Abstract
The reorganisation of the Panchayats or system of local self-governance in India, after the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1995, has created the basis for the establishment of formally democratic institutions for local governance at the grassroots level. An important feature of the post-1995 Panchayats is the reservation of seats for the socially marginalized sections and women. While this quota is not always filled up, it is heartening to see women Sarpanchs (the elected head of a Panchayat) even in remote villages like Kashipur, one of India’s and the world’s poorest districts, in the state of Orissa.

The evidence on functioning of new institutions of local governance in different parts of India has indicated vast potential of using these institutions to generate local resources. State sponsored rural development programmes have also achieved a greater success level in states where there has been active participation of the Panchayats in implementation.

This paper believes that the organisation of women to experiment with forms of constructive dissent, raise questions regarding their state and society, and helping them arrive at answers is a natural guarantor of development. Women also display strong group cohesion, and they show feelings of solidarity and unity, and act together. Women are also most intensely involved in ensuring food security for their family.

While it is difficult to precisely define “development” in a pluralistic society like India, sustainable development in such a labour-intensive economy is most successful when the process is inclusionary and women have a particular role to play in it.
Keywords: Kashipur, panchayats, sustainable development

1.Introduction

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1993 revolutionised the concept of democracy, people’s participation and self-determination in India, by conferring constitutional sanction on local self-governance at the grassroots level. The Act prescribes a decentralised hierarchy of three tiers for local self-governance, consisting of the Zilla Parishads at the district level, Samiti Panchayats at the intermediate level and Gram Panchayats at the village level.

This paper studies the functions of the Gram Panchayat, or local self-governance at the village level, and the role of women in aiding sustainable development through local self-governance. In particular, the study examines the role of women in addressing issues of poverty, deprivation and development in Kashipur in the eastern state of Orissa, which is one of India’s and the world’s poorest districts.

A “village” in the Indian context ordinarily consists of a habitation or a group of habitations, or a hamlet or a group of hamlets, comprising a community that manages its affairs in accordance with traditions and customs. The Census of India regards most settlements of fewer than 5,000 as a village. These settlements range from tiny hamlets of thatched huts to larger settlements of tile-roofed stone and brick houses. Most Indian villages are small; nearly 80 percent have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, according to the 1991 census. Most are nucleated settlements, while others are more dispersed.

Traditionally, villages in India recognise a headman and listened with respect to the decisions of the Panchayat, composed of important men from the village’s major castes, who had the power to levy fines and exclude transgressors from the village social life. Disputes were decided within the village precincts as much as possible, with infrequent recourse to the police or court system.

In present-day India, the government supports an elective Panchayat and headman system, which is distinct from the traditional council and headman, and, in
many instances, even includes women and very low-caste members. As older systems of authority are challenged, villagers are less reluctant to take disputes to court.

The 73rd Amendment Act states that every village shall have a Gram Sabha consisting of persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the panchayats at the village level.

The Act also states that 50 per cent of the total number of seats at the three tiers shall be reserved for lowest castes of the Indian social hierarchy – the Dalits, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and importantly, that 33 per cent of the total number of seats at all tiers of the Panchayats shall be reserved for women. This paved the way for the election of nearly 1 million women at the district, block and village levels.

The Constitution declares, “The Gram Panchayat shall be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of people, their cultural identity, community resources and customary mode of dispute resolution.” It states that it is “empowered to approve plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development, to identify persons as beneficiaries under the poverty alleviation and other programmes, and to give certificate of utilisation of funds for various plans and programmes.”

The 11th schedule of the Constitution further stipulates that functions in respect of 29 subjects, including agriculture, land reforms, housing, rural electrification, education, health centres and the public distribution system are to be devolved to the panchayats.

The Act aims to give the Gram Panchayats (hereafter referred to as Panchayats) a pivotal role in the entire scheme of decentralised governance, planning and development, by granting it complete autonomy in making decisions regarding the management, protection and preservation of natural resources. It also encourages the formulation of socio-economic development programmes, projects and schemes for the political and cultural empowerment of the tribes or the indigenous peoples. This has also opened the way for issues of social, economic and environmental sustainability to be addressed at the level of villages.
The underlying spirit is on the *devolution, rather than delegation of powers* to the Panchayats, that is, the adoption of decentralised *participatory democracy*, rather than decentralised *representative democracy*. This carries forward the cardinal principle that the class or social group, which plays the principal role in economic production and social development, must, in course of time, take control of that development. This can also be extended to responsibilities in relation to its impact on the natural environment.

### 2. Role of women in sustaining development in Indian villages

According to studies conducted by the Census of India (2001), seventy-five per cent of India’s women live in the villages. The typical Indian woman starts her living from scratch each day, as she rises before sunrise to walk 10 miles through wild weeds, unpaved, stony footpaths to bring back a heavy burden of firewood and water to meet the day’s requirements. She returns to a day of hardship as she juggles multiple tasks of performing household chores like cooking and cleaning, and toiling in the fields. In her lifetime, she can expect to go through 8-9 pregnancies, of which approximately 50 per cent may result in live births. Only 20 per cent of these live births may live up to age five, concludes the UNDP-aided India Human Development Report 2001.

India’s women are struggling for survival in a world where the physical resources they have traditionally depended on for survival are rapidly degrading and diminishing in the face of intense population and industrial pressures. Though they are all economically active, they have not yet acquired the skills necessary to make an adequate living in an industrialising economy.

According to India’s Nobel laureate for developmental economics Amartya Sen, organisation of women to experiment with forms of constructive dissent, raise questions regarding their state and society, and helping them arrive at answers is a natural guarantor of development (Sen 1992). Studies of social researchers, NGOs, and women’s groups demonstrate how women cope with problems of poverty and deprivation. Following are observations of a study conducted by Rose (1992):
First, women show greater resilience than men in combating day-to-day poverty and exercise incredible ingenuity in making ends meet. While it is common for men to remain unemployed for long periods of time, women generally combine many occupations simultaneously, and bring in small amounts of cash, trading for food grain or clothing, vending small quantities of consumer goods and using what skills they possess to earn wages.

A second trend that emerged out of previous studies is that women spend almost all of their earnings on their families. Their average earning of about Rs. 10 a day (approximately 30 Australian cents) is invested immediately in food, clothing and meager shelter, while their husbands contribute a much smaller part of their earnings to the households – if there is a husband, and if he has earnings. Up to 30 per cent of poor families in Indian villages are solely supported by women who are self-employed.

The third quality that has emerged is that women display exceptional ecological consciousness. While men often prefer to earn cash income from wood crops, women across the country insist on protecting and planting trees, as they increasingly realise the effects of deforestation, droughts, soil erosion and saline encroachment on their land and families, as they lose the local resources they depend on.

From such examples it is quite clear that when amiable conditions exist for women to play a leading and active role in the decision making of the village, the entire community benefits. This increased participation of women is often associated with better utilisation of financial resources, increased harmony in village and the prioritisation of some important, yet neglected aspects of development such as girls’ education and sanitation. Social reform measures such as reduction in alcohol consumption and domestic violence clearly get more prominence when women come to the forefront in rural communities.

If India wants to pull itself out of its poverty, it is by giving these poor, illiterate rural women access to resources and opportunities to plan and implement their own programmes that this can be accomplished. The movement from the private, individual, circumscribed world to a broader consciousness of collective, public and political worlds
will generate the self-respect needed to resist exploitation and to demand change collectively.

The emergence of rural Indian women from their limited communities and desperate economic situations will bridge the yawning gap between the traditional and modern worlds, between illiteracy and literacy, and – between exploitation and empowerment – in a uniquely Indian way. It will also contribute to the more sustainable development of what is projected soon to become the world’s most populous country.

3. Role of women and self-governance in Kashipur – India’s and the world’s poorest district

Nestled securely among the gently sloping, placid hills of the Eastern Ghats, with a myriad natural, gurgling streams, fresh, sweet smelling air and red earth contrasting with the lush green of the paddy plantations and the clear blue sky to present a beautiful, startling panorama of colour, Kashipur in the eastern state of Orissa, hardly seems an appropriate stage for one of the most distressing dramas of human exploitation, and collective deprivation of basic human rights of an entire community.

Kashipur, along with her sister districts of Bolangir and Koraput, has the dubious distinction of being among the ten most backward districts in the India and the world.

The sheer extent of marginalisation of the people has no single standard of measure. With a failed public food distribution system (PDS), the tribes know no food security, and seven of them in fact, were tragic victims of deaths due to starvation in September – October 2001. With an ineffective water management programme, the community has no water security. With ambiguous provisions in the 1998 Land Acquisition Bill, and worse still, with a government that has no scruples to make clever use of it to deprive the residents of their land, they know no land security.

Kashipur falls under Schedule Five of the Constitution, which affords legal, economical, social and cultural protection to the Scheduled Tribes or the indigenous peoples of India. Nevertheless, with a literacy rate of a shocking 1 – 2 per cent, the
tribes of Kashipur have neither the means of protest, or indeed, even the awareness, that they are being deprived of their basic fundamental rights, guaranteed to every citizen of this country, by the highest legal order of the land.

Kashipur saw its first woman Sarpanch, or elected head of Gram Panchayat in 2001, when the 28 year-old Champa Devi was unanimously selected for the post. She was the obvious choice even for men, as she held the most advanced education, having completed class seven at the local government school.

Champa Devi’s first project was to organise access to credit in order to stimulate economic development. Fair credit is a unanimous demand in almost every Indian village. When families earn the minimum for day-to-day survival, times of emergency or social obligations like marriages and deaths can mean lifelong debts.

With the assistance of “Aragamee”, a UNICEF-funded NGO based in Kashipur, Champa Devi established a women’s group called the “Ama Sangathan” or Our Organisation. The two organisations started by attempting to help its members get loans from nationalised banks but it quickly became apparent how ill-equipped both the women and the formal institutions were, to deal with one another. Most women could not fill out withdrawal and deposit slips, could not understand which queues to stand in, and were unable to sign their names. Sometimes their names changed from visit to visit, as they might give their husband or parent’s names. It clearly demonstrated how irrelevant these formalities were within their own communities, where verbal dealings were the known means of agreement (Das 1994).

Champa Devi and Agramee realised that what they needed was their own banks. In one of the most innovative solutions for rural credit, they overcame the problem of illiteracy by arranging an agreement to use women’s photographs instead of signatures on their passbooks. They disregarded advice that a bank for poor, illiterate women would be suicidal, and claim better recovery rates and higher profit margins than most formal institutions. Now their model is being promoted by women’s organisations around the world!
I realised during a field trip that I made to Kashipur in May 2002, that while there is a sense of frustration about the forces that mire these women in poverty, they understand that change is a process of struggles and they are beginning to acquire an empowering sense of identity and confidence, that based on their experiences and determination, they can solve their own problems.

The women’s groups also quickly realised that these rural peasant women found formal banking hours inconvenient due to their work schedules. In another innovative solution to bridge the modern and traditional worlds, they overcame this problem by arranging to send out volunteer bank workers to the women’s neighbourhoods and workplaces, to collect savings and loan installments.

Early on in its banking experience, the Ama Sangathan conducted research to find out why some women were defaulting on loan repayments. They were alarmed to find out that 20 of the 500 women surveyed had died, and 15 of those deaths were due to complications during childbirth (Das 1995).

The two immediate reasons identified were tetanus due to inadequate medical care and the need for income. If they had no savings and no maternity benefit, they could not leave work for childbirth.

It became clear that these poor, self-employed women, engaged in rolling bidis (crude cigarettes), or working in the fields, needed a way to protect themselves from risks of childbirth, and find a way to eat and feed their family during the period of delivery.

The Panchayat aided by Champa Devi strongly believed that society as a whole was responsible for the welfare of children, and not the poor mother alone. However, when the government’s LIC (Life Insurance Corporation) rejected their call for the public support of these women as unprofitable, the Ama Sangathan initiated their own prenatal services. At the time of conception, the expecting mother would register for maternity care services at the Ama Sangathan by paying a nominal fee of Rs. 15 (approximately 30 Australian cents). The money would be collectively deposited in the rural bank, and at the time of her delivery, the new mother would be given a stipend of Rs. 100
(approximately AUD$3) and a kilo of \textit{ghee} (clarified butter). In addition, the Agragamee also helps to initiate training courses for \textit{dais} or midwifes in rural areas.

“\textbf{The tribals have a most unhealthy custom of laying a newborn on a bed of wet cow-dung},” says Sagarika Ghosh, a health worker at the Ama Sangathan, in an interview in June 2002. “\textbf{The new mothers would also subsist on just rice and salt for months after birth, and bathe the infants even 4-5 times a day.}” These practices naturally resulted in a high infant and maternal mortality rate.

Issues of health, sanitation and hygiene, which are all too often neglected by male Sarpanchs in favour of infrastructural development projects like constructing new buildings, are given the urgent importance they deserve by women heads. The health and nutrition programme of the NGOs focuses on educating the mothers on the benefits of breastfeeding, immunisation, antenatal care and various diet supplements. There has also been a marked rise in safer deliveries, with trained \textit{dais} monitoring the procedure.

\textbf{The shadow that looms darkest over the tribals of Kashipur at the moment, and one of Champa Devi’s most challenging confrontations as their elected head, is the imminent threat of losing their land.} The villages of Maikonch, Baphilimalli Hills, Toragoda, Baghri Jhola, Bilamal and Kucheipadar have concentrated deposits of bauxite ore, which has attracted a horde of swooping multi-national companies (MNCs) like Utkal Alumina, ALCAN (Aluminum Canada), and Larsen and Tubro, in partnership with ALCOA and HINDALCO, for mining, smelting and processing aluminum.

\textbf{Schedule 5 of the Constitution clearly provides that tribal land cannot be taken away from them without their informed consent, and given to non-tribals. Nevertheless, the tribals who cultivate the \textit{dongar} or uplands, and Orissa have a curious law that states that lands on a gradient can be taken away on the principle of ‘eminent domain’ (nobody’s land, which makes it government property), and the residents are not eligible for compensation. The 1998 Land Acquisition (Amendment) Bill does not precisely define “public purpose”, for which land can be taken away. The NGOs and social activists have been demanding a restrictive definition, to include only schemes of “genuine welfare”.}
A survey conducted by the NGOs reveals that a 100,000 people are likely to be displaced to accommodate the mining units, though Utkal Alumina estimates that 2193 tribals will lose their land (Ramachandran etc 2001). More than 90 per cent of the tribal population in these villages, which depend on agriculture, and sale of MFPs (minor forest produce) as a livelihood, face the terrifying prospect of losing their means of survival altogether.

The people are determinedly resisting any attempt to proceed with the project, as the recent police firing at the peaceful assembly of protesting tribals in Maikonch village demonstrated. The political ramifications of the project, which is currently in a stalemate, are significant.

The project will encourage a lot of migration into Kashipur, which might lower the proportion of tribals in the population to less that 50 per cent, which would mean that the area would be re-scheduled. The tribals then stand to lose privileges, granted to them as residents of a scheduled area.

The environmental implications of the proposed operation are no less alarming. Heavy water pollution is anticipated, since processing of one tonne of alumina would leave behind two tonnes of toxic sludge, which will have high amounts of caustic soda. These effluents will have to be released downstream, so that approximately 50-60 villages along the banks will be adversely affected. The silent, peaceful hills will reverberate with noise pollution, and the clean air will be marked by foul odour and hanging dust.

The NGOs are considered the primary roadblocks to launching the mining project in Kashipur. While the NGOs defend themselves by insisting that the neither oppose nor support industrialisation, and they only wish to help the tribes make an informed decision about the type of development they’d like to achieve for themselves, they are often accused by the state government of spawning a culture of dependence.

In an interview with Champa Devi in May 2002, she retorted, “In fact, the government has made the tribals more dependent and helpless by taking decision-
making so far away from them. One by one, their resources are being taken away, and then returned as concessions and charity.”

In a multi-cultural, pluralistic society like India, it is difficult to define precisely what “national development” means. Any progress that comes at the sacrifice of a community of citizens, must surely be rejected as “anti-national” and “anti-development”. As Champa Devi points out, the tribal economy is a self-sustaining, healthy one, and the tribal community would be a very powerful one, if an alternative plan of development is drawn up to strengthen their food security, increase the literacy rate, provide housing, health and sanitation facilities, and revitalise the Panchayat system by giving it a greater autonomy, and at the same time, introducing a more effective system of accountability.

No development project can be justified if it results in displacement and state-induced impoverishment, and if a section of the society is traumatised by it. Development through displacement projects like mining only results in a greater alienation of the tribals from their land. It is crucial to give the residents a choice in the kind and the manner of progress they’d like to achieve. Because development, when it is dictated from top-down, is no progression, only retrogression.

The Panchayat systems success at changing women’s work and living conditions by bringing about greater participation of women in self-governance will depend on its understanding and acknowledgement of the women’s ability to translate their values into the working system.

As Bhatt (1996) asserted, “When women lead the movement of the poor, the growth rate of the economy will be as fast as the growth of social harmony and the growth of national integration.”

4. Problems faced by the Panchayats and women Sarpanchs

The operational success of the decentralisation process is dependent to a large extent on the efficient functioning of the Gram Panchayat, which is regarded as the basic unit of the Panchayati Raj system. The tiers at the intermediate and district levels, in majority of the states, are still to acquire relevant roles. Often, they are just reduced to fund-
forwarding agencies for governmental programmes being implemented by the Gram Panchayat, instead of being allowed the autonomy to take on roles of policy-making and implementation.

The 73rd Amendment aroused a great deal of expectation that the Panchayats would be entrusted with substantial functions at the ground level. However, the functions and responsibilities of the Panchayats, a self-governing body that will be administered by persons of not adequate education, need to be more clearly defined. State Governments continue to perceive Panchayats as institutions created to erode their authority. In facts, very few states have devolved specific functions to Panchayats in spite of the fact that they amended their Acts in conformity with the provision of the 73rd Amendment.

Active women Sarpanches have given importance to social development activities like health, sanitation, old age pensions and welfare but a perusal of the agenda of Panchayat meetings across the country demonstrates a pattern of work priority being accorded to infrastructure issues such as the construction of roads and community buildings. Social sector development issues such as health and education take a back seat. Even discussion of the infrastructure issue is found to be limited to new constructions. Repair and maintenance of existing structures is often overlooked.

An unfortunate observation that has emerged is, that most women elected heads are Sarpanches only on paper. High monetary extortions from corrupt government officials, and threats of physical violence, rape and abuse from the upper castes often keep them from performing their duties.

Kaliamma, a Sarpanch from the village of Gudalur in southern Tamil Nadu, lodged a complaint with the sub-divisional officer that she was not being allowed to perform her duties. Retribution was immediate. At the Gudalur bus stand, angry goons stripped her and beat her. The police have registered a case under the SC/ST Atrocities Act, but life has only become more difficult for Kaliamma (Times of India 2002).

The Dalit woman Sarpanch of in neighboring Shivpuri was even less fortunate. Rajammal was raped by her upper caste opponents on April 2001 when she went to the fields in the morning. In the same district, Saku Bai, a Panchayat member of Dolariya
village was refused water at a meeting. Saku Bai said, in an interview with me in May 2002, “Now I am being given water in separate tumblers meant for Dalits.” She is afraid of the upper caste community and does not want to fight. “We have to live. If I do not submit to their whims, they will stop giving work to my husband,” she said.

In Itiya village of Bareilley district of the state of Uttar Pradesh, a woman Panch was paraded naked with bells tied to her neck after being raped by the “big men” of the area. The “punishment” was for an alleged illicit relationship.

Various sub-committees included in the state legislations for social justice, amenities, production, etc. are not functional in about 85 per cent of the Panchayats. There is no clarity about the role and composition of these committees and no effort has been made to make them operational.

A noteworthy example is the state of Rajasthan, which was a pioneer in introducing Right to Information clause in its state Panchayat Act. Under this provision, every citizen has the right to see the official government records after paying a nominal sum decided by the state government. However, most villagers are not familiar with this provision.

Most Panchayat institutions demonstrate an insufficient understanding of the constructive role that self-help groups (SHGs) and NGOs can play and are unable to configure a working relationship with them. With apathetic and corrupt administrations at the state and central levels, the tribal population is heavily dependent on the local non-governmental organisation network as a representative and protector of their rights. In Kashipur for instance, the NGOs serve almost as a parallel administration.

The possibility that ultimately the Panchayats could try to stifle or suppress these SHGs, perhaps as threats to their own existence, cannot be ruled out. People’s initiatives blossoming into the self-help groups would get repressed and that would ultimately reduce the effectiveness of Panchayats, as they would have no pressure lobby to interact with. There is an urgent need to work out mechanisms/systems that will allow the SHGs and the Panchayats to work in tandem and establish a system of reinforcing each other’s work.
Establishing a system, through which the SHGs and the Panchayats interface efficiently, is eminently possible because by nature and mandate both these institutions have the same objective, i.e., of ushering people-centered development and to empower the disempowered.

5. Conclusion

The move to institutionalise formal self-governance at the grassroots level, and to encourage from the beginning, women’s participation in the development process, is vital for individual women, but they can be sustained only if they become a part of the entire society’s consciousness, and if large scale policies support both the programmes and the ideology.

An important point to make here is that part of the reason that women submit to the exploitation inflicted upon them in the first place is because they are not conversant with the formal, literate world, and that many of them live and deal in a limited circumscribed environment which does not promote unifying with people outside of their sphere.

This, therefore, is the basis of the ideology of democratising rural self-governance, and promoting women’s role in it – that women, from different castes, religions and communities join together to define, and plan their development.

The evidence on functioning of new institutions of local governance in different parts of India has indicated vast potential of using these institutions to generate local resources. The Panchayats have undertaken several activities for village development, which can be strengthened by further devolution of resources and powers to these institutions. In fact, effectiveness of state sponsored rural development programmes has also achieved a greater success level in states where there has been active participation of the Panchayats in implementation.
For instance, the state initiated PDS or the public distribution system has been acknowledged to have failed in most states as a result of state corruption and hoarding. As an alternative to the PDS, many Panchayats in villages in the states of Orissa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra and others started the grain banks, where grain is harvested and stored in huge straw mates plastered with cow dung. This grain is then redistributed and rationed out to the families in the villages.

Over 70 years ago, Mahatma Gandhi had advocated a near foolproof strategy of ensuring food availability and access to the masses, especially the poorest of the poor. He proposed that production of food must be as proximate as possible to consumption. *In the matter of food grain production he advocated maximum possible self-reliance at village level.* He wanted all Indian villages (where 80 percent of the population lives) to grow the food grains required by each of them to feed the local population – using discreetly the local resources of soil, water, vegetation, grazing grounds.

Many economists subscribing to the theory of comparative advantage rejected Gandhi’s prescription of self-reliance. However, a number of the objectors later realised the value and validity of Gandhi’s approach when their studies revealed that even when the production of food grains in the economy was comfortable at the aggregate level, the poorest in remote villages had little access to food. Currently, this truth has erupted in India in the most embarrassing if not cruel fashion: Government is holding 60 million tonnes of food grains in its buffer stocks while 50 million human beings hungering for food have no access to it.

Ultimately says Mani Shankar Iyer (2002), the Panchayats can fulfill their responsibility as institutions of self-government only if devolution is patterned on a nexus between the three Fs: Functions, Functionaries and Finances. Very few states have linked the formal devolution of functions to the means for actualising such devolution through the devolution of functionaries and finances.

There is also a disturbing lack of clarity about the tasks to be entrusted to different tiers of the Panchayati Raj system. Some states like Karnataka and Kerala have shown the way to how different functions can be entrusted to different tiers and how the work of the different tiers can be synergised to the benefit of the system as a
whole. Each state government must establish an appropriate body to recommend the division of devolved functions (along with functionaries and finances) to different tiers of the Panchayati raj system. The central government might set the tone with an indicative model prepared by an appropriate central body.

Matthew (1999) points out that arrangements for the training of elected members of the panchayats at different levels, and of the administrative and technical staff attached to the panchayats, fall at present far short of requirements. An exponential increase in the quantum of funds made available for such training is required as well as deep consideration to the overall training requirements of both elected members and panchayat staff, he says. Moreover, there is special need to concentrate on training for the weaker sections and women. The Indira Gandhi National Open University has evolved a multi-media model for extending training on a mass scale through the use of both traditional and innovative forms of mass communication. This multi-media model needs to be brought into play with all deliberate speed. Mathew also recommends that the national television channel Doordarshan too needs to take up the challenge of effectively training elected members and staff, especially representatives of the weaker sections and women, in the arts of Panchayati raj.

In view of the crucial importance of adequate women’s participation in meetings of the gram sabha, Iyer recommends a sub-quorum of female attendance should be built into the required quorum. Moreover, he says a provision may be made that meetings of the gram sabha be preceded by meetings of the Mahila Sabhas or women’s organisations, comprising all adult women voters of the village panchayat, to ensure that gender concerns and preferences get fully reflected in the proceedings of the Gram Sabha.

Article 243G provides that panchayats should be enabled “by law” to function as “institutions of self-government”. Yet, as Das (2001) points out, in most states, devolution and decentralisation is by executive orders under the law rather than “by law” per se. It must be ensured that all states undertake devolution “by law”, as called for in the Constitution, so that no retrogression in devolution is possible without the explicit concurrence of the state legislature.
Reservation for women has opened the door to revolutionary changes of a political, social and cultural nature. India can truly be proud of being the first and only country in the world to have empowered through free and fair elections more than one million women who are participating in the panchayats. There is, however, still some way to go in changing the apparent empowerment of women into a real and genuine empowerment. To this end, Iyer (2002) recommends:

- Reservations for women to extend to at least two terms.
- No-confidence motions against women chairpersons be allowed to be tabled only once every two years, no oftener, so as to end the widespread harassment of women chairpersons through threats of no-confidence motions, which are much more in vogue with respect to women than men chairpersons. If a woman chairperson or member is removed for any reason whatsoever, another woman of the same category, and not a man, must replace her whether in full or acting charge.

Implementation is a key responsibility of the panchayats. The gram sabha must be deeply involved in implementation at all levels because it is the best form of social audit, both pre-implementation and post-implementation. This is also the most effective way of cutting down corruption and nepotism and ensuring transparency and accountability, as well as functioning democracy. In laying down the procedure for panchayat-level implementation at all levels of the Panchayati Raj system, state governments should specify the role and functions of the panchayats.

Overall, the phenomenal success of the 73rd Amendment Act 1995 and the magnitude of its gains in leadership, in visibility and income control marks the crossing over from the empowerment of particular women or a few organisations to more widespread climate change. Women Sarpanchs have proved beyond doubt their ability to use their perceptions and solutions, to move from individual survival issues towards government policy change, helping shift India’s development process more realistically towards people’s aspirations and abilities.

Their integrated approach has managed to increase incomes and assets of women, increase their access to services, their range of job skills and most importantly, their confidence (Rose 1992). By evolving ways to bridge the modern and the traditional,
the women Sarpanches have displayed their supreme leadership qualities to fighting to recover their land, acquiring access to bank accounts, and worker identification cards.

By envisioning the kinds of systems they need to serve them, by articulating them, by developing the training to know how to build them, by employing themselves at delivering these systems, and finally, by realizing for themselves the Gandhian ideal of self-reliance, these women have made concrete contributions to development thinking and job creation in India – and proved themselves an invaluable and indispensable means of achieving sustainable development in rural India.

References: