Women aiding sustainability through local governance in India

The Panchayati Raj in Kashipur – India’s and the world’s poorest district, in Orissa state

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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
Three tiers of local self-governance at the grassroots levels:

- Zilla Parishads at the district level
- Samiti Panchayats at the intermediate level
- Gram Panchayats at the village level
The 73rd Amendment Act declares that:

“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 further declares that:

“The Gram Panchayat shall be 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.”
Importantly, the 73rd Amendment Act allows that:

- 50% of the total number of seats at the three tiers shall be reserved for the lowest castes – the Schedule Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Dalits
- 33% of the total number of seats at all tiers of the Panchayat shall be reserved for women
This paved the way for the election of nearly 1 million Indian women from the villages, at the district, block and village levels.
The underlying spirit of the Act is on the *devolution, rather than delegation of powers* to the Panchayats

or

the adoption of *participatory democracy, rather than decentralised representative democracy*. 
India’s women
Women cope with problems of poverty and deprivation better than men:

- Women show greater resilience in combating day-to-day poverty
- Women spend almost all of their earnings on their families
- Women display exceptional ecological consciousness
Kashipur in Orissa, India
Champa Devi, Kashipur’s first woman Sarpanch...an inspiration in a man’s world
The flip side of a lack of resource development – a clean, fresh, beautiful Kashipur
The Ash Pond created by NALCO on Kashipur’s single freshwater lake, when there is already severe water insecurity.
Heavy toxic water pollution in the initial stages of the mining project in Kashipur
May 2002
“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.”

Champa Devi, Sarpanch, Kashipur, Orissa, May 2002
No development project can be justified if it causes state-induced impoverishment, and if a section of society is traumatised by it.
Recommendations for a more effective empowerment of women at the Gram Panchayat level:

- Reservation for women to extend to at least two terms
- No confidence motions against women chairpersons to be tabled only once every two years