

Women and Panchayats in India: Creating a New Space for Leadership in Asia.

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"It is not merely that more justice must be received by women, but also that social justice can be achieved only through the active agency of women. The suppression of women from participation in social, political, and economic life hurts the people as a whole, not just women. The emancipation of women is an integral part of social progress, not just a women's issue."

Dreze and Sen (1999:178)²

The Millennium Development Goals (2000) also highlighted the above concern. The goals include the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty, universal primary education, gender equality, empowerment for women, reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases as well as ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development. All these goals assume additional significance once it is realized that women suffer a lot of deprivation due to lack of achieving the above goals. As for example it is well known that majority of the poor in the world are found among women, the percentage of illiteracy among the women is higher than those of men, and access to primary health care is always denied to large percentage of women so on so forth. Realising the above picture various governments have been taking various measures to improve the conditions of women. Indian government is no exception. Along with various measures such as providing micro- credit to women, the government has also amended the Constitution in 1993 in which the local government institutions have been given a new lease of life to plan and execute the local development planning in which not less than one-third seats have been reserved for women. The local government institutions are known as panchayats or village councils in India. According to 73rd Constitution Amendment Act,1993,the panchayats have been given a tenure of five years, an election and a finance commission,29 subjects to plan and execute and a wide based participation at the grassroots level. Interestingly the 29 subjects

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² Dreze,Jean and A.Sen(1999) India :Economic Development and Social Opportunity,{1995},New Delhi,OUP.

given to panchayats include eradicating the poverty to providing primary education as well as the other aspects of wellbeing of the villagers. In other words the panchayats have been involved in the task of fulfilling the MDG in a participatory manner. *It is our contention that being in the panchayats the women themselves have been involved in the task of the local development in a big way and have assumed the role of leadership in Asia in spite of being the beginners in the political process.*

In order to test the above hypothesis the following steps will be followed. First some of the government initiatives including that of panchayats and the structure of those institutions will be discussed followed by a discussion on the impact of the panchayats on the lives of villagers. After that the impact of panchayats on women such as social mobilization etc. as well as the quality of participation will be taken up. After that some of the factors affecting the quality of participation will be high lighted. A summing up will follow in the last section.