

CHAPTER-VI

Women and Decision making process in Hailakandi

This chapter explains access of women in Hailakandi to power and decision making in public domain as well as their private life is responsible for status of women's empowerment in the district. While women enjoyed right to vote for many years, they occupy only a small fraction of seats in state legislature and parliament. Although situation gradually change with 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments that provide reservation of 33% of seat on panchayat and municipalities but this has yet to be translated at national and state level.

Participation of women in the democratic process is an integral part of their life as it promotes gender equality by strengthening the quality of civic life. As they constitute half of the population, it is very important to have women is decision making in the public domain. Those obstacles which do not let them participate fully have to be identified and remove. Often structure and social mores are the barriers. Sometimes, the problems is with women themselves and this has to be overcome to. Governmental and non-governmental interventions will undoubtedly facilitate to promote women's participation in decision making. While women have been visible in mass movements and protests, it is worth nothing in particular that their presence has not been felt strongly in structure decision making institutional settings. Where women's participation is substantial, their need in positions of power rather in isolated positions of power hinders gender equality.

As per the NFHS-2 the women in Assam have greater autonomy in some aspects of household decision making, like what to cook, whether to take her own health care and purchasing of jewellery. But very few of them have the autonomy to decide to visit

relatives and friends, stay with parents/ siblings, going to market and very few of them have access to money. Thus her autonomy is confined only to very few aspects of household decision-making and that too in a very limited scale compared to her counterparts in the other North Eastern States. As to public decision-making, however, one must admit the very limited scope available for the women in the North East, Assam being no exception. Women may be visible at public places and institutions, as there is freedom of movement, but her visibility does not give her power, she is very unlikely to be a member in the decision making bodies of these institutions. Data on managerial bodies of schools and colleges, public institutions, religious institutions reveal the invisibility of women in power¹.

Women in Hailakandi have very low representation in decision-making bodies and do not even have complete freedom in household decision making. In fact, women's participation in decision-making, their rights to property and access and control over resources are some of the areas where women in the district still lag far behind. The State also has been too slow in implementing any legislation favouring women's rights. The State does not have a Policy for Women's Empowerment and very little has been done to formulate such a Policy. One positive step that the Government adopted during the Ninth Plan was the Women Component Plan. But due to paucity of funds, the State could not implement the Plan in the proposed manner. Many Social Sector schemes have become dysfunctional due to the inadequate fund flow from the State.

Table:6.1 Gender basis composition of Hailakandi Municipal Board with highest educational Qualification

Sex	Below Matriculation	Matriculation (HSLC)	HS	UG	PG
Male	2	0	6	0	0
Female	1	4	2	1	0

Source: Municipal Board Office, Hailakandi

Table:6.1- Gender basis composition of Hailakandi Municipal Board with highest educational Qualification shows that female members of Municipal Board constituted in 2013 gone in favour of women as out of 16 members of body 1 member has UG degree with LLB qualification as highest educational qualification. On the other hand, no other male member of the present body has UG degree and 2 of the male members are belonging to Below Matriculation category. Thus, as a result of 50% reservation of women in Urban Bodies they are now in an advantaged position and could able to occupy the seat of Chairperson and Vice –Chairperson having opportunity to bring any decision in favour of them.

Table:6.2 Gender Basis Composition of Hailakandi Zilla Parishad with Highest Educational Qualification

Sex	Below Matric	Matriculation	HS	UG	PG
Male	0	2	1	3	0
Female	0	1	1	1	1

Source: Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Assam in Collaboration with UNICEF

The table 6.2 on gender basis composition of recent Hailakandi Zilla Parishad shows that out of 10 members four belongs to female folk and six belongs to male category. Out of four female members of Zilla Parishad one is matriculate, another higher secondary and two others have UG and PG as the highest qualification. On the other hand, among the male members three persons have UG, one has HS and another has matriculation degree as highest qualification. Hence the female members are ahead of male members so far literacy is concerned as none of the male member possesses the PG qualification.

Table: 6.3-Total number of Representatives with Highest Educational Qualifications elected to Local Bodies (both GP and AP) of the District (Gender Basis)

Name of the Blocks	Gender (Sex)	Below Matric	Matric	HS	UG	PG	Total (F)	Total (M)	Grand Total (F+M)
Algapur	Female	53 (34%)	16 (10%)	9 (6%)	2 (1%)	1 (0.64%)	81		154
	Male	34 (22%)	18 (12%)	17 (11%)	4 (3%)	00		73	
Hailakandi	Female	63 (40%)	8 (5%)	5 (3%)	00	00	76		159
	Male	38 (24%)	22 (14%)	19 (12%)	3 (2%)	1 (0.62%)		83	
Lala	Female	63 (30%)	34 (16%)	8 (4%)	1 (0.47%)	00	106		211
	Male	36 (17%)	37 (18%)	27 (13%)	4 (2%)	1 (0.47%)		105	
Katlicherra	Female	31 (32%)	14 (14%)	4 (4%)	00	00	49		97
	Male	21 (22%)	13 (13%)	8 (8%)	5 (5%)	1 (1%)		48	
South Hailakandi	Female	49 (45%)	3 (3%)	1 (0.92%)	00	00	53		108
	Male	34 (31%)	15 (14%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	00		55	

Source: Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Assam in Collaboration with UNICEF

NB: Data not available about the president of Mohanpur-Burnibrea, Bakrihawar, Soyedbond of Algapur Block, and Bahadurpur, Barhaila and Narainpur-Tupkhana of Hailakandi Block

In table 6.3 the gender basis of composition of total number of representatives with highest qualification elected to the local bodies (both GP and AP) shows that in Algapur block female below matric are 34% (53), 10% (16) matriculate, 6% (9) HS, 1%(2) UG, 0.64% (1) have the highest qualification out of 154 total elected members to GP and AP. Here it may be mentioned that the female members are in a subordinated position because in respect of male elected members, the table shows that only 22%

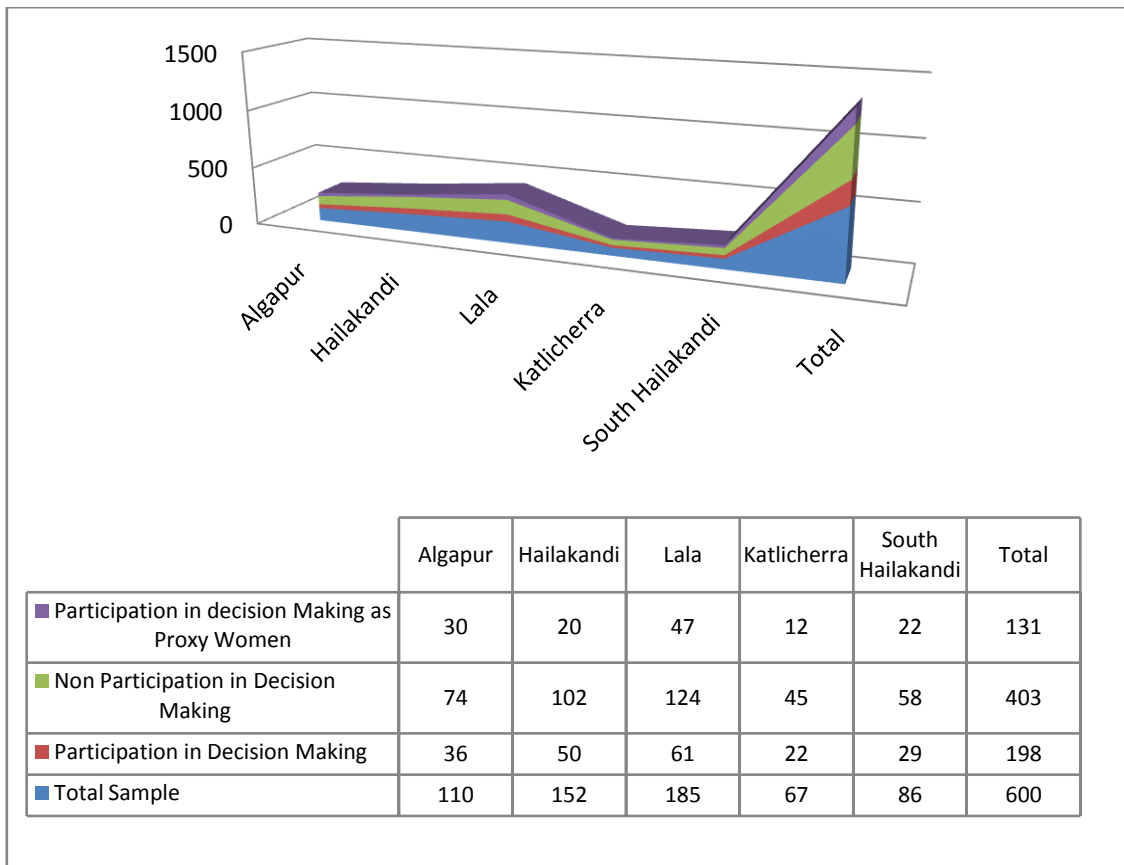
below Matric,12% Matric,11% HS, 3% UG having highest qualification of the male members were elected to the GP and AP . From Hailakandi block 40% (63) below Matriculate female, 5% (8) Matriculate, 3% (5) HS having highest qualification out of total 159 members of GP and AP of the block were female members. The same trend also can be seen in this block and again the women members are subordinated in respect of education because only 24% (38) below Matric, 14% (22) Matriculate, 12% (19) HS, 2%(3) UG and 0.62% (1) having highest qualification out of 159 elected members belong to male category. The same thing also observed in case of lala, Katlicherra and South Hailakandi blocks as the percentage of below matric number is more in case of female members in all the blocks having no PG qualification . Thus it clearly indicates the fact that the women members are in a disadvantaged position in public sphere so far as decision making in PRIs of Hailakandi district is concerned.

Table: 6.4 Response of Respondents in Decision Making in Public Spheres in Hailakandi District

Sl. No	Blocks	Participation in Decision Making	Non Participation in Decision Making	Participation in decision Making as Proxy Women
1	Algapur	36(33%)	74(67%)	30 (83%)
2	Hailakandi	50 (33%)	102 (67%)	20 (40%)
3	Lala	61(33%)	124(67%)	47 (77%)
4	Katlicherra	22 (33%)	45(67%)	12 (55%)
5	South Hailakandi	29(33%)	58 (67%)	22(76%)

Source: Field Survey

Chart: 6.4 Response of Respondents in Decision Making in Public Spheres in Hailakandi District



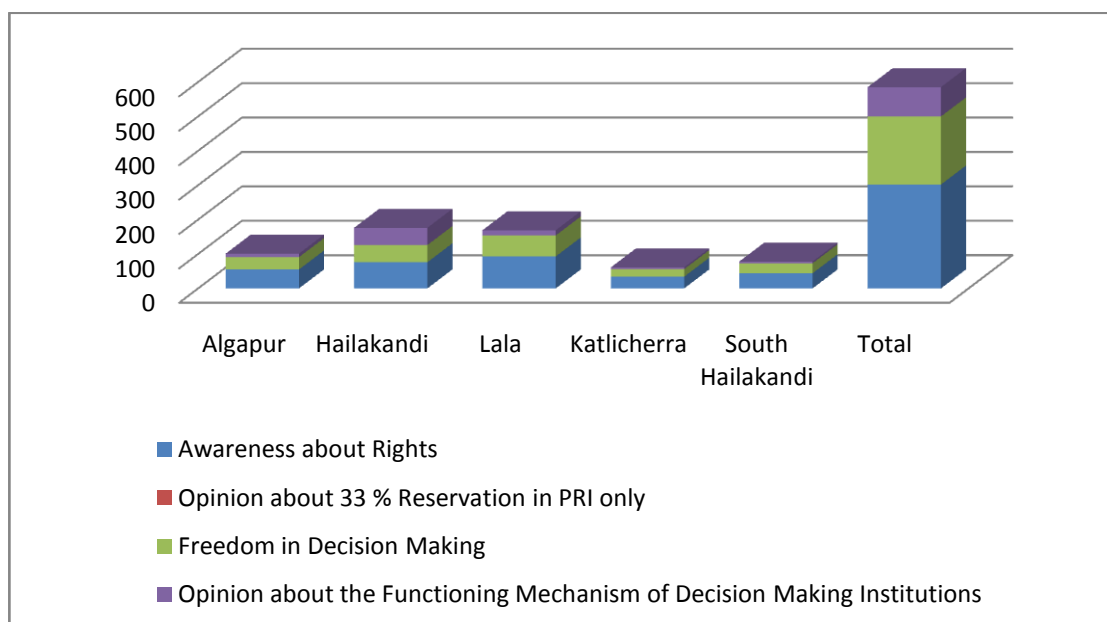
The question regarding participation of woman in decision making process, non-participation and opinion relating to proxy women was responded by the respondents in a peculiar manner. The response from all the five blocks of Hailakandi district relating to participation in decision making process in public sphere is just 33% i.e. 36 in Algapur, 50 in Hailakandi, 61 in Lala, 22 in Katlicherra and 29 in South Hailakandi are of the view that due to reservation of 33% in local bodies for woman, they could able to participate in decision making process. However, the respondents of Algapur block agreed that 83% (30 samples) are proxy women in different local self governing bodies, 40% (20 samples) in Hailakandi block, 77% (47 samples) in Lala, 55% (12 samples) in Katlicherra and 76% (22 samples) in South Hailakandi are also proxy woman in political activities.

Table: 6.5 Response of Respondents in Decision Making in Private Spheres in Hailakandi District

Sl. No	Blocks	Awareness about Rights	Opinion about 33 % Reservation in PRI only	Freedom in Decision Making	Opinion about the Functioning Mechanism of Decision Making Institutions
1	Algapur	55(50%)	Not Satisfied	36(33%)	10,Little Known
2	Hailakandi	76(50%)	Do	50 (33%)	50,Something Known
3	Lala	93(50%)	Do	61(33%)	15,Little Known
4	Katlicherra	34 (50%)	Do	22 (33%)	5,Little Known
5	South Hailakandi	44(50%)	Do	29(33%)	5,Little Known

Source: Field Survey

Chart: 6.5 Response of Respondents in Decision Making in Private Spheres in Hailakandi District



The Table number 6.5 of the field work shows that 50% (55 samples) in Algapur, 50% (76 samples) in Hailakandi, 50% (93 samples) in Lala, 50% (34 samples) in Katlicherra and 50% (44 samples) in South Hailakandi of women are well aware of the different rights of women. However, most of the women are not satisfied about the 33%

reservation system for the women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) only. They want reservation in state legislature, parliament and in different administrative services too.

As far as the question of freedom of women in decision making of PRIs is concerned, 33% of women in different blocks of the district said ‘Yes’ about their freedom in decision making process despite of the allegation against woman of the district being “proxy woman” in decision making process.

Regarding the opinion of woman about the functioning mechanism of decision making institutions of the district all the respondents of Algapur block said “little known”, Hailakandi “something known” and Lala, Katlicherra, South Hailakandi “little known” about the functioning mechanism. This is to be mentioned here that there is rural-urban gap so far as the knowledge about functioning mechanism of the decision making institutions are concerned, for which the respondents of Hailakandi “know something” about the matter. But other samples from different blocks of the district know “little” about the mechanism.

Table: 6.6 Responses of Respondents about Awareness in Private Spheres in Hailakandi District

Sl. No	Blocks	Whether Grievances redressed through Social and Legal Institutions?	Are Women Still Subordinated in Family and Society?	Are Women Participate Equally along with Male in Family’s Financial and Other Matters
1	Algapur	36(33%) yes	55(50%) yes	30 (83%) no
2	Hailakandi	50 (33%) yes	76(50%) yes	20 (40%) no
3	Lala	61(33%) yes	93(50%) yes	47 (77%) no
4	Katlicherra	22 (33%) yes	34 (50%) yes	12 (55%) no
5	South Hailakandi	29(33%) yes	44(50%) yes	22(76%) no

Source: Field Survey

So far as the response of the respondents about awareness of women in private spheres is concerned, the question relating to whether grievances of women are redressed through social and legal institutions? From different blocks 33% said in a positive manner but rest 67% said negatively because they thought only those women who participate in PRIs are influencing the social and legal institutions in their favour only and they are mainly influenced by the patriarchal structure of the society.

The question relating to women subordination within the family and the society 50% (55 samples) from Algapur, 50% (76 samples) for Hailakandi, 50% (93 samples) from Lala, 50% (34 samples) from Katlicherra and 50% (44) from South Hailakandi admitted that women in the district are still subordinated position within the family and in society because of the influence of customs, traditions and primordial loyalties of the society. Hence there is a clear indication of patriarchal structure of the society in which women are still disadvantaged group.

The respondents responded the question relating: Are women participate equally along with male members in family's financial and other decision making matters? Here 83% (30 samples) from Algapur said no and also 40% (20 samples) from Hailakandi, 77% (47 samples) from Lala, 55% (12 samples) from Katlicherra and 76% (22 samples) from South Hailakandi answered negatively.

Table: 6.7 Electoral Roll, 2014

Districts	Assembly Constituency		General Elector			Service Voters		
	No.	Name	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Hailakandi	1.	Hailakandi	73204	66882	140086	454	175	629
	2.	Katlicherra	79844	71726	151570	88	47	135
	3.	Algapur	74411	63745	138156	93	39	132
		District Total	227459	202353	429812	635	261	896
Percentage(%)			53%	47%		71%	29%	

Source: Election Commission of India.

From the above table no.6.7 it appears that in three different Assembly Constituencies of Hailakandi district the total numbers of Voters are 429812 in number out of which 227459 total male voters and 202353 are female voters in number. Of the total number of service voters 896, male voters are 635 and female voters are 261 in number. It is observed that the political parties and leaders of the district always try to woo the women voters as it form 47% of the total general voters. So far as service voters are concerned, also 29% of the total service voters that is 896 belong to female. Unfortunately, the political parties and the leaders since very beginning never set the women as their party candidate in general elections either to the Lok Sabha or to State Assemblies excepting in the last election of 2011 in Hailakandi district. But the women candidates set their own candidature on their own from different constituencies but never won the election. Sometimes their security money has been forfeited and the present MLA of Algapur Constituency, a female, is not so active in politics but could manage a ticket due to upper hand in the party she belongs.

Thus the women subordination in Hailakandi is clearly visible from the Table nos. 6.4,6.5 and 6.6. This is due to patriarchal nature of the society, demographic composition of the district, conservative tradition and mindset, male domination in public and private spheres, ignorance and lack of awareness of women folk, less initiative for women upliftment by women organizations and above all the concern of the state as well as central government, for which women are still in a subordinated position and gender equality is the need of the hour.

It can be said that the participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institution particularly in Hailakandi district is low and for their activities they are dependent on others. Most of the time, they are not in a position to take a decision on their own and are not able take positive decision. The finding of this study shows that the progress of women in

panchayati raj institution is slow and it will take more time to attain women's goal. Because women are irregular in the Panchayat activities due to worth missing their daily wage and worry about their babies and family. It is also fact that the women who have come in under caste reservation have come out with their social and economic disadvantages – mostly illiterate , with little productive assets, largely dependent on wage labour and into a rural society that has fixed places for various castes and gender. In the course of conducting the study it is realized that some measures are required to be taken to promote women's participation in politics. So it may be suggested that elected women in each district may develop a network among them and hold meetings and discussions on routine basis about necessary measures to promote their participation and neutralize male domination in local self bodies. The present study presents low level of education in this case study which is not a good sign for a healthy democracy. Thus, it is important to make extra educational training programmes related to politics for enhancing knowledge of elected women members on government policies and programmes, bureaucratic structures and the issues of local concern. For this, government made provision for mandatory attendance of Awareness Programme/Orientation Programme by members of PRIs and Extensive Training Centre, Boalipar, Hailakandi has been providing the same training. But it is a matter of great regret that despite of the noble efforts of some of the SHGs there is tendency of proxy women's attendance in various above said programmes. Sensitization of male members in PRIs is equally important so that they listen to women patiently, converse politely, acknowledge their suggestions in the meetings and implement them wherever feasible. It would lead to psychological empowerment of women.

Political Party and Women Empowerment

Women play a dual role in politics – as voters and political representatives. On the voting front, though adult franchise was granted in 1937, it was the progressive spirit that pervaded the making of the constitution that made it a reality. The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to men and women as voters and citizens. Generally, in India, registration and participation of women as contestants is less than that of men. In recent past, records show that there has been an increase in the percentage of women who vote. Such participation is also contingent on the mobilisation efforts made by political parties, NGOs, Action Groups and the general awareness among the community of the importance of women exercising their franchise. Again, a note of caution is required, lest it be assumed that political participation always indicates political awareness on the part of the woman voter. Usually, however, countries that do hold regular elections show an improved recognition of women as a political constituency and parties and candidates tend to adopt pro-women stances and appeal specifically to women's votes, especially at the time of elections. This becomes very evident when we look at consecutive elections in the Indian context, wherein there is a growing consciousness of the need to woo the woman voter and the need to pay attention to the needs and issues of women, in the election manifestos of political parties.

Since Independence, due to exercise of their franchise, Indian women have been exposed to the political processes and are showing increasing awareness about not only lack of rights but also their utility. A majority of illiterate rural women are also politically sensitive and aware of the various issues confronting them. Women get easily mobilised in the political processes by the political parties who approach women very often for party issues and for short-term goals by winning elections, but not for

long-term goals of bringing about social changes and gender equality in political power-sharing. In all the elections held since independence, women had the voting rights. The percentage of seats won against the seats contested is showing a declining trend only because the number of women contesting elections has increased sharply. However, it may be seen that voting by women in all tiers of Government has always been a feature of the Indian Polity since 1947. Due to the paternalistic family and male dominated political structures space has not been provided for women in decision-making bodies, women constituted 3.1% of the total contestants in 1996 election and did not occupy more than 6.10% of the total seats in the state legislative assemblies and Parliament. The number of women contestants in Parliamentary elections has not increased significantly over the years. Political parties are still reluctant to field women candidates at national level.

In the early days of the Indian republic, the number of women representatives was a mere 22, which was a lowly 4.4% of the total seats in the Lok Sabha. The sixth Lok Sabha in the year 1977 saw an all time low of just 19 woman representatives. The twelfth Lok Sabha had 44 women i.e. 8.8% of the total seats.

Even as early as the 19th century Indian women had begun to appear on the national scene in public and political activity. Women were not only being accepted in public activity but were organising themselves to fight for their rights in different walks of life. Though women constitute nearly half of the population of the country, it was only after Independence that efforts were made to promote women's participation in public life. Though the Constitution of India provides for the Government to make special provisions to safeguard the interests of women as detailed in Article 15 (3) and Article 39, it has not made any provision for reservation for women in respect of jobs and political offices. However, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act mandated

reservation of one-third seats in the village, block, districts and municipal elected bodies in India. As a consequence, women had not advanced much politically and economically. From the records available of the past 50 years, since the independence, it is seen that the strength of women in the political field as reflected in State legislatures remained at an average of 3 % to 5% of those elected. At the level of Parliament, the position of women members has varied between 5 to 7%.

As self confidence and participation in decision-making are the real tools of empowerment of Women, their share in administration at the national as well as at the state level should be analysed. In 2014, Women occupied only 7 out of 45 ministerial positions in the Central Council of Ministers, which is a little more than 15% against around 10% Women participation in 2004. 62 females have been elected in 2014. Election constituting more than 11% share in the Lower House².

It may be mentioned that the female participation has gone up from 56% to 66% in 15th and 16th General Election. 40 of the 62 Women MPs have been elected for the first time to the 16th Lok Sabha.

On national basis, in the state, women share is only 8% in Assemblies and 4% in State Councils.

In the Panchayat Setup, over all 46.7% women are representing in the national basis.

There were 2 women Judges out of 30 Judges in the Supreme Court and there were only 58 women Judges out of 609 Judges in different High Courts with maximum 25% in Delhi High Court and no women Judge in 6 (six) High Courts of this country.

Among the all India and Central Group-A services, 30% females are in Indian Economic Service and only 12% in Indian Trade Service.

So far as representation of women in the Central Council of Ministers is concerned there are 23 Cabinet Ministers, 22 Ministers of State out of which 6 Cabinet Ministers and 1 Minister of State belongs to women in 2014 whereas in the year 1996 there was no cabinet Minister and 1 Minister of State.

In 16th General Election of 2014 the percentage of women electors cast their votes and participating in election is 65.6% whereas in 15th General Election of 2009 it was 55.8%. 16th General Election of 2014 out of 543 seats 62 women elected from different seats to their male counterpart that is 481. In Assam, the women voters turn out was 79% of the total voters of women as 72, 09,120. From Assam 2 women MPs have elected to 16th Lok Sabha out of 14 seats.

So far as participation of women in State Assemblies is concerned, in 2011 from Assam 15 females having 12% of total seats were elected to State Legislative Assembly.³

It is seen that women in large numbers have come out against atrocities on women, in defence of their traditional control over crucial resources, water, forests, and land, mass literacy drives and other issues. They are also coming out in large numbers over ecological degradation, price rise or protests against police repression, etc. While there is the increased participation in grass root political movements, it is not getting translated into a growing share of women in the formal political structure of the country. Amongst the several reasons for such a situation is the growing money power and muscle power required to contest even the smallest of elections in India, the intimidation, violence and slander that a woman candidate has to face combined with the traditional male domination that seeks to keep her indoors. Narrow electoral arithmetic and the necessity of fielding a winning candidate makes most political parties shy away from fielding more than a token number of women candidates. And if

they are fielded at all, kinship and affinity factors play a major role. It is very common to observe that the relatives of politicians are promoted and supported to emerge as politicians. Increasingly, women have stood for elections and got elected as members of State Legislative Assemblies and the Parliament. The same is also true in case of Hailakandi district as there is no woman Cabinet Minister and no Ministers of State in the Council of Ministers at the national level from Hailakandi district. Although one women candidate has been elected to the state legislature in the last election but found no berth in the ministry.

Constraints

Some studies of Parliamentary participation indicate that women members participate more actively in 'women's issues' – health, welfare, atrocities against women, crimes like dowry and violations of human rights. This participation is confined to the more articulate women. In issues such as defence, finance, politics, etc. their participation is relatively limited. Analysis of trends of women's participation to contest elections to the Parliament and State Legislatures indicate that there is a gender discrimination which is responsible for poor representation of women in India.

Empowerment

Women's role in decision making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) to the Indian Constitution have served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structures. This Amendment provided for reservation of one third of seats for women at level of local governance in urban areas. There is also a one-third reservation for women for posts of chairpersons of these local bodies. This amendment has initiated a powerful strategy of

affirmative action for providing the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making and provided an opportunity to bring women to the forefront and centre of city development and develop new grass-root level leadership. There are about 400 (four hundred) elected women representatives in Panchayats and Municipal Bodies in the district of Hailakandi.

After 1993, women's participation in local governments increased quite radically, with the enactment of the legislation providing 33 percent reservation of seats for women in local bodies. The legislation and its implementation has added another level in political participation. It is noteworthy that within the premier civil services of India, the representation of women from the district is not that of encouraging.

Laws/legislation promoting the participation of women in local government

The 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution, 1992 has served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in local government. The Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992 aims at Constitutional guarantees to safeguard the interests of urban local self government to enable them to function as effective democratic and self governing institutions at the grass root level. This Amendment provides for reservation of 33 percent of elected seats for women at local government level in urban and rural areas. There is also a 1/3 (one-third) reservation for women of posts of chairpersons of these local bodies.⁴ A very active role for women in Hailakandi local governance is envisaged as compared to governance at the state and national levels in India. These provisions have provided great opportunities and challenges to women in Hailakandi, particularly in the local government field. This is of great significance, since this grass-root level participation has considerably broadened the base of women's participation in politics at city level.

Constraints

Involvement of women in the political arena and in decision-making roles is an important tool for empowerment as well as monitoring standards of political performance at local level. However, in the present political process of entry into decision making political institutions, there is growing influence of money and muscle power, backroom dealings, communalisation and criminalisation. In many respects women and men elected representatives face similar problems on election to office. Above all there is a need to understand just how to be a good local politician. The role of political representatives at local level is demanding and all new `recruits' need time to gain experience and to understand the rules, regulations and procedures governing the administrative bureaucracy with which they now have to work – often quite closely in the rural and urban service delivery system. Some of the major constraints that prevent women from effective participation at local level are as follows:

1. Lack of orientation / training in rural and urban development issues, functioning of PRIs, and Municipal administration.
2. No proper knowledge / orientation about PRIs, Municipal Acts, rules and regulations.
3. No prior experience about dealing with multidimensional rural and urban development issues / civic issues and its complexities.
4. Lack of knowledge about technical in-puts related to rural and urban service delivery system.
5. Lack of support from senior male / female colleagues in the party/local body.

6. Less co-operation from officials understanding about various facets of the budget, such as allocation of budget at ward level (at central / ward level).
7. Lack of party support and poor organisational structure.
8. Lack of money and resources to sustain the electoral campaigns (in spite of code of conduct by election commission).
9. Discrimination in decision making at party level.
10. Specific notions towards politics and political atmosphere.
11. Fear and insecurity.
12. Lack of confidence in public speaking.
13. Criminalisation of politics and use of money power.
14. Family responsibilities.
15. Traditional social attitudes to subordinate women.

Civil Society Initiatives Aimed at Increasing Women's Participation in Local government

Political system in India works through political parties who contend for power by invoking popular support. Therefore it is necessary that if women want to share power they have to make a place for themselves within the political parties through which the democratic system operates. The experience of the last 65 years show an inability to create 'this space' and recent studies show that there has been no significant change in either the nature of women's functioning or in the political parties' approach to women and women's issues. If we examine women's participation (prior to 1993) in Hailakandi district it is seen that the political parties have given less importance to

women's issues in terms of ideology, either in priority in their party manifesto or in terms of the number and importance of the position that women occupied in individual political parties. Women are not seen as a vote bank to be approached, and once the men are mobilised, women will merely endorse their choice of party and candidate. Male candidates rarely have access to the female electorate and there are not enough women involved in political campaigns to be able to reach out to a large section of women even in towns and villages. As a result, the exposure of women to political debates and issues has always remained indirect. According to women from all parties the political environment was not conducive to women's participation in politics.

The analysis made by Kumari and Kidwai (1996) stated that political parties have dominated the conservative 'cultural' perspective and no conscious attempt has been made to increase active participation of women.⁶ Women in India today are agitating at the doors of Parliament, demanding reservation for 33 per cent of the seats. The issue at stake here is more complex than it may seem. It is not only a question of a few more or a few less women in the corridors of Parliament and legislatures but also a response to the fact that a large section of society has historically been denied its legitimate share in the exercise of political power, power that ultimately determines its destiny. In this demand for reservation, women are also raising their voice against a system, which has consistently denied them space by harnessing the forces of tradition in order to marginalise and trivialize their role.

Strategy for Women Empowerment

Reservation of seats for women in Panchayats/Municipal bodies have shown that it has tremendous implications, not merely in terms of the number of women entering the public arena and holding public office, but also in terms of the social, economic and

political impact that these reservations have had for the total system. It is for these reasons that women are increasingly demanding political roles for themselves. They recognise that constitutional guarantees do not ensure effective participation and that these cannot ensure political equality. Hence the need to gain entry into political institutions and in the functioning of the state, and to share control over the power the state exercises. This alone would lead to a situation where women are able to reverse the existing situation, which has consistently been against their interests, and bring about the necessary changes in policy and the social structure so as to ensure a more equitable and humane order. The role of women's participation in elected bodies should not be undervalued. Elections are after all a forum for self government and democracy, they are significant in drawing the attention of the nation to the problems and needs of disadvantaged sections; the manifestos, campaigns, promises made by individual candidates, track record and future course of action of political parties are indicative of national concerns as well as mandates for action. Proper selection of candidates in an election is vital if this representative democracy is to function in the interests of a majority of the population that is depressed and disadvantaged. Hence, opportunities for participation at this level are significant for the adoption of politics and measures for women's development. Strong and dynamic women who would not dream of appropriating privilege are today talking of reservation because they have come to recognize that they will not give "easy entry" in the corridors of power without reservation. This hierarchy is so rigid that the natural processes of democracy and constitutional guarantees have not been able to make a dent in these fortresses of power. The demand for reservation should not therefore be seen as either a gift or a privilege that women are seeking. For most women it is the last straw and a desperate measure to ensure their coming into the political mainstream. Their participation

becomes vital in the context of the adoption of development strategies that are negative and harmful to women. Today most of the political parties in India have initiated some initiatives to activate political participation of women and develop their capacities. However, most of the political parties have not yet developed any special programmes to meet the special requirements of women in urban or rural areas, despite the fact that most of the women activists felt that if planned efforts were made, they could be easily mobilised. Different debates concerning struggles of women as well as various actions by women's groups and NGOs on local as well as national levels have forced the mainstream political parties to accept women's concerns in their political programmes. The political parties started changing their attitude towards women which is reflected in their election manifestos, their attitudes towards women candidates, speeches and slogans.

Statistics on women's participation in the electoral process are not very encouraging. It is important not only to pressurise the political parties but also to make the leaders understand the significance of organising systematic training of women possessing leadership qualities, of carefully selecting women candidates and ensuring financial, technical and human resources for affirmative action (Patel, Vibhuti, 1992)⁷. The need to strengthen women's participation and leadership is constantly emphasised by various institutions and women's groups. They are providing some training, however systematic training of women possessing leadership qualities is not enough and more concerted efforts are required to facilitate the process of women's ascent to key positions in political field. It is essential that the women's groups and movement recognise the importance of women as a constituency and ensure their participation and representation in policy formulation. The movement must provide a support system for women who enter political processes to win elections. As stated by Nath Kamale

(1997) 'The women's movement has been a powerful agent of empowerment and has provided an alternative perspective for fundamental structural changes. The movement has created organisational strength of women, has focussed on women's issues and mobilised them around these issues. The women in the movement, however, have shied away from active participation in politics. The women's groups and women activists thus aim to bring about a change in the women's perceptions, but not necessarily in the structures which subordinate women. If we want to bring about change in the lives of women and transform mainstream politics, there is no other way than to get involved in politics and transform it.⁸ The women's movement and groups have to recognised the importance of women as a constituency and ensure their participation and representation in policy formulation. This can be achieved through reorienting existing structures for entry into decision-making including the political party system and introduce quotas or reservation as a temporary means of women's representation. The movement should also provide a support system (women's groups) for women who enter political processes to win elections. The women's groups working at the grassroots level are small and scattered and have diverse ways of empowering women. There are no infrastructural facilities of networking available that could bring them together and strengthen them while allowing autonomy in their functioning. It is important to create unity in diversity between women's groups, organisations and individuals involved with women's empowerment. They need to adopt a common strategy, informed by a common vision, to be able to bring about changes in the policies and structures that perpetuate their subordinate status.

Local Government Initiatives to Encourage Women to Participate in Local Governance

Reservation for women in local government is not just a question of getting a certain number 'in'; it also develops their capacities to play their rightful roles in the development process and makes an important difference as the local governments deals mostly with the quality of life for citizens. Municipal responsibilities relate both to women's practical needs and their strategic needs. The better we meet women's strategic needs, the better they are able to contribute to good city governance. Good Local Governance, in turn, enables a better response to women's practical needs. Most local governments have initiated orientation / training programmes to encourage women to participate in local governance by organising city-specific induction or theme-based training programmes, wherein intensive training is given in various subject areas, such as, municipal acts and its implementation, laws of meetings, municipal budgeting, budgeting at ward level, municipal taxation, mobilisation of resources, urban service delivery systems (solid waste management, water supply, sewerage, health care services, traffic and transportation), poverty alleviation schemes, community management, environment management, shelter programmes, new reforms in municipal administration, functioning of ward committees, motivation techniques, communication skills, women and development, handling the media etc. The Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India and Urban Development Department of State Governments organise a number of training programmes, workshops, seminars for women elected representatives at local level through various training institutions. Many municipal bodies have initiated a series of in-house training in municipal administration and urban development, in collaboration with premier training institutions in India. State governments through their State Training Centres organise

capacity building programmes for women elected members from municipal bodies in their States. Special training / orientation programmes are organised by Ministry of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation, Government of India under the UNICEF assistance and government's funds in the area of poverty alleviation schemes and its implementation in urban areas (e.g. SJSRY, NSDP, etc.)

Gender Sensitisation through Data

Local governments are using sex-desegregated data for policy and programme formulation. It is an obligatory duty of municipal governments in India to collect, compile and maintain vital statistics in their city limits. Sex-disaggregated data is in use in many cities of the States in India for policy programme formulation and implementation of some special programmes and projects at local city level. The Government of India regularly collect, analyses and disseminates quantitative and qualitative data on the number of women and men employed at various levels in government on an annual basis and many mechanisms have been set up within governmental structures for monitoring progress in this field. The Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India is collecting and using gender-disaggregated data to evaluate development from a gender perspective. The Department is also developing a Gender Development Index (GDI) for the construction of EDI and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). Bringing women to positions of political power in local government is just the first step in social transformation. Gender sensitization of those in power, be they men or women, is of critical importance. Influencing the choices of those at decision – making levels and bringing gender issues to the political agenda are important factors. Over the years, this perspective has gained acceptance within organisations, action groups and political parties.

Government departments, other institutions, non-governmental organisations, and women's organisations have undertaken several programmes to sensitise local governments about the issues and needs of women in their cities. It is recognised that law enforcement is a critical factor for bringing about enduring changes in gender perceptions. Several initiatives have been taken by the Government of India and the voluntary sector to sensitise law enforcement personnel and policy makers. Gender sensitisation of police personnel and urban administrators in the National and State level training centres is now a regular programme. A National Centre for Gender Training and Research has set up in the National Academy of Administration in Mussourie with the objective of sensitising young administrators and policy makers on gender issues. The Election Commission of India maintains updated information on women representatives in each Parliament, including categorised information on the number of scheduled castes women representatives. With the recent revolution in information technology, the entire information is available not only in print but also on the Internet in the Parliament and Election Commission websites. This increases outreach and access of this information to the general public. The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India maintains updated information on the representation of women in local self-government or Panchayati Raj. The Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India also has come out with publications like 'Women in India – A Statistical Profile' in 1997, which compiled information on all aspects related to women in India. The Planning Commission, which is mooting the process of collection of gender desegregated data by all concerned departments in various Ministers, has included information on women's representation in power and decision-making in its Ninth Five Year Plan Document. Besides these, several independent organisations are carrying out their own research and surveys that

provide updated information on the same. These are also widely used and are quoted in different public documents. Sensitising the leadership of people's movements in the country to gender issues need to be priorities.

Legal and political initiatives and Women Participation

The number of women in politics at the local level had been very small, and their influence negligible. Prior to 1990, the women in local politics were generally either politicians who had lost membership of higher institutions, or those who were given such an opportunity to serve the purpose of publicity. In many cases, the motive was partially also to satisfy the aspirations of these few women, since they could be kept under virtual control and denied higher aspirations. The insignificant presence of women at these levels was an important indicator of two basic facts: one that women who are planted at the top often lacked the kind of training required for effective participation, secondly, the society was unable to accept women in politics, particularly at the grass-root level.

If we examine the reasons for low participation, women of Hailakandi district have always been treated as subordinate to men in every aspect of life. Their place of work was confined to the domain of the household with household chores and rearing of children. Her identity was attached to that of her father, husband or son, i.e. she was given a status in accordance with that of her male partner. It is not that women in the past have not contributed substantially in politics, but because of their secondary status and low esteem, most of them were denied entry in political decision-making.

The 74th Amendment of the Indian Constitution in 1992 ushered in a new era in the democratic process of the country as it not only provided constitutional status to the municipal bodies but also provided an enabling environment for women to a direct part

in the local self government and brought women to the forefront and centre of local development. Sharing power and responsibilities with immense control over resources for development and social change will be an empowering instrument for women.⁹

Article 243 T (I) of Constitution Amendment (1992) states as follows:“Reservation of Seats: 243 T (1) Seats shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in every Municipality and the number of seats so reserved shall bear, as nearly as may be, the same proportion to the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in that Municipality as the population of the Scheduled Castes in the Municipal area or of the Scheduled Tribes in the Municipal area bears to the total population of that area and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constitutions in a Municipality.

2. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or, as the case may be, the Scheduled Tribes.

3. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Municipality shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality.

4. The office of Chairpersons in the Municipalities shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and common in such manner as the Legislature of a State may by law, provide.

5. The reservation of seats under clauses (1) and (2) and the reservation of office of Chairpersons (other than the reservation for women) under clause (4) shall cease to have effect on the expiration of the period specified in article 334.

6. Nothing in this Part shall prevent the Legislature of a State from making any provision for reservation of seats in any Municipality or office of Chairpersons in the Municipalities in favour of backward class of citizens.” Different political parties in India have shown great reluctance to field women candidates. Reservation of seats at Municipal level has put pressure on political parties to identify and field more women candidates.

Training and Support Mechanisms for Women in Local Government

Attention is being given to the training and capacity developing skills and capacities of all elected representatives in local government, including women. They are trained to acquire skills, knowledge and orientation needed to carry out the onerous responsibilities given to them. A time bound, systematic and comprehensive training programme has been drawn up which will be funded by the Central Government. The Indira Gandhi National Open University has been associated with the preparation of a syllabus on women and development. The Government of India is also committed to capacity building efforts by organising and funding training programmes for women elected to municipal bodies in India. A large number of such kind of training programmes for elected members are handled by All India Institute of Local Self Government which is a premier training institution in local government field (established in 1926) in India. Ministry of Urban Development (MUD) supports several such kinds of training programmes through Regional Centre for Urban and Environmental Studies (RCUES) which are functioning in all the regions of India.

Apart from this, some of the theme-based training programmes are organised by State Training Institutions in several States for women elected members in municipal bodies.

Human Settlements Management Institute (HSMI) of HUDCO organises some specialised training for women elected representatives in India. Besides some of the major training institutions in India, State Women's Commissions in all States in India (to deal with women and development issues), Administrative Training Institute (ATI), Guwahati etc. have been imparting training to the newly elected representatives of PRIs and Municipal Bodies of Assam. The Extensive Training Centre, Boalipar, Hailakandi has been addressing different issues of the women with orientation programmes about awareness and functioning mechanism so that women empowerment will be translated in to a reality in the district.

Support Groups and Forums of Elected Women in Local Government

The examination indicates that women elected to local governments have not formed any formal associations, groups and forums. However, all women mayors meet during meetings organised by All India Council of Mayors (AICM), which is an association of mayors representing all cities in India. These meetings give women mayors a opportunity to interact with each other and with other male Mayors and exchange ideas, information about effective urban service delivery, good governance and also provide issue based support. Similarly, various seminars, workshops, training programmes organised by Government of India, State Governments and National and Regional institutions provide wide opportunities for women elected members to meet and interact with elected women members from different municipal bodies in India. Similarly, events organised by political parties, women's groups, nongovernmental organisations also provide an opportunity for women elected members for experience sharing,

networking and sometimes lobbying for some specific purpose in urban development and good governance. It is also observed that in many cities women elected members have close links with local NGOs, CBOs or Residents' Associations or action groups and through such networking women members support each other and initiate networking among themselves about governance at local level or any issues related to women and development.

Special Measures to Recruit Women in the Civil Service and Increasing the Number of Women in Decision-making Positions

One of the variables that go into the Gender Empowerment Measure, as depicted in the Human Development Report, is the proportion of men and women at senior levels of government. In this context the study initiated in 1996 by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), as part of a project 'Capacity Building for Civil Services', was a significant step. In order to crystallize the problems faced by women in Civil Services as well as to isolate areas which needed to be addressed through policy guidelines, a survey was carried out across a cross section of the services, among men and women officers, to ascertain the issues on which guidelines would have to focus. The survey questionnaire was formulated keeping in mind different areas of concern for women officers like Gender Image in work place and in the family to stress factors. Various government studies have been undertaken in the past on problems and issues related to the various individual services that constitute the Indian Administration. But this survey broke new ground in terms of coverage of services and levels of both women and men, as well as the range of related issues. Many issues, such as stress and motivation and sexual harassment that persist across the services were touched upon for the first time. A national level Project Steering Committee was set up for carrying out the Capacity

Building project, and a Focal Point was identified in the DoPT for examining the sphere of “Women’s Issues in the Civil Service”.

In the Civil Services, the overall percentage of women in 1997 was 7.5%, the highest being 12.3% in the Indian Foreign Service. Women are increasing their presence in other sectors such as the Revenue Services, the Railway Management Cadres, Tele communication etc. On the whole, women in 1997 represented 13.8% of the employee strength in the public sector, as against only 8.6% in 1971. Women’s Organisation or other civil society organisation have taken some initiatives in some states of India to encourage women to stand in local government elections, however, these groups or organisations are small and scattered and have diverse ways of empowering women. There are no infrastructural facilities of networking that could bring them together and strengthen them while allowing autonomy in their functioning. It is important to create unity in diversity between women’s groups and civil society organisations involved with women’s empowerment. Political participation would make a significant different if it came from those who are at the helm of affairs of political parties, and if women are there wielding power, the situation can improve to a great extent and political participation would give every woman a sense of dignity as a individual.

SHGs and Networking

The SHGs groups have to recognise the importance of women as a constituency and ensure their participation and representation in policy formulation. This can be achieved in Hailakandi district through reorienting existing structures for entry into decision-making including the political party system and introduce quotas or reservation as a temporary means of women’s representation. However, from the field study it has been observed that most of the women SHGs working in the district are not

providing the service for which they have been created and they exist in pen and paper only. The movement should also provide a support system (women's groups) for women who enter political processes to win elections. The women's groups working at the grassroots level are small and scattered and have diverse ways of empowering women. There are no infrastructural facilities of networking available that could bring them together and strengthen them while allowing autonomy in their functioning. It is important to create unity in diversity between women's groups, organisations and individuals involved with women's empowerment. They need to adopt a common strategy, informed by a common vision, to be able to bring about changes in the policies and structures that perpetuate their subordinate status. Non-partisan women's groups should provide necessary moral and advisory support to women candidates to increase their chances of being elected to political offices. They should work towards enhancing the capacity of women candidates to win the elections by providing them with a forum whereby they could exchange ideas and experiences and learn from experts on electoral laws and politics and evolve issues and strategies to win elections.

Special Civil Society Initiatives

The 33 percent for women in local bodies has brought into focus the fact that there is a need to bring more and more women into the party¹⁰. But the problem is that many women of Hailakandi district are often not equipped to become members of the political parties, as the party expects a certain level of consciousness for membership – not everybody can become a member. Also, women have difficulty in attending party meetings, study circles or demonstrations because of their timings and the pressure of housework. Most of the parties of Hailakandi have not yet developed any special tailor – made programme to meet the special requirements of women in both rural and urban

areas of the district, despite the fact that most women activists felt that if such an effort was made, they could easily be mobilised.

As analysed by Kumari and Kidwai (1996) at one level, the party's ideology itself may be discriminatory, on the other hand its ambiguity in a traditional society may leave adequate space for discrimination. Party workers at times exhibit a sense of lack of gender equality because they carry with them their traditional value systems which are often feudal and patriarchal, into the party. Much of the discrimination against women in the party is because of the attitudes of these individuals. But at the same time women assert that the party does not try to change the attitude of both men and women who come to the party or make them more gender sensitive. The nature of electoral politics in India also marginalises women and women's issues from the political agenda. Many women feel that electoral politics, at times limits the kind of support women politicians would like to extend to members of their own sex, since they realise that they cannot win elections on women's issues alone.

Most of them are still feel hesitant to identify themselves with women's issues, claiming that women form only one section of their constituency and till recently not the determining section. Also, elections are largely conducted by men and with men's support. Electoral expediency requires women participants to compromise to survive in the man's world of politics. All parties recognise the need to win women's votes, but often seem unsure of the best way to gain support among women.

The type of leadership required is of transformational type. Women's entry into processes of governance should create change in the very institutions of governance in Hailakandi district. In order to effect such change, leaders have to emerge which can occur only through participatory processes. The participation allows empowerment,

which then generates leadership. It is only through their leadership, and their implied changes in the hierarchy of party and power that they may provide that they can justifiably participate in governance as representing something 'different'. This leadership can emerge only through active participation. Therein lie the role of the political parties in creating an enabling environment for active leadership generating participation. Prior to 1992, political parties of Hailakandi district have not been initiating any special initiatives or programmes to encourage women to stand in local government elections. The number of women in politics at the local level has been very small, and their influence negligible. After 1993, women's participation in local governments increased quite radically with the enactment of the legislation providing one-third reservation of seats for women in local bodies. The effective implementation of this legislation has added another level in political participation. According to women from all parties the one third reservations for women in local governments has brought into focus the fact that there is a need to bring more and more women into the local government field and develop their capacities. This particular 74th Amendment of the Indian Constitution ushered in a new era in the democratic process in India as it not only provided constitutional status to the municipal bodies but also provided an enabling environment for women to take direct part in the process of local self government and brought women to the forefront of city development. The 74th Amendment mandated reservation of one – third seats in municipal bodies for women. There is also one third reservations for women in position of chairpersons of these local bodies in Hailakandi.

A very active role for women in local governance is envisaged as compared to governance at the state and national levels in India. These provisions have provided great opportunities and challenges to women in Hailakandi. The challenge now is to

transfer this large presence of women at local government level supported by the real delegation of power and responsibilities. Women's role in decision making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment. Reservation of seats for women in local bodies has shown that it has tremendous implications, not merely in terms of the number of women entering the public arena and holding public office, but also in terms of the social, economic and political impact that these reservations have had for the total system. Recognising various constraints in Hailakandi district such as present-day communal politics, elements of criminalisation, corruption, muscle power, violence, lack of awareness of political participation, preparation to fulfil the role and responsibilities as elected representative, etc, the Government, NGOs, Women Groups and activists have been actively involved in providing necessary in-puts to women. Women of Hailakandi have been mobilised to participate in elections as candidates and voters, and to be vigilant citizens where elections are held. Communities have received gender sensitization to facilitate acceptance of the new roles assigned to women. Leadership and organisational training of women has been conducted to enable them to be dynamic change agents. Networks have been interacting, to influence mass based political structures to provide more space to women.

Engendering Development

According to the present study including our own observations from the field, about 35 percent women attend the panchayat meetings regularly. Given their sheer numbers, one might conclude that democracy has become more participatory than before at least at the grassroots level. This argument becomes strengthened because the socio - economic background of these women showed that the majority of them come from the lower income group particularly at the village panchayat level. In-so-far as the effective

participation of these women is concerned, it is noticed that if they get outside support in terms of NGO intervention, women's groups, or any other social or political movement, the women become relatively more vocal. Their knowledge about the functioning of the Panchayats increases.

Women not only take up issues relating to basic needs - drinking water, availability of doctors and teachers in the villages, which is dear to them, but also general developmental activities. One example is installing irrigation facilities for the paddy fields to augment the income of the Panchayats. Another example is supervision of the eye camps, where eye problems are treated. Similarly, women could augment the income of the panchayat by leasing out the ponds and similar other common property resources. They also ensure the availability of bathing and toilet facilities at the panchayat office premises. Since the poverty eradication schemes are routed through the panchayats and it involves the distribution of money to build low-cost houses, for widow pension, old age pension, and to start small business, the women members of the panchayats come to know about these very soon. The women of the neighbourhood act as the 'watchdog' compelling them to deliver at least some of the goods. The same thing happens regarding the distribution of the food grains at a subsidized rate through the panchayats. Women of the villages can easily approach the women elected members and can buy rice at any time. The micro-studies also show that the working culture of the panchayats has changed because of the presence of the women. Finally, a part of the increase of the female literacy rate can be attributed to the presence of women in the panchayats and their willingness to get educated.

Thus we see in spite of the constraints, contrary to the popular criticism, the standard of the political institutions at the grassroots level hasn't been lowered as a result of the

reservations of seats for women and, to some extent, the development process has become engendered.

Family and the Self

AK Sen the famous economist has mentioned that the family is an arena of cooperation and conflict. The feminists have highlighted the conflict area more than that of cooperation.¹¹ According to observations the reservation of seats in the local governments has increased the areas of cooperation. Evidence from the results of the Census of India (2001) show that the female life expectancy at birth has exceeded that of male, though marginally, indicating that women's self-perception has changed. Similarly the female literacy rate has jumped from 39 per cent to 53 per cent within a decade.

Related to the question of family and self and the impact on institutional standards is the question of the “**proxy women**”. Let us define the concept called proxy women. It is alleged that since many of the women are first-timers and are illiterate, they depend on their men folk for conducting the panchayat activities. In other words, the women follow their men folk without understanding the implications. Hence, they are termed as proxy women.

There are several issues involved here. First of all, the husbands or other male relatives will shield them from the panchayat secretary and Block Development Officers if they try to harass the women. In fact, some of the state governments have passed a rule that female elected representatives should be accompanied by their male relatives to the panchayats. This is because, in some cases, the Secretaries of the panchayats tried to implicate the inexperienced women by asking them to sign blank cheques. Even if women chiefs depend on their husbands, the power relation between husband and wife

has already changed because of reservations, particularly because the husband gets a chance to come to the public sphere because of the wife; the patriarchy is no longer monolithic. As a result in many low-income families the husband-wife relationship hasn't soured. On the other hand the husband supports the wife and helps her in her domestic work also. Even the other members of the family, including the mother-in-law and sister-in-law, help her to complete domestic chores. The community leaders of the same caste support the women candidates.

Besides those who argue that those who come to panchayats are all proxy women, they forget to analyze their background. Few of them even in places like Muslim majority Hailakandi district, are recruited from a highest educational background. Since they are educated and know about the working of the panchayats, they will not remain silent in the meetings. Further, it assumes that all the men who work on behalf of women are corrupt and they influence their women to be corrupt. It may not be true.

Finally, the proxy women are seen as proxies only in the first one or two years of their tenure. Gradually they become independent. In the process they come to know about many modern institutions like courts, block development, agriculture and other offices, the existence of various officials and sometimes about the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers and other ministers. In a nutshell, it may be pointed out that woman elected representatives have carved out a niche for themselves in the family. More active members get better recognition in the family. As a corollary, the family members don't mind the women talking to the other men nor do they mind if they take off the veils and address the meetings.

Nonetheless, women in panchayats weave many dreams and their self- perception changes when they realize the immense potential of the public sphere. Evidence shows

that the villagers also recognize their potential. The researcher has interviewed villagers, men and women, as well as the women elected representatives to draw that conclusion.

Thus we may conclude that as a result of the above amendment, women get a chance to get empowered and at least in 25 per cent of the cases they get to act. One can say that, clearly, unlike the critics who see them only as proxies for men, the varied experiences of women show that the panchayats have become important terrains of struggle which not only empower a certain number of women but also reflect the power struggles regarding class, caste and gender.

Mobilization of Women

We have noticed that about 400 women of Hailakandi district have come to active politics as a result of the reservation. Not only women are involved in the political process but also they become aware of the grassroots institutions. Moreover, it is noticed that women in the village become the main campaigners for the women candidates. As a fall-out, it is noticed that women, particularly in the rural areas, have become restless and desire to get engaged in certain economically gainful activities. It is encouraging to note that many Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been formed in different parts of Hailakandi district rural areas. It is worthwhile to note that the central government has given a lot of emphasis on the formation of SHGs in the Year of Women's Empowerment (2001). The success of these SHGs varies across the states. For example, the women groups in Hailakandi are doing extremely well. Nonetheless, a good beginning has been made toward the economic empowerment of women.

In addition, more women than men are attending different meetings and training programmes arranged for skill development and awareness. Along with the elected

women, the vocabulary of the village women in general has also increased and they get familiar with the words like Block Development Office, District Magistrate, etc. So a ground has been created to mobilize the women of rural India to seek gender justice in a more vigorous way. The entry of women itself leads to a change in the nature of politics.

Constraints

The constraints are many. In many places the women are not immune to systemic corruption, though as beginners they are more cautious. Coming into politics is still considered as dirty and spurned. The community leaders of the village try to choose candidates who are non-performers. The women themselves don't come forward. It is always the family members or party leaders who push them to contest. The selection of seats for reservations, which are done on a lottery basis and only for one term, doesn't provide much scope for nurturing a constituency. Even if the women perform during the first term, they are not allowed by the men to contest from the same seat again. Some of them get frustrated and become depressed. As mentioned before, the panchayat institutions are used as an implementing agency so the bureaucrats feel that they are the boss and the first-timer female elected representatives are there to obey them.

Violence against women has increased. A woman member of the panchayat has to face many difficulties if she defies her husband's dictation and discuss the agenda in meeting. In some cases, women representatives don't know that they have been elected from certain constituencies. The inter-caste violence has become more acute. Once a woman ward Commissioner of Hailakandi Municipal Board was slapped by the Chairman of the Board.

Conclusions

The 73rd Amendment has created an opportunity for large number of rural women to take part in the public institutions. Democracy has become more participatory in the process of implementing it. In many places, women have been functioning well and have engendered the development process, although in a limited sense. The family has accepted the new role and even the relationship between husband and wife has been altered. The myth of being a proxy woman gets disproved as husband-wife relationship has become relatively more egalitarian. This has led to a mobilization of rural women to a great extent. They are becoming restless.

The elected women prove to be the role model for the village women. Thus we find that the 73rd Amendment has an empowering impact on the women. And the study would like to argue that in a context where women's labour is still marginalized and the rural hierarchies remain unchallenged to a large extent, the entry of women into politics in such a big way is in itself a radical change. Despite the constraints, they are playing an extremely important role, which needs to be recognized.

The panchayats are still resource-starved. There are many parallel institutions like the Water Harvesting Committee and Janmabhumi program which by-pass panchayats easily. The Lines Departments control their own budgets. Even now half of the women are illiterate and their economic contributions don't get acknowledged. But a good beginning has been made to achieve the long-neglected gender justice.