

Decentralised Governance and Political Empowerment of Women: Gram Panchayats in Koraput District of Odisha, India

Tejeswar Karkora¹

Abstract

Women's participation in public life is often constrained due to various socio-economic conditions. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of India provides 33 per cent reservation for women to give them wider representation in the local bodies. In spite of such and other provisions, empowerment of women is not satisfactory because of certain factors like political failure, lack of education and awareness among women. Against this background, a study was conducted in a backward and tribal district of Odisha, which examined the political processes. The study attempted to find out how women perceive their political empowerment as people's representatives. It also examined the perception of elected representatives on political empowerment. The findings of the study are expected to give a better understanding of the relationship between socio-economic backwardness of the region and women's participation and empowerment. In turn, this will help in meeting the challenges of women's empowerment as envisioned in the 73rd amendment. This empirical study found that the participation of women is adversely influenced by the socio-economic structure of the region. The socio-economic backwardness of the region affected the capabilities of women in their participation as people's representatives. The performance of the women members appears to be more adversely affected than the male members. Thus, capabilities in the public domain are not only gendered, but also socio-economically structured.

Keywords

local governance, women empowerment, panchayat, reservation

Introduction

In contemporary India, participation in public life is considered an important indicator of empowerment. However, various factors such as caste, religion, illiteracy and economic backwardness often determine the extent of participation and become constraints in development (Gowda, 1998). Political empowerment of women in rural areas is one of the significant concerns because of the expectations generated of their role in decision making. Despite several affirmative actions to encourage women's participation, the patriarchal nature of Indian society continues to dominate.

Women continue to face discrimination on several grounds, which restricts their power and the right to express themselves (Mohanty, 1995). Political empowerment was conceived as one way to involve women and encourage their participation in both the public and private domains. Political empowerment helps them to be aware of discrimination, inequality, the need for capability building, and to participate in decision-making (Rani et al., 2009). The active participation of women in the political sphere would help in speeding the process of empowerment, give them the desired self-respect and social dignity (Jha, 2004).

¹School of Social Sciences, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Naorji Campus Hostel – VI, TISS, V.N. Purav Marg, Deonar, Mumbai, 400 088, India. Email: tejeswarkarkora@gmail.com

In 1990s, two landmark Constitutional Amendment Acts (CAAs) namely, the 73rd (for rural governance) and the 74th (for urban governance) CAAs of 1992, laid down the general framework for decentralizing governance. This was not the first time that decentralization was advocated in India. The 73rd CAA ushered in a greater degree of uniformity in the structure of rural local bodies by broadly defining their structure (a three-tier one), composition,² powers and functions. The objective was to achieve social and economic development of rural areas by placing the local administration under the control of local elected representatives (Kothari 1999; Meenakshisundaram, 1999).

There is a need for equal representation of women in the public domain as they are an integral part of the social structure not only for the perpetuation of human race but also in its socio-economic progress (Gowda, 1998). The virtual absence of women in the rural public domain led to the amendment to the Constitution so as to provide for reservation for women in all the tiers of panchayats. Even then, the participation of women in decision making continues to be neglected. Illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, insecurity are the major reasons that make women vulnerable and create obstacles to their political role (Manikyamba, 1989). Thus, the question that must be raised here is: How will women effectively use the public space provided to them through the one-third reservation of seats for them in local bodies under the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)?

Policy Analysis

In the 1950s, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee favoured non-political panchayats involving people and their representative for the implementation of development programmes of the government. It majorly focused on the development of women through participation in the local governance (Datta, 1996; Manikyamba, 1989). In the 1970s, the Ashok Mehta Committee argued for political panchayats, an emphasis on decentralization of power, and people's participation as an instrument for supporting rural development through programme implementation and strengthening of the planning process at micro-level. This led to second generation panchayats in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and West Bengal. There was also a strong recommendation for co-opting women and the reservation of two seats for women in panchayats. In effect, the Mehta committee acknowledged the importance of women in the decision-making processes (Datta, 1996).

In 1990s, the Singhvi Committee suggested Constitutionalisation of Panchayats. It emphasised the need for developing panchayat bodies primarily as units of self-government as well as reservations for better representation of weaker sections like women, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) for the posts of chairpersons in panchayat bodies (Singh, 1994). The Singhvi Committee gave institutional support to participate in the local governance process (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2008).

The 73rd amendment ensures 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in the PRIs thus ensuring their wider representation in the local bodies (Gowda, 1998). One-third of the number of seats and heads of panchayat positions are reserved for women belong to SCs and STs in all three layers of PRIs. These seats are to be rotated so that every woman gets the opportunity to enter the panchayats. Importance was given to women because they play a significant role in the livelihood activities of rural household and have better understanding of local needs and issues, which would help the development activities of PRIs (Tyagi and Sinha, 2004).

The 73rd Amendment Act also provides for a meaningful decentralization of powers to the people at the grass-root levels, and sufficient representation for the weaker section of society (Singh, 1994). However, the status of rural women remains unchanged due to lack of awareness, illiteracy and patriarchal family structures. This paper attempts to understand the impact of the 73rd amendment on the underdeveloped areas and to find out the hurdles to effective implementation of the Act. Such an understanding is essential for the meaningful implementation of the Act for the development of the tribal regions in India.

²Reservation of seats in the panchayats for marginalised groups like Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) as well as other backward communities and women.

Empirical Studies

Since the implementation of the 73rd Amendment, until 31 May 1998, there were 768,582 women in Gram Panchayats (GPs), 38,582 in Panchayat Samitis, and 4,030 in Zilla Parishads. However, this number was still less than one-third of the total seats reserved for women (Tyagi and Sinha, 2004).

Indian society is still strongly influenced by patriarchal family system, which discriminates against women. This is reflected in their low participation in the decision-making process in the public domain. The 73rd Amendment Act notwithstanding, women continue to be subjected to family influences, especially the males. Active participation of women in decision making can solve the problems of rural area (Khan and Alam, 2009). A study in Rajasthan and Haryana showed that women came to panchayat meetings dressed in traditional manner that required them to cover their faces because of pressure from their families or local leaders.

It was found that illiteracy made the women vulnerable and unable to articulate their demands resulting in their inability to control the panchayats. As a consequence, they had to function as mere 'rubber stamps' endorsing decisions and actions taken by the males (Tyagi and Sinha, 2004). Women representatives from the SCs or STs rarely express themselves in panchayat meetings. In some cases, the general-caste women were seen to be slightly more active (Mohanty, 1995). Therefore, there is also a need for changes in the social structure to improve the performance of women as people's representatives (Geetha, 2008).

Odisha became the first state to introduce one-third reservation for women. The 73rd Amendment Act helps the rural poor and marginalized to participate in the various development programmes and express themselves (Mohanty, 1995). Karnataka gave special attention to facilitate the proper functioning of GPs' activities and ensure rural development (Ghorpade, 2002). In Karnataka, there is 42 per cent representation of women in the PRIs, which is nine per cent higher than the mandated minimum. Studies have shown that women are committed and are task-oriented regardless of their family commitments (Gowda, 1998).

It was noticed in various studies that the socio-economic backgrounds of the women influence their participation in the PRIs. The political affiliation of the members and their families are strong influences and create barriers in their participation (Singla, 2007). Reservation for women in local government bodies has given them space in the public domain. However, family and community create barriers to the participation of women. Moreover, there is the tendency to push wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, mother or other female relatives as proxies for the males (Kaushik, 1993, 1996). Therefore, the stress now must be on quality participation of women rather than merely quantitative. Quality participation can be achieved by providing various training programmes to the women members and using the mass media to create awareness among the women in PRIs (Jha, 2004). Training will also help the women to raise gender and other social concerns in PRIs, which will help to broaden the framework for empowerment (Stephen, 2001).

Several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are working in rural areas for rural development. Their engagement includes training and capacity-building for women as local government representatives (Behar, 1998).

In Andhra Pradesh about ten SHGs have provided the inputs required to build the capacities of women for their participation (Bandhyopadhyay et al., 2002). In Godavari, Khammam and Kurnool districts, SHGs are strengthening women's unity and enhancing their leadership qualities (Rao, 2003). A study conducted in Uttar Pradesh highlighted the need for state governments to provide training aimed at improving women's awareness regarding their participation in the local bodies (Pal, 1998).

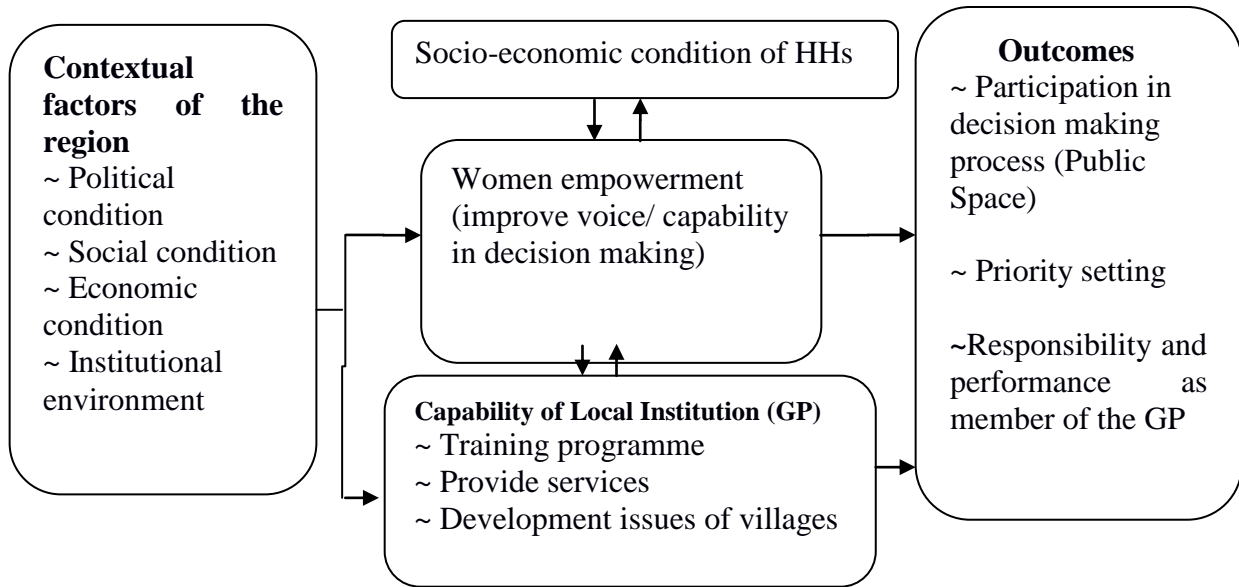
This brief review also shows that the influence of a given region's socio-economic conditions on women's capabilities has not been adequately studied. Women ward members' low awareness of the development programmes in their areas severely restricts their performance and the control of GP is also another aspect that has not been studied.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical perspective on political empowerment of women can be understood in terms of Nussbaum's (2000) approach to capability, which explains both human capability and dignity. Third world countries adopted an approach to a person's capability based on the principle that every person is a means to the end, thereby emphasizing women's role as producers, outlet for sexual needs, agents of family prosperity, caregivers and as a support for men. Women are never treated as people entitled to the same rights as men (Nussbaum, 2000). The theory further envisages the empowerment of women in the public domain as being largely dependent on their social and economic context. Do 33 per cent reservation for women help in building their capabilities? Women are bound to traditional beliefs and their active participation in local governance is a big question mark.

Reservation of seats in local bodies has given women the opportunity to play an important role in the decision-making process. Statutory empowerment of women will become real and relevant only when they are given properly planned, systematic training in the responsibilities, duties and rights which will develop them as elected representatives (Palanithurai, 1996).

Figure 1: Framework for Analysis



This study examines the contextual factors of a region to locate the position of women in the society. The political, social and economic conditions as well as institutional environment (formal and informal) are the basic contextual factors that are linked with each other. These factors are directly linked with women empowerment in relation to their capability for decision making, and the capability of local institutions. Women empowerment, in this study, means their 'political empowerment.' There is an institutional process which enables women to become members of the GPs. In this sense, it can be said that their 'empowerment' is taking place and women are being given a 'space' in the public domain.

Through this 'empowerment,' women can raise their voices on several issues related to development, health and child care, education, water and better sanitation for their villages. How much of this 'representational empowerment' results in actual 'political empowerment' is the question. Women's lack of capacity and access to information at the grassroots level makes decision-making difficult for them. Reservation for women and marginalised groups is still overshadowed by considerations of caste, and the patriarchal systems.

Capacity building of the grama panchayats (GPs) must necessarily incorporate training programmes for women. Indicators such as women empowerment and local government capacity create certain outcomes. These outcomes reflect the participation of women in the decision making process, inducements in priority setting, socio-economic development, their active performance in the GP, both as members and their contribution to the development of their village.

Methodology

This study was conducted in three GPs of Koraput district of Odisha. The aim was to understand the perception of women on political empowerment vis-à-vis their self-participation, as elected representatives, in the political decision-making process. The research questions were:

1. How do the women in this area feel about their political empowerment?
2. Does political empowerment lead to social empowerment?

These questions were central to the study. The socio-economic contexts of the region vis-à-vis women political representations were contextualised to understand the capabilities of women that, in turn, measured their degree of empowerment.

Did the women representatives of the GPs in this study retain their political empowerment or did they merely occupy the political space to become spectators in political decision-making? This study also aimed at understanding the relationship between the socio-economic backwardness of the region and political representation of women by examining how women perceive their political empowerment as people's representatives. It also attempts to understand how the development of these areas was influenced by women's political representation.

The study was conducted in Koraput district, which lies in south-west Odisha (KPTGOI, 2009a). Koraput is one of the 55 districts of India that are most affected by extremism (Planning Commission, 2005). Being among India's poorest regions, this part of the state has come to occupy a special place in public debates and public policy interventions. The total population of this Koraput is 1,177,954 (Census of India, 2001a) where 589,438 were male and 588,516 were female (Census of India, 2001b). About 50.66 per cent of the population belongs to STs (Census of India, 2001c) and 13.41 per cent to the SCs (Census of India, 2001d). Male literacy level was 47.5 per cent and for females, it was 24.81 per cent (KPTGOI, 2009b).

Koraput is chronically drought-prone. Thus food shortages, poverty, hunger and starvation deaths and distress migration are common in this region. Although there are several centrally-sponsored schemes have been implemented here, there has been no significant alleviation of the region's problems (Government of Orissa, 2004). There have been no studies of women's empowerment in Koraput. The majority of women from this region are socio-economically and educationally backward and their problems have not got the due attention, either from the state or NGOs. The central government's National Sample Survey of 1999-2000 showed that about 78 per cent of the rural people of Koraput district belonged to the below poverty line category (BPL) as

against the state average of 47.15 per cent (Das, 2006). The social, economical and political backwardness of this region has been a major influence on the development of women.

Data to meet the objectives of the study were selected purposively from women ward members of the three GPs of Koraput, Padmapur, Laxmipur and Kutinga, through an interview method. Interviews were conducted among 24 women representatives of the three GPs by using semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted among the sampled women representatives. Few case studies were also prepared to understand the women's perception of political representation.

Table 1: Socio-economic profile of women ward members of the sample GPs
(in %, n=24)

		<i>Gram Panchayat (GP)</i>			
		<i>Kutinga</i>	<i>Laxmipur</i>	<i>Padmapur</i>	<i>Total</i>
Age (in years)	21-30	40	63.6	62.5	58.3
	31-40	60	18.1	25	29.1
	41-50	-	18.1	12.5	12.5
	Above 50	-	-	-	-
Caste	SC	20	36.3	25	29.1
	ST	80	54.4	62.5	62.5
	OBC	-	9	-	4.1
	General	-	-	12.5	4.1
Marital Status	Married	100	90.9	100	95.8
	Unmarried	-	9	-	4.1
Religion	Hindu	80	90.9	87.5	87.5
	Christian	20	9	12.5	12.5
Educational Level	Illiterate	60	36.6	62.5	50
	Primary	20	45.5	12.5	29.1
	Secondary	-	9	25	12.5
	Higher Secondary	20	-	-	7
	Post Graduation	-	9	-	1.4
Family Type	Joint	40	72.2	75	66.6
	Nuclear	60	27.2	25	33.3
Annual Income (in INR)	10,000	60	45.4	37.5	45.8
	10,001-30,000	20	45.4	62.5	45.8
	30,000-100000	-	-	-	-
	Above 100000	20	9	-	8.4

Socio-economic Background of Women Members

The age of the person influences performance as a leader in political institutions. It can be seen from Table 1 that 58.3 per cent of the respondents belonged to the age category of 21-30 years. The members from the older age groups were more aware and active in different development work as compared to the women in the younger age groups, the main reason being that the younger women had to devote more attention to their families, which had growing children. Religion has great influence on the day-to-day life of Indians. Eighty-eight per cent of the elected members were Hindus. Caste is another factor to measure the level of representation among women because it can play a dominant role in influencing the participation of ward members. The data shows that 21.1 per cent of the elected members were from SCs, 62.5 per cent from the STs, and 4.1 per cent from the other backward castes. Only 4.1 per cent of the GP members from the sample belonged to the open category. Education is important to create awareness. Males played a dominant role in the implementation of development programmes because women had less knowledge about the issues. The lack of awareness and knowledge among the women can be attributed to illiteracy. It was observed that 50 per cent of the ward members were illiterate in the three GPs. The marital status of the women also influences their activities in personal life as well as public life. Ninety-six per cent of the ward members from the three GPs were married. It can be assumed that married ward members would be more responsible and mature than their unmarried counterparts.

The family size has a bearing on the participation levels of the women in the Gram Panchayats. Sixty-seven per cent of the ward members belonged to joint families. Household income is an indicator of the economic status and it helps to locate how income levels of family affect participation. Forty-six per cent of the ward members belonged to the lower income group. Due to their poor economic condition and as they have to work (mostly as labour) to support the families these women were not able to play an active role.

Views of Elected Women Members on Political Empowerment

Implementation of 33 per cent reservation for women at panchayat raj institution (PRI) level has given them opportunities to participate, discuss and share the problems of their villages in the public domain. At the same time, it has helped them to get involved in the decision-making for the development activities of the GPs. Prior to the 73rd amendment, getting rural women to participate in elections was a major challenge. Women would contest the elections either due to force by the family members or the villagers. They would not contest on their own initiative.

Barshi said that, “my villagers approached me to take part in the election because they had confidence in me. But I knew from the beginning that I might not be able to give time for GPs as I was working as a labourer to support my family. Sonari explained that, “I am from Dombo (SCs) community and my lack of knowledge about laws and rules of government makes me vulnerable. I am vulnerable because of my illiteracy. I contested the election only on the request of my villagers.”

It was observed in this study that most of the elected women members were, directly or indirectly, forced by the family or villagers to take part in the election. They did not take an interest because of their lack of awareness. After becoming part of GPs women’s status rose slightly. Geeta, the sarpanch of Padmapur said, “I am happy after I got elected as GP member. It gave me new dignity and status in family and in the society.” Geeta added that it was difficult for “women in our region to take part in male dominated panchayats. It was only possible because of the reservation.” A few women members said that “to a great extent, our status got elevated in society but we still face certain socio-economic barriers to our participation.”

Women were also of the opinion that nothing had changed after their election. Because of their caste and poor economic background, they are busy working to make ends meet. Caste plays a dominant role in the performance of GP members. This is reflected in their participation in public activities. STs and SCs are the dominant groups in the region and this helped them participate effectively in GPs activities as compared to the general caste women, who were hesitant to participate because of the restrictions their families placed on them.

Some of the women ward members are accompanied to the GP meetings along with male family members. One of the ward members said that, “I go to GP meeting along with my husband because I am illiterate and I do not have the idea about the rules and regulations. My husband takes all the decisions in GP on my behalf.” In many instances male family members would handle the work of the GP on behalf of the women. This attitude is exemplified by the admission of one ward member that she has not been to GP even once after election and that her husband took care of all her work.

During the FGD, one of the women said, “I do not know what political empowerment means. These days’ women have reserved seats in the GPs, so my family forced me to contest in the election and I obeyed them.” Another woman said that, “I am a ward member, but I do not bother about my involvement in GP activities because I am busy helping my own family to earn more money.” On the other hand, as one woman explained, “taking part in the GP and raising my voice is political empowerment to me.” “Contesting the election and attending GP meetings is political empowerment for me,” said another respondent in agreement. Generally, most of the women were unaware of their involvement in the activities of GPs.

Koraput district comes under one of the most backward region of India (Government of Orissa, 2004). The socio-economical, political and educational backwardness of this region affects the day to day life of every household. Discussion in the FGD showed that the majority of ward member’s fell in the below poverty line (BPL) category. Due to the poor economic conditions of the households, most of the ward members were engaged in labour or other activities to support their

families. One of the ward members said that she does not get the time to do any kind of work for the GP due to her family problems.

Women’s preoccupation with family duties did not leave them with enough space to concentrate on GP work. Most of the women ward members were not satisfied with the kind of work they were doing in the GPs. Najarani said, “there is a need to improve the power of women in GP. It will enhance their capabilities to work on regular basis.” But Damayanti said, “I do not have any idea about the GP activities as my husband proxies for me.” Kutinga sarpanch explained that “participating and winning election is political empowerment for me.” Parbati, another woman Gram Panchayat member was an agricultural labourer who made use of the opportunities that the 73rd CAA opened up. She contested the GP election “because no woman was willing.” Being elected gave Parbati an identity. “Contesting in the GP election is empowerment for us. Without reservation, we women would not have got the chance because of the domination of men,” said a ward member. Nirupama explained that she came from “...a backward region like Koraput and it is difficult for a woman like me to understand policies and programmes. But whenever I speak in the GP meeting it makes me feel empowered.” Being able to contest elections, participating in the GP meetings, and being a part of the decision- making process is considered as empowerment by women in rural areas.

**Socio-Economic Backwardness and
Participation of Women as Elected Representatives**

This study showed that the contextual factors of a region influence the capability of a person. A person’s capability is limited by the environment he/ she lives in. Koraput is one the 55 districts of India that are most affected by extremist violence (Planning Commission, 2005). Given the backwardness of this region, it is a struggle for survival for most people. Table 2 explains the factors that influence women’s participation in Koraput.

Table 2: Factors that Influence Participation of Women (in %, n=24)

<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	<i>Social Condition</i>	<i>Economic Condition</i>	<i>Traditional and Cultural Condition</i>	<i>No idea</i>
Kutinga	60	20	-	20
Laxmipur	45	27	18	9
Padmapur	50	37	12	-
Total	50	29	12	8

Fifty per cent of the ward members from the three GPs said that social conditions influence the women’s participation as leaders. About 29 per cent said that economic conditions are barriers as making ends meet becomes a priority for survival. Twelve per cent of the women said that traditional and cultural boundaries impact women’s participation in GP. In the FGD one of the women said, “we women have the capability to participate effectively in GP, but socio-economic and cultural factors of the region severely limit our effectiveness.” It was found that regional contexts and the nature of the society they live in significantly impact the capabilities of elected women representatives.

Social conditions like caste, gender and educational status of a person also influence the participation of women in GP. Koraput is a tribal region, and tribal societies are known to be more liberal in their attitudes towards women. Women were allowed to work, but the ward members were not comfortable working in the GP partly due to their lack of awareness, but also due to the men dominating GPs. Singhari felt that “women are made for household work and not to get involved in village matters or GPs. Traditionally, politics is for men only and not for women. A woman’s character can get spoiled or criticized when she tries to occupy public space.”

The caste of a person plays an important role. Women belonging to the SC or ST category were under fewer restrictions as compared to general caste women whose mobility was curtailed by their families, which affected their ability to take part in the decision-making processes.

Education is a power enabler. The literacy rate of women in Koraput is lower than that of the men. It was observed that people were less interested in promoting girls' education and restricted their own girl child's access to school. The women members said that they do not send their daughters for schooling outside their village due to the unsafe environment as well as their unwillingness to educate them in co-educational schools. Low literacy rates are the outcome of such sentiments.

Illiteracy was a major problem for the women ward members. They did not understand issues, policies and programmes that directly impacted them and, at the same time, they faced problems in articulating their demand. Therefore, it was only to be expected that the male members of the households were using their women to obtain approval of programmes, and grants in the GP. In spite of the obvious problems on account of the women's illiteracy, the state government has not initiated measures to improve women's awareness levels as well as educating them on their roles and responsibilities.

The state government's lack of attention to proper implementation and monitoring the development of Koraput has resulted in persistent poverty, hunger and food insecurity. Most of the ward members in this study come from the BPL and lower income groups. The adverse economic conditions are obstacles to women's participation in GP work because women are more preoccupied with the necessity to provide for their families. They are unable to make the time required for fulfilling their responsibilities as GP members. Koraput is surrounded by mountains and most of the households are engaged in shifting cultivation, an occupation that keeps all the members of a household, including the women, busy throughout the year to produce enough food grains. For this reason too, the women ward members were unable to concentrate on their responsibilities in the GP.

Traditional or cultural factors of the region are also significant influences. One woman participant in FGD said that, "one-third reservations for women helped us to take part in large numbers, which would not have been possible given the traditional practices of our society, which do not allow women to participate in public life." A Padmapur ward member said that "women face different boundaries while we participate in the GP activities only because we are women." Another woman said that her husband "does not give me the freedom to take part in the GP because of the conservative mindset of my family." The Padmapur ward member also felt that the "conservative nature of society is a big hurdle for women's participation in GP activities. Most households do not like their wives or daughters attending the GP meetings because they think that the GP is only for male politicians and women have no role to play." Clearly, despite the favourable conditions created by reservation of seats in PRI for women, there is still a high degree of reluctance to allow women to attend GP meetings.

The study found that the social structure of Koraput did not allow women to share public space with men. There is also no effort being made by the government to overcome these barriers. In a region where the neglect of women is more acute because of its backwardness, the government must be held accountable for not doing anything to counter the social and cultural barriers.

Women Members of GPs as Agents in the Development Process

The main aim of the 73rd Amendment Act is to directly involve women in the various development programmes for rural areas. This study examined the involvement of women as agents of development process in the rural areas. To this end, the regularity with which women attended GP meetings and participated in the decision-making processes were treated as the appropriate indicators. Table 3 presents data on the regularity with which women participated in various GP activities.

Data in Table 3 shows that 66 per cent of ward members felt that women take an active part in the meetings. Attending meetings is necessary to understand the various development issues,

policies and programmes. About 12 per cent of the women said that they did not attend the GP meetings regularly because of domestic responsibilities; but they try to attend sometimes. It was also found that the male heads of households did not allow their wives to attend the meetings because they felt that GP is for men.

Table 3: Regularity of Attendance by Women Members in GPs (in %, n=24)

<i>Gram Panchayats</i>	<i>Regularly</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Never</i>
Kutinga	60	20	20
Laxmipur	72	-	27
Padmapur	62	25	14
Total	66	12	22

About 22 per cent of the women said that they never attended the meetings because they were illiterate and it was hard for them to understand the proceedings. In such instances, the male members of the women's households take part in the GP and function as proxies for the women. An attempt was also made in this study to understand whether women had made their voices heard on development issues in the GP meetings. One of the ward members said that, as a rule, she did not speak at the GP meetings but "I only do so when I need anything urgent for my ward." Another woman said that "women do not say anything in GP due to their poor knowledge about the policies and programmes. Most of the time, I do not attend the GP meeting, but when I do my husband is with me and he does all my work." A ward member from Kutinga said that "the male ward members never give us chance to make our voices heard. They always try to exercise their command over us."

Women were hesitant to take part in the development activities of their GP because of their illiteracy which, they felt, was a barrier to understanding the issues that concerned them as well the policies and programmes intended to benefit them. They would, sometimes, try to make themselves heard but, usually, they followed the instructions of the male ward members and Gram Panchayat officials. One of the ward members from Laxmipur said, "illiteracy is a major hindrance in our path in participating in decision-making processes of GPs. Lack of awareness about the policies and programmes is another problem for us." Women had problems in articulating their demands due to their lack of awareness of their responsibilities.

The sarpanch and GP officials took decisions on behalf of the women ward members of Laxmipur. Another ward representative of Laxmipur said that "people do not consider us as ward members because we are illiterate and we come from poor economic backgrounds. They reject our suggestions. This has made us afraid to speak again." The ward member of Kutinga said that, "the decisions of GP are always taken by the sarpanch. We have to accept them without questioning."

It was found that the husbands of the women ward members are the ones who enjoy the power. The main aim of the 73rd Amendment Act to give voice to women and involve them in PRIs, seems to be defeated. From the beginning of the implementation of the Act, it was the men who wielded power. The support given by male members to their female colleagues is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Support given by Male Members (in %, n=24)

<i>Gram Panchayats</i>	<i>Regularly</i>	<i>Depends upon the situation</i>	<i>Some times</i>
Kutinga	40	60	-
Laxmipur	45	36	18
Padmapur	75	12	12
Total	54	33	12

Fifty-four per cent per cent of the women said that they received regular support from their male colleagues. Women were given equal space and freedom to speak their minds. Without the support of men, women ward members were hesitant to speak in the GP meetings. As seen in Table 4, 33 per cent of the women said that the support of male ward members depended upon the situation. Twelve per cent said that they had received occasional support from men. But often, the men would take up a lot of time in discussing problems concerning their wards without letting women raise their concerns.

The Odisha government has given special attention to the Gram Sabhas (village council) and Palli Sabhas in the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act. The main purpose of Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas is to give space for airing grievances and problems of all the wards in a GP. It is necessary for all women ward members to attend the Gram Sabhas or Palli Sabhas. This study found that most of the ward members were not even aware of Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas and hence, did not attend any of these meetings. The officials of the GPs would conduct these meetings in the absence of ward members. The villagers were not comfortable explaining their problems to government officials. In situations like these, women could have played an important role as mediators. Their lack of awareness as well as having to make a living meant that they could not attend these meetings.

A GP Manual, which is published by all states in the country, gives direction for proper functioning of GPs. In some states, the Manual gives more powers to women for active participation in GPs. During the FGD with the Padmapur GP ward members it was discussed that “the government should make a GP Manual that is common for all states. A common manual will ensure equal powers to women in all states. GPS must be financially independent so that they are not dependent on funds from the government.

The participants in the discussion also were of the opinion that “if we were to compare the GP Manual with manuals from other states, we will find that Odisha’s Manual has several shortcomings.” A universal GP Manual is one way of ensuring that women have similar roles and responsibilities in all GPs. Development of the GPs can be made possible if women actively attend and participate in the activities of the GPs. Due to the lack of involvement of women in the three GPs, their wards remained backward.

Case Studies

A few typical cases are presented here to help others to understand the women ward members’ perceptions of their work and the difficulties they face.

Case 1: Barshi Miniaka (50) was a ward member of Nissar, Laxmipur GP and belongs to the ST category. She was illiterate and her family depended on agricultural labour for a living. “I contested for the position of ward member only after the pressure from my family and villagers. I am illiterate and it causes problems when I participate in GP meetings. Though I tried to take part, I never got the chance to speak. In my view political empowerment is knowing our rights and responsibilities. I take my male family members to my work place. I am satisfied with the work I am doing in my ward. I am always interacting with the GP officials with regard to the problems existing in my village but they are not cooperative. Women can perform better than men as we are more responsible. The only problem is that male ward members and officers do not listen to me. My complaints are never heard.”

Case 2: Ghasu Gauda (35) was a ward member of Uperpakistanadala at Padampur GP. She was from the general caste and her family depended on agricultural work for their basic livelihood. “I had no intention of contesting the GP election. My villagers forced me to stand as a ward member. They had faith in me and that was the reason why I won the election. But, in general, women from the upper castes face many difficulties in entering politics, especially in a backward place like Koraput. I hesitate to participate in the meetings due to my poor knowledge. For me, attending meetings is political empowerment. But winning the election alone will not help us to participate actively in the GP. The government should give training to all women to improve their capabilities so that they can perform well in GPs.”

Case 3: Damayanti Bidika (25) was the ward member of Daliamba at Laxmipur GP. She was a housewife in a nuclear household, which mainly depended on labour for a livelihood. "I contested as ward member of Daliamba only because of my family. I do not know the work and functions of GP. After I have been elected, I have not been to the GP office even once because I have a small child. My husband generally attends all the meetings and takes decisions on my behalf. Women are represented in the GPs by proxy and their male family members do all work just like my husband does for me."

Case 4: Singhari Miniaka (38) was from Tala Kutinga ward from Kutinga GP. They mostly depend on agriculture and labour work. "I come from a very poor family. My family forced me to contest the GP elections and later, the village committee supported me. Taking part in the election is political empowerment for me. Sometimes, I attend GP meetings but, I never give more importance to them as I have to work to make ends meet. Because I am illiterate, I can barely understand what goes on in the GP. Usually, I attend the GP meetings to get money. I follow the instructions I am given. The sarpanch and GP officials decide everything regarding the development of our village development issues and inform us later."

Case 5: Sonari Miniaka (27) was a ward member of Narshikaipadar from Laxmipur GP. She was from the ST category. "I have not participated in any GP meetings because I have little knowledge about these matters. My husband manages everything for me. Although I am now a ward member my status in the society remains the same."

Case 6: Najarani Khara (22) was a ward member from Laxmipur GP. She says, "political empowerment means to have power to rule. Our district is socio-economically deprived, which affects our participation in Panchayat activities. Most of the ward members belong to poor families. It is hard to balance domestic duties and GP work. In my case, I try my best to manage both. I always raise my voice for the development of my ward."

Case 7: Baidi Hantal (23) is from Laxmipur GP and was the ward member for Ghatguda. She came from a nuclear family and her family was depending upon labour for basic livelihood. "I took interest in GP only because of my family; they supported me a lot. I won the election because of them. To me, political empowerment is empowering women to serve the people. But, because of the poor economic condition of my family, my participation is restricted. I had to discontinue my education for financial reasons and now I find that this (lack of education) is affecting my work. I am unable to understand any of the policies and programmes of the government. My husband accompanies me to the GP meetings and helps me."

Discussion and Conclusions

Women constitute half of India's population and they are an integral part of the social structure. Majority of women live in the rural parts of the country and are more marginalized than those living in the mainstream. Women must increase their participation in public life to improve their status. Reservation for women at the local government level is an important step towards the overall development of women and children.

Political participation can help women take part in the decision making process of development schemes and programmes of the government. High illiteracy rates among women is a major impediment to their awareness and understanding of policies, programmes and schemes and hence their overall development. This is the main reason why majority of women are not involved in village development activities.

Socio-economic background also affects women's involvement in GP work and, as a result, their performance. Age, caste, marital status, religion, education status, nature of family and the income levels of ward members have significant influence. The older and middle-aged women were more aware and active as compared to their younger counterparts because the latter had to devote more time to their families.

The caste of a person also played an important role. Women from SC and ST categories faced less restrictions in their families than other caste women in GP work. They were at a greater disadvantage with respect to their participation in the GP. SC and ST women were not very aware

of their role and responsibilities in the GP. Gender also played a noticeable role in that the rural people are more inclined to listen to their ward members if they are males.

The purpose and objective of reserving seats for women in PRIs was to empower them politically. Most of the ward members had no idea about what political empowerment meant. For a few of them, political empowerment meant contesting the election or being present at GP meetings. Often, the male family members of ward representatives interfered in the work of their women. Only a few ward members ever visited their GP offices. All the work was handled by the husbands or other male family members. In effect, women were expected to only approve of their men's decisions and actions. It is imperative for the state to intervene and provide adequate training and sensitization to the women so that they became aware of their role and responsibilities and able to perform better.

The economic backwardness of the region affects the capabilities of people's representatives. The impact was more adverse with women than with men. Capabilities (and performance) are influenced by the patriarchal structure of the society. As most of the women ward members belonged to the BPL category, their poor economic conditions tends to make women more vulnerable. Most of the women ward representatives were engaged in low-paying labour or agriculture for a living. Both the nature of the work and the need to make ends meet prevented these women from giving their best for GP work.

In spite of being made ward members, the women's status in society did not change significantly. Male family members were the main barriers in women's participation because of the restrictions placed on them. This paper recommends modification (or amendment) of the Odisha Gram Panchayat Manual to enable free and effective participation of women. It is essential that steps are taken to empower these elected women members so that they function as agents of change. Leadership qualities in the women must be encouraged and their participation in public life must be facilitated. For this to happen, there is a need to change the social and traditional systems prevailing in society.

Women should be trained to improve their knowledge. They must be sensitized to understand their rights, and their roles and responsibilities as GP members. To begin the political empowerment of the women first of all, arrangements must be made by organizing awareness programmes in rural areas. Participation by mass media, self-help groups, political parties and NGOs may be sought to achieve this objective. It is important to understand that reservation of seats for women in itself is not sufficient to achieve empowerment of women. Awareness programmes can go a long way in facilitating the process. The 73rd Amendment Act must aim for quality of participation in PRIs instead of achieving numbers.

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