were usually kept at home and taught household duties, once again reinforcing the gender roles to which girls were expected to adhere. Incidentally, this is also one of the reasons why women married at an early age.

In summary, I argue that reasons for the failure of women's political participation cannot be isolated, but rather need to be understood as a part of a larger context within which women live—a context that is shaped by long standing structural forces. However, returning to the confirmed part of the hypotheses, I argue that quotas are working to some extent. My findings indicate that quotas have resulted in changes in agendas and policies. As part of my measurement criteria, I identified four broad areas based on a continuum from most likely to least likely to occur: 1) women's initiatives, 2) participation in *panchayat* activities, 3) policy changes, and 4) personal changes. These categories served as preliminary indicators to measure success along with agendas. Based on my case studies, quotas have indeed resulted in change that benefits women, as evident in the first three categories. Women's participation ranged from attending *panchayat* meetings, *gram sabhas*, to initiatives in starting self-help groups and campaigns against alcohol. The impact of women's participation was most "visible" in these three categories. The issue is more complex with regards to the remaining category of personal change, as will be discussed in the next section.

### Hypothesis 3 & 4

- 3) *Quotas as liberal mechanisms for change are likely to have limited success in achieving gender equality for Indian women because they are not likely to affect cultural attitudes towards women.*
- 4) *Changes that affect women's lives will be only at the margins.*

Both hypotheses three and four were confirmed. As discussed in Chapter I, I view quotas as a liberal mechanism. I argue that Indian gender quotas are also a formal institutional mechanism designed with a specific goal: to change another formal institution, the *panchayati raj*. In this attempt, quotas have had limited success in bringing about reform due to the persistence of informal institutions encountered along the road. Liberal democracy is appealing mainly due to the promise of equality of status and opportunity for every citizen. However, the greatest challenge to these goals has come from the social and political forces in a pluralistic and stratified society like India. Although quotas were instituted as a correction policy and to break down formal barriers to women's access to politics, they are only a starting point.

Quotas did result in increased women's representation in the *panchayati raj*. Women were elected in unprecedented numbers all over the country. For the majority of the women elected, this was their first experience with politics. For some it was the first experience of participating in an activity outside their immediate household. In many ways, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment revolutionized women's relationship with politics. It created a political space that was guaranteed for women. Theoretically, women no longer had to fight their way into *panchayat* bodies. Parties and other groups pursued them to run for elections.

However, the question of the extent to which quotas have resulted in changed in women's lives and social status remains. My findings suggest that, despite the fact that women have been given access to politics, quotas have not resulted in any sweeping transformation of women's status in India. Women continue to be viewed through the lenses of traditional stereotypes, powerful, and difficult to escape.

The dominant Hindu culture legitimizes women's subordination to such an extent that not all Indian women see themselves as subordinate, or even if they do, they see nothing wrong with it. The Indian patriarchal culture, over generations, has convinced women that they are in fact inferior. From the discussion of patriarchy in Chapter I, it is apparent that there is no single explanation for the origins of patriarchy around the world. Patriarchy as a system has manifested itself uniquely in different parts of the world as a result of many factors. Cultural norms, religion, and caste have greatly influenced this system, particularly in India. According to Uma Chakravarti, patriarchy in India evolved historically as a result of caste and gender hierarchies. The Brahmanical Code was established along these very lines of caste and gender hierarchies, which further reinforced the patriarchal system (Chakravarti 1993). Gail Omvedt (1983) concludes that several factors like economic participation, the role of violence and force as well as ideology led to the creation of patriarchy in India. Although all these factors are important, most of the scholarship on Indian patriarchy deals primarily with the economic aspect. The Marxist explanation appeals to many Indian feminists. The existing literature fails to provide adequate explanations regarding the influence that religion and subsequent cultural ideology has had on maintaining patriarchy in India. While patriarchy is defined as male control of female fertility, sexuality and labor power, the areas of sexuality and fertility are not emphasized

sufficiently. Although a number of Indian feminist groups accept the social feminist position, i.e. both patriarchy and class oppression are significantly related—they have yet to successfully articulate how to challenge these simultaneously.

Thus after examining the literature on patriarchy I argue that most of the existing literature does not adequately explain the status of Indian women, because it fails to emphasize the influence of religion and ideology in Indian society. In order to understand women's subordination in India, one must begin with an understanding of patriarchy as it is manifested in the Indian context. Uma Chakravarti's definition of patriarchy as embedded in the caste and gender hierarchies in India comes closest to explaining the status of Indian women. Kamla Bhasin's explanation of patriarchy as a system of complete male dominance is also useful to a certain extent. However, in the Indian context, a definition and understanding of patriarchy needs to be developed which includes its religious roots. In other words, patriarchy in India is strongly influenced by religious ideology.

### Theoretical Implications of Research

This project falls under the study of institutionalism and feminist literature on gender and politics. As such, my research addresses some of the on-going debates in these fields. Within the field of institutionalism, the research is concerned with two broad questions: what is the interaction between formal and informal institutions? And to what extent is institutional design successful?

I situate my work in the new institutionalism perspective, based on a tripartite distinction between historical, rational choice and old sociological (synthetic, political science, eclectic center approach) institutionalisms (Hall and Taylor 1996). Historical institutionalism overemphasizes structures and legacies, while rational choice

institutionalism deals with the dilemmas of collective action and rational actors struggling to solve them. Finally, sociological institutionalism emphasizes the arrow of causality (structure- agency) to be mutually reinforcing. It has two varieties. One, which often is associated with political science, is more synthetic. The other, often called postmodernism or new sociological institutionalism, disregards agency (since it is completely submerged in subjective discourses).

Much of the focus on the study of institutions in political science has been limited to formal institutions. As Helmke and Levitsky (2002) note, “the 1990s were a decade of institutionalism in comparative politics” (1). The emphasis was on constitutional design, electoral systems and other formal institutional arrangements. The goal was to study outcomes and explain change. As much as these approaches contributed to advancing comparative political theory, the limitations of these approaches soon emerged. Scholars pointed out two limitations: outcomes were often not properly explained by formal institutional design, and many of the rules of the game that influenced political behavior were in fact informal constraints, not formal rules (Helmke and Levitsky 2002, 2).

The authors further argue that informal institutions have been at the margins of study in mainstream comparative politics and that there is a need to move informal institutions from the margins to the center (Helmke and Levitsky 2002, 2). My research contributes to this topic as it encompasses both formal and informal institutions. Indeed, the emphasis throughout on the persistence and “stickiness” of informal institutions as it interacts with formal institutional changes is what makes the project theoretically interesting.

### An Institutional Perspective to Feminist Theories of Inequality

The dissertation presents an institutionalist perspective to understanding the nature of gender inequalities. Overall, the dissertation provides a more complete institutional analysis by suggesting that informal institutions are key to understanding gender inequality. It is the reproduction of norms and values and unwritten code of rules that women are subjected to in a society that need consideration. While this is certainly not a new idea, my research makes a contribution to the existing debates on gender inequality by showing that informal norms and values affecting women (and men) are in fact institutions in the sense that they are maintained, reproduced and enforced over time, and take firm root in society. In chapter one, I introduced the idea of quotas as a formal institutional mechanism designed specifically to reform another institution—the *panchayati raj* system. I argued that institutional design was possible, but to a certain extent. Success will depend among other variables, on the context in which it occurs. The larger environment within which informal rules and norms are reinforced must be taken into consideration in designing institutions. I agree with sociological institutionalists like Uslaner who suggest that context is what matters most when thinking about design. Moreover, successful design is ultimately the result of a good fit between the newly introduced formal mechanism and the existing informal institution.

The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that informal rules are at times in conflict with formal institutions. When seen as a set of informal rules, patriarchy is one such institution that comes into conflict with the new gender identity quotas was created to ultimately achieve. Women are seen primarily as wives and mothers. Politics is seen as part of the public sphere, an arena hostile to women. To the extent that these norms

prevail in Indian society, institutional reforms do little in changing attitudes. Success in participation occurs in instances when women have managed to bridge the gap between the public and the private and have consolidated their positions in both spheres. In other words, women who are able to overcome the influence of informal norms of patriarchy through a combination of various factors such as education, skills, and personal characteristics, are the ones who make the most of their opportunities.

At the beginning of this section, I asserted that quotas are formal mechanism designed to change another formal institution—the *panchayati raj* system. Equally important is the idea that quotas were also designed specifically to change an existing informal institution—the existing norms and values expressed through patriarchy. Therefore this type of reform was intended not only to increase women's numerical representation in politics, but a broader change in gender roles was a long-term goal. The discussion on the intent of the framers of the constitutional amendment as well as the supporters of the reform in chapter two concludes that both groups hoped that quotas would provide an entry for women to take up new roles and to re-define their existing roles not only in the political sphere but also in the private sphere.

Furthermore, successful implementation of quotas can also be seen as a problem of institutional design. Quotas are undermined by formal as well as informal mechanisms. One factor limiting the success of quotas has been problems with the issue of decentralization.

#### Decentralization

Among other provisions, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment emphasized the allocation of greater powers to the lower levels of the *panchayati raj* institutions, as well as to the

*gram sabhas*. The idea that rural problems are to be solved at the rural level was also important. The state has engaged in efforts to fulfill the goals of decentralization to some extent. Hence for example, the *zilla parishad* regularly organizes various workshops for newly elected *sarpanches*, women representatives, and *anganwadi* (pre-school) workers, to educate them about their rights and responsibilities. Historically, the Sangli district has had an excellent record in implementing the various sections of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment.

Furthermore, the *gram sabhas* are represented on paper as forums where meaningful deliberation as well as decision-making can occur. Since the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment allocates greater powers to the *gram sabhas*, this is an important political space for villagers to utilize. People are encouraged to participate in *gram sabhas*. Women's role in *gram sabhas* is another important issue addressed in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. There is also provision for separate *gram sabhas* to be held to address women's issues.

However, *gram sabhas* have thus far failed to serve as an effect means to increase participation at the grassroots level. I observed that in most cases, the majority of the villagers did not attend *gram sabhas*. When they did attend, very little deliberation occurred. Neither the people nor the *gram panchayat* members are sufficiently educated to understand the significance and relevance of the *gram sabhas*. In most cases, *gram sabhas* served as platforms for identifying beneficiaries for certain government schemes- such as the below poverty line (BPL) scheme etc, which entitles members to subsidized housing, loans, and food.

However, this is also one of the major problem areas. Many *gram panchayat* members said that they stopped attending *gram sabhas* because they were not in a position to answer questions raised by the people regarding the status of their applications



forms for the various schemes. In order to avoid this, often the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak* would prepare a list of beneficiaries prior to the *gram sabha*. This has resulted in deserving names being left out, and relatives and friends of the *sarpanch* and *gram sevak* making it to the list. This past year, the State Government passed yet another law, stating that even greater powers would be given to the *gram sabhas*. If *panchayats* are meant to be deliberative bodies, then greater participation in *gram sabhas* must occur.

Although a number of government schemes and policies are focused on women's empowerment, there appears to be a gap between existing policies and its implementation. A possible solution is that decentralized power should be derived from the functionaries. Decentralization is flawed because it fails to provide real decision-making authority at the lowest level—the *gram panchayat*. The fact that *gram panchayats* need approval from higher levels for most issues, including their budgets, suggests that decentralization has occurred effectively only in the sense that power has shifted from the state to the district level.

Additionally, the decentralization system is flawed because of increasing tensions between the executive and the legislative branches of government. Here it is necessary to examine the relationship between the government appointed bureaucrats and the elected officials at all three levels of the *panchayati raj*. As I have argued in previous chapters, government-appointed secretaries often take charge and make decisions at *panchayat* meetings. Initially appointed to assist elected officials in governance and to serve as a check for potential power abuses, the role of the secretaries has changed considerably. The secretaries not only maintain the records and oversee the administrative functioning

of the *panchayat*, they are considered “experts” to whom decision-making is often deferred, especially by women.

Furthermore, institutional constraints include women’s exclusion from meetings. The atmosphere in some *gram panchayats* and certainly in the *panchayat samiti* office and meetings was at times not conducive to women’s participation. Often male members and secretaries (*gram sevaks* and the block development officer) refused to listen to the women who had acquired power through reservations. The general complaint expressed by women members and presidents was that the government officials withheld information from them, and thus did not involve them in decision- making. Sometimes, women were not informed about monthly meetings. At other times, they were discouraged from attending, but their signatures were obtained, ostensibly showing their attendance. Although government initiatives were designed to increase women’s participation, most of the programs are not implemented in an equitable manner.

Returning to the point made earlier about quotas being undermined by both formal and informal mechanisms, I conclude that the design problem with decentralization needs attention. Existing informal institutions also undermine quotas. It is in this area that my research also makes a contribution to feminist theory in general and liberal feminism in particular. The combination of my findings and the use of an institutionalist approach inform the discussion on liberal feminism.

#### Quotas as Liberal Mechanisms

Liberal feminists have long been engaged in taking issues with liberal democracy. They have examined issues of rights, citizenship, making arguments for a more active and participatory approach, as well as asking questions associated with equal

representation (Sharma 1998). For example, Anne Phillips notes areas of feminist dissatisfaction with existing liberal democracy. First, Phillips is critical of the basis on which women have been included in the political community. Second, she critiques the weight feminism attaches to women being able to transform their identity through active involvement in collective discussion and action (Phillips 1992, 68-82).

My dissertation builds on this critique of liberal feminism. I agree with Phillips that quotas as a liberal mechanism have limited impact in changing women's identities. What I suggest is looking at the reasons for limited impact through an institutionalist perspective. It is not sufficient to argue that informal institutions exist as an obstacle. Rather, the more important question is to ask why they "stick?" Throughout the dissertation, I have shown explanations why informal institutions are sticky in India. The rules and norms that form the basis of informal institutions are reproduced in a number of ways.

First, such rules and norms are maintained through customs. Indian society places a high value on social customs. Women in particular are expected to adhere to social customs. Second, rules and norms are also reproduced through customary law. In the absence of a uniform civil code, personal laws are governed by religion. Hence women's rights to inheritance, laws regarding marriage and divorce fall under various religious laws. Third, girls are socialized from a young age to adhere to these rules. Thus new formal institutions like quotas are battling with years of socialization, making success a real challenge. Finally, deviation from these informal rules and norms results in social isolation and shaming. Women are very aware of the costs of defying social norms. Women are also judged differently than men. According to the informal norms,

interactions between men and women must be limited. Interestingly both married and single women face this restriction. Single women are viewed with suspicion when they interact with men, particularly in rural settings. The norms are also used against women representatives, as was demonstrated through the example of the single female representative whose character was called into question at election time.

Married women too are expected to interact only with their husbands and other male members of the family. They do however; have more flexibility, compared to single women, because they are considered as “*vahinis*” (sister- in- laws, a term used by men to identify married women). This suggests that interaction between married women and other men is acceptable within the limits of the relationship described above. So it is common for men to refer to all married women as “*vahinis*. ”

Madhu Kishwar’s analysis of factor’s inhibiting women’s participation in politics further illustrates this point. She argues that politics is largely based on the art of building alliances (Kishwar 1997). Women are at a disadvantage because they are unable to cultivate relationships and alliances with men due to social restrictions. As a result, Kishwar argues that women lose out on vital information that men pick up through causal conversations and social gatherings (Kishwar 1997).

In one situation that I encountered, in the midst of an interview, a woman asked me about my husband’s attitude regarding my fieldwork. Specifically, she was curious about what he and my extended family might think about the prospect of me talking to other men. “Are you not concerned about your husband?” she inquired. When I asked her about her apprehension about participating in *panchayat* meetings, she replied that she was worried about bringing shame to herself and her family in the event that rumors

might arise because of her interactions with men on the *panchayat*. Such examples illustrate the powerful hold of informal rules and norms that influence women in their day-to-day activities. Norms are reproduced through public shaming that has severe consequences for women.

Overall, it is safe to say that the picture presented throughout the dissertation is a mixed one. On the one hand, women are making progress and are using the opportunities provided to them through reservations. On the other hand, they have a long way to go in the journey towards gender equality. Politics in India is informal in nature. My research indicates that decision-making commonly occurs outside meeting rooms—in hallways, in homes over dinner and drinks. Because women are excluded from these activities and spaces, they are excluded from participating in decision-making. What emerges is the importance of who knows whom. Regardless of laws and regulations, it boils down to networks based on kinship or political parties or caste. In the face of such traditions, is it feasible to think about change?

Although I have argued that informal institutions limit the extent to which quotas can result in a change in women's participation, my research indicates that quotas as liberal mechanisms are nevertheless necessary. It is a first step, one that is also a required step, because had it not been for quotas, women would not even appear on the political map of India. Quotas have indeed provided women with their first opportunity to experience public, political life. Quotas have placed women in decision-making positions and have changed the opportunity structure that previously existed for women. Moreover, quotas have provided women with a legitimate space in which to articulate their concerns. Hence, however flawed they may be, I conclude that liberal mechanisms were a

necessary first step in addressing gender inequality. My work also contributes to the broad perspective of liberal democracy because it demonstrates the need for the state to make provisions to ensure equality of its citizens. It is the state that initiated the reforms in India. A top-down reform did work and there are signs however limited of real impact.

Another important implication of my work is linked to feminist literature on gender and politics. Much of the work done on quotas in a comparative perspective has focused on women in national or state legislatures. Moreover, previous studies on women and the *panchayati raj* focused on isolating factors influencing women's participation and providing profiles of the "types" of women most likely to succeed in politics. My research combines a variety of methods and approaches to present a detailed and analytical account of women's participation in the *panchayati raj*. It shows participation is a dynamic issue, one that must be studied by considering the context within which it occurs.

Additionally, my work also relates to current debates in Comparative Politics regarding representation and participation. As the world's largest democracy, India makes for a very interesting case study. From a comparative perspective, the Indian case is unique because of its multi-ethnic and plural society. With a historical precedence for quotas, the Indian case touches upon questions of group rights in a democracy. With a stable democratic history, India also presents an interesting case for democratization theories.

Finally, my research potentially has implications for another sub-field within comparative politics: state/society relations. Although not the focus in this project, the questions raised can be analyzed by studying the relationship between the state and

society. There is an ongoing debate about the role of the state in bringing about reform, particularly in the third world (Kohli, Migdal and Shue, Rai 1995). Various positions range from relying solely on state institutions to completely rejecting the state. However, as Rai (1995) argues, for women, the state and civil society are both complex but necessary spaces that need to be explored. Quotas can be seen as a formal mechanism of the state designed for institutional reform. Hence the role of the state in changing the structure of the *panchayati raj* becomes crucial and will require analysis.

Similarly, the role of social organizations and social forces also need consideration, especially in a country like India, where social organizations influence politics (Kohli, 2001). Since this dissertation examines the impact of formal institutional mechanisms on social power and organizations (i.e. informal institutions), a next step would require a closer analysis of the state-society literature, particularly as Migdal and others develop it.

### Concluding Remarks

Quotas have been in place in India only for the past ten years. As mentioned previously, most of the women I encountered were in their first terms in office. It is too early to find major signs of their impact on women's lives. However, the situation is dynamic in some areas. In the two years since the research was completed, many more women have contested and won elections. Others are involved in activities to increase awareness of women's potential for political participation. As I write this conclusion, voters are going to the polls all over India for what is described as the largest parliamentary election in the world. The story certainly does not end here. Currently, there is much debate and controversy over extending the women's reservation bill to the

state and national levels. The success of the bill depends on the extent to which some of the flaws in the current quota system can be addressed. More importantly, it will be interesting to study how the relationship between formal and informal institutions plays out in the future.



## **APPENDIX**

### **Protocol Clearance From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board**

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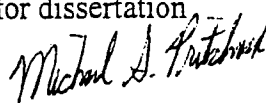
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Date: March 14, 2001

To: Jim Butterfield, Principal Investigator  
Aparna Thomas, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Michael S. Pritchard, Interim Chair



Re: HSIRB Project Number 01-03-01

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Women's Participation in the *Panchayati Raj*: A Comparison of Four Indian States" has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 14, 2002

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