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BLOCK 2
WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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UNIT 4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN INDIA

Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Learning Outcomes
- 4.3 Historical Overview
- 4.4 Post- independence Developments
- 4.5 Brief Overview of Initiatives Post -independence
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4.1 INTRODUCTION

It is analysed that “Human institutions evolve over a period of time and in the process get adapted to the traditions and temper of the people” (Report of the Committee on democratic decentralization, Government of Maharashtra, 1969). It is therefore pertinent to understand the functioning of local self-governance institutions within the specific historical context. With the understanding gained by such study of the historical evolution of local self-governing institutions and their functioning in different time periods in history, one is in a better position to understand their present working and likewise, suggest alterations, for further improvement. It is the functioning of the local institutions henceforth, that have been set up following the 73rd and the 74th constitutional amendments, that needs to be observed and studied for the purpose of real democracy, for democracy inheres in processes; in the way things are actually done. The historical factor in attitudes and proclivities that developed over time, that characterize a particular culture cannot be denied. Democratic Decentralisation holds the promise of affecting real democracy by involving people in policy choices and other vital matters of administration that concern them, at the grass roots, which is where the actual implementation of policies take place and results are achieved, and where, the real success or otherwise of schemes and projects can be gauged. In this Unit we will study the evolution of local governance (which is also known as local-self) in India in the pre- and post-independence periods. Texts tell us that neither democracy nor democratic decentralisation is/are an alien concept(s) in India. There was an interregnum when local autonomy in governance was lost to centralised administrations. However, after successive attempts in the post-independence period, the desired three-tier arrangement for local governance has been put in place.

4.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the origin of local governance in India;
- Explain the evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions;
- Learn about the post- independence developments related to governance.

4.3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Panchayats as an institution of local self-government at the village level had its origin in Ancient India. A sort of village council or an association of the residents of the village consisting of the village elders, Panchayats or Gram Sangha performed administrative and judicial functions. Sometimes, the Gram Sanghas or Panchayats were from among the villagers who regulated their own lives through these bodies. We find reference to Gram Sanghas in the Manusmriti, Kautilya's Arthashastra (400 B.C.) and the Mahabharata. The Shanti Parva of Mahabharata refers to a Sabha named 'Sansad' also. This consisted of the common people and was, therefore, called the 'Jan Sansad'. Valmiki's Ramayana speaks of the Ganapada, which was a sort of federation of village republics. Only those persons could become the members who had the general welfare of the people in their hearts (Kashyap, 2003). Local self-governing institutions were disrupted following invasions from the north- west. Not much effort was made during the medieval period to re-establish the same. Mughal governance was highly centralised. Villages were penetrated only for purposes of collection of revenue, never that much for administrative purposes. While the emperor had ultimate control, his team of jagirdars, zamindars, who formed the aristocracy of the Mughals interacted with the peasantry, but for exploitative purposes. This complicated agrarian relations in the countryside. The pre -British Mughal system of administration had a highly bureaucratised hierarchy of officials. The British made full use of this apparatus of administration while bringing about necessary changes as per their own requirements. Administrative and political reform during the time of the British was largely guided by commercial considerations. Expanding commerce and private property needed rule of law and an official machinery to enforce the contractual obligations. Therefore, political and administrative reforms were carried out from time to time, including establishment of local self- governing institutions on lines of British theory and practice. They lacked the local tinge; nevertheless, were there. The 'feudalisation' of India is attributed mainly to the Gupta era, when centralised authority of the preceding Mauryan age gave way to a decentralised system where the aristocracy attained land rights and subsequently power over subjects. The oligarchy exerted considerable influence on the monarch who depended on them for military supplies and cooperation during combat. The trend continued during the reign of Harsha, and worsened later. At the eve of the twelfth century, India had ceased to be a cohesive polity and presented a variegated picture of numerous tribes and ceaseless battles for 'paramourty'. Paramourty

however, was attained, long after, by the British. They consolidated the 'nation state', however obviously for personal gain, as above stated, and introduced modern systems of governance. The British rulers for the first thought of reversing the trend of centralisation only in 1882 when the Government of Rippon issued a resolution proposing steps in the direction of local self-government. The resolution called upon the provincial governments to establish a network of Local Boards charged with definite funds throughout the country. Accordingly, the present idea of democratic decentralization (rural local government) is the result of Lord Mayo's Resolution (1870) and Lord Rippon's Resolution (1882). The Report of the Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1909), and the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935 have further contributed in this direction (Malik, 2002). The British Government, with a view to preserve and stabilise its political control, took various measures and recognised village panchayats. A special Commission was appointed in 1909 on local self-government, which suggested the need for revitalising the village Panchayats for handling local affairs. The Decentralization Commission, which reported in 1909 made some far-reaching suggestions to remove some of the defects in the working of the Local Boards. In 1915 a government resolution endorsed the Commission proposals. But again, the provincial governments took no steps in the matter. Following the Montague Declaration of 1917 regarding the introduction of responsible government in gradual beginning with the local bodies a Resolution was issued by the Government of India in 1918 and, under the scheme of provincial dyarchy, by 1919; rural self-government was put under the charge of the Indian ministries. Some progress was made. Besides Municipal and Local Boards Acts, laws were passed in almost all the provinces to introduce Panchayats in villages (Henry, 1970). Subsequently, a number of Acts were passed like the Bengal village self-government Act of 1919; Madras, Bombay and United Provinces Village Panchayats Acts of 1920, Bihar and Orissa Village Administration Act, Assam Rural Self-Government Act of 1926, Punjab Village Panchayats Act of 1935 etc. to look after the village affairs and certain matters relating to their development. Under the Government of India Act, 1935 provincial autonomy started functioning in the provinces from April 1937. Congress Governments took office in eight of the eleven provinces. Considerable progress in the direction of Panchayati Raj was made during the period of the Congress rule. According to the January 1948 Plan of Gandhiji, each village Panchayat would constitute a working party with an elected leader. Above the village Panchayat came the hierarchy of indirectly elected bodies— taluka and district panchayats—each of which comprised the sarpanchs of the next lower panchayats. Members from the district and municipal panchayats would make up the provincial Panchayat. The national Panchayat would be responsible for defence, currency, customs, running of key industries of national importance and the coordination of provincial economic development plans (Raj, 1948). But the Panchayats formed under these acts were not democratic bodies as the government mostly nominated their members. The powers given to them were meagre and their financial resources were also limited. Commenting on the status of Panchayats during the British period, Maddick observed, "The British administration, with its

Roman sense of justice replacing the traditional powers of Panchayats in the more serious judicial cases, its system of tax gathering and of administration made such a violent impact that the corporate life of the villages was weakened and, in most cases, 'died'. The end of the Second World War brought in its wake the downfall of colonialism and the subject countries were granted independence by the ruler countries one after another. Invariably these countries were underdeveloped and backward because science and technology were not applied to the welfare of the masses of these countries. The gap between rich and poor countries begins widening instead of narrowing down, because in the newly emerged nations there was human power but not wealth. This enormous disparity among the people of the world is a problem not only for the poor nations but also for the rich parts of the world. Prosperity, like peace is indivisible. The end of the war also brought on the world stage two super powers having different approaches for the economic progress and welfare of their masses. These approaches are poles apart from each other. The first is the democratic approach and second is the revolutionary approach. Thus, a great burden fell on the shoulders of our leaders and they were called upon to share the responsibilities, which were to them a dream. Under such circumstances history came to their rescue and they cleared their policy in clear terms: Planning— Democratic, with a view to get the benefits of both the approaches—Democratic and Revolutionary. In every committee, conferences and meeting be it national, international or regional, there was only one topic under discussion and it is how to achieve speedy development in underdeveloped and undeveloped countries. A great number of programmes are assisted by the United Nations, its specialised agencies, inter-governmental organisations, regional commissions, bilateral agreements and many semi-public and private agencies, with a view to improving the economic conditions of the people in different parts of the world.

4.4 POST- INDEPENDENCE DEVELOPMENTS

The plea for greater autonomy to the rural bodies received conceptual strength with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the national scene and his advocacy of the doctrine of the national development through autonomous rural organisations, which he strived to model on the lines of Panchayat system as it prevailed in Ancient India. He envisaged five-tier system of Panchayats, Taluka Panchayats, District Panchayats, Provincial Panchayats and All-India Panchayats. The administrative system envisaged by him was that of a pyramid whose broad base would comprise numerous village communities of the country. Mahatma Gandhi, in 1946 had rightly remarked that the Indian independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a Republic of Panchayat having powers. It is a welcome phenomenon that several economists have started discovering a new virtue in the concept of political decentralisation to ensure people's participation at the grassroots level so as to allow the gains of development to reach them. It was therefore only natural that demands were made in the Constituent Assembly for the revival of the Panchayat system of government at the local level. Soon after the independence some of the provinces had passed Panchyati Raj Acts

and taken practical steps to organise village panchayats as units of rural self-government and endow them with certain powers and authority of administration. The Gandhian Constitution for free India drafted by S.N. Agarwal envisaged self-sufficient, self-governing village communities. Gandhiji was an ardent exponent and devotee of village swaraj (self-rule). For him, the term comprises village autonomy and self-sufficiency. Thus, Gandhiji wanted to see each village working as a small republic in which the people will not only solve their problems at their own but also formulate policy and programmes for development (On Gandhiji's insistence a clause regarding PRIs was inserted in Indian constitution in Article 40 under the chapter on Directive Principles of State Policy. Members of the village panchayats were to be elected by all the adults in the village). The village was to be the primary unit and the foundation of development planning. Later on, the Sarvodaya movement had also drawn on this philosophy of diffused democracy and decentralisation. As a result, "the movement for Panchayati Raj achieved both an intellectual respectability and sentimental appeal emphasizing that in such a state the best servants of the village should form the Panchayat, being elected unanimously, and from the village level there should be indirect election to sub-districts, provincial and central administration (Henry 1970). Jawaharlal Nehru also referred to the existence of democratic institutions at the village level in ancient India and said that India's strength really lay in 'her widespread system of village republics or self-governing Panchayats'. These Panchayats were 'elected by the village folk and thus there was a basis of democracy in this system.' Nehru was rather surprised to find that these Panchayats enjoyed both executive and judicial powers 'and their members were treated with greatest respect by the King's officers' (Nehru, 1962). On 16th March 1963, Nehru remarked that community development and Panchayati Raj were among the most helpful developments in the country, together constituting a revolutionary movement which, even if it had only yielded a fourth of the expected results, yet had proved' an amazing success, strengthening India at the very roots and preparing millions of men and women to shoulder responsibility and to be self-reliant. Still later, on 22 June 1963, Nehru said: "I have full confidence in its success because I have full confidence in Indian people." In March 1950, the Planning Commission came into existence and we began to plan for large-scale economic and social progress. As such the Planning Commission gave concentrated thought for a period of two years to the development of rural areas. The Planning Commission, therefore, thought of shaping the village development programmes, so as to attack the five giants of hunger, Poverty, Disease, and Ignorance through a self-help programme of Community Development. "Community Development is a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and on the initiative of the community". Thus, was defined the term at the Ashridge Conference of Social Development in 1954. The village Panchayats gained further impetus with the beginning of the First Five Year Plan in 1951. In 1952, several states launched community development and rural development plans with the help of local Five-Year Plan introduced in 1956. The Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India have travelled a long way to acquire a constitutional status from a mere mentioning of it in the

constitution in the form of Directive Principles (Article 40). Article 40 of the Indian Constitution states: “The state shall take steps to organise Village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.” The Article remained a dead letter for many years before finding a place of some importance in the form of the Balwantrai Mehta Study Team Report in 1959. The team had inter-alia envisaged directly elected Panchayats for a village or a group of villages, an executive body called Panchayat Samiti for a block with directly elected and co-opted members and an advisory body, Zilla Parishad, at the district level constituted indirectly with an ex-officio member from the lower tier and others with the Collector as the Chairman (Mishra, S.N, Kumar, Lokesh, Pal Chaitali, 1996).

Check Your Progress-1

1) Write in your own words on the history of local governance.

2) Write on post- independence developments related to governance.

4.5 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVES POST-INDEPENDENCE

Brief Overview of Initiatives Post-Independence The term ‘Panchayati Raj’ came into usage after the acceptance of the recommendations on Democratic Decentralisation of the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team. Previously the terms used were ‘village panchayat’, ‘district board’ or ‘sub-district board’, which were the self-governing bodies at the village or regional levels. Panchayati Raj implies the creation of local government institutions at the village, block and district levels. The Institutionalisation of democratic decentralisation in the form of statutory Panchayati Raj thus opened a new chapter in the history and gave a new turn to the evolution of rural local self- government institutions in India (Maithali, 1995). Panchayati Raj involves a three-tier structure of democratic institutions at districts, block and village levels, namely Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti, and Village Panchayat respectively. These institutions are considered as training ground, or democracy and political education. Rural development plans and programmes are implemented at this level so that fruits of development at this level so that fruits of development can accrue to the community directly. These institutions were established in 1959 based on the philosophy of decentralization and Gram Swaraj. The philosophy of development that emerged in India after Independence emphasised the involvement of the

people into a structure that would enable them to actively participate in the process of decision-making. In order to bring democracy to the grassroots level and involve people in decision-making, an experiment was made with the devolution of power to the elected representatives and allocation of responsibility and financial resources as it was felt that this would be a major institutional device for the development of rural areas. Introduction of Panchayati Raj was hailed as one of the most important political innovations in independent India. It was also considered as a revolutionary step. Panchayati Raj is a system of local self-government wherein the people take upon themselves the responsibility for development. It is also a system of institutional arrangement for achieving rural development through people's initiative and participation. Administration of development programmes aimed at social economic and cultural development, provision of community and welfare services etc. are entrusted to these local self-governing intuitions. Balwantrai Mehta himself, who said that a welfare state would never be achieved in reality so long as local self-government did not function at the District, Taluka and Village levels with elective elements, moved the Resolution on "Panchayati Raj". According to him, Panchayats and the cooperatives were the two institutions through which the people could be trained for the leadership. By the year 1962, Panchayati Raj had come to be accepted as national programme. It was felt necessary that Panchayati Raj got the widest support of the people and therefore the need for avoiding party politics in the election to village Panchayats was emphasised. It was hoped that the political parties would also avoid setting up candidates on party lines for Panchayat elections. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed to enquire into, among other things, the lack of initiative, apathy and indifference on the part of the rural population. According to the Committee there was to be a Panchayat Samiti at the Block level, which was to be indirectly elected by the village Panchayats. At the district level there was to be a coordinating body called the Zilla Parishad consisting of the Presidents of the Panchayat Samitis, Members of State Legislatures and Parliament and all district level officers of the development departments as members and, with the collector as the Chairman.

The sixty-fourth and sixty-fifth amendment bills, which later became the seventy-third and seventy-fourth amendments were the first major constitutional efforts with the stated objective of transferring power to the grassroots people. It was a great initiative by Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister. But unfortunately, the two bills were lost in the Rajya Sabha by three votes. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment sought to integrate the democratic process at all levels by formalizing a mechanism wherein people at all levels were to have an opportunity to participate openly in matters which concern their welfare and development. No doubt, a wide variety of functions have been assigned to the institutions of Gram Sabha but there is no uniformity in assigning the functions among the states and in most of the cases they are non-functional. The rural people are not fully involved in the decision – making process and financial management. They are kept aloof in the development process from planning to execution of rural development schemes and Programmes. The devolution of powers and functional

strengthening of the different tiers of the PR system is progressing at snail's pace in most of the states. Bureaucratic control over PRIs continues to be very strong. The financial devolution from centre to the states and the PRIs has not yet taken place. There is lack of proper maintenance of records and registers by the Panchayats. The elected representatives fail due to illiteracy and lack of awareness as compared to their better off counter parts. The bureaucrats are unwilling to empower the Panchayats. Politicisation has been the main in the smooth functioning of Panchayats (Singh, 2005).

4.6 LET US SUM UP

The year 1959 marked a revolutionary step in the development of the institutions of rural local self-government in the country. The year saw the inauguration of Panchayat Raj movement throughout the country. The Panchayats which had formerly been associated only in an executive and advisory capacity, under the community development programme were now to assume full responsibility for carrying it a head. The turning point came with the publication of the report of the Committee on Plan Projects in 1957, popularly known as the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee. The Committee was set up by Central government in 1957 to enquire into the questions of economy and efficiency and suggest other measures for the reorganization of community development programme. The Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), appointed by the Janata Party Government, was the major one, which suggested two- tier system of Panchayati Raj consisting of Zila Parishad and village Panchayats. However, these recommendations were not accepted by the government. C.H. Hanumantha Rao working Group (1983), G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985), L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986), Thungan Committee (1988) etc. were the other committees, which gave valuable suggestions for revamping the local bodies. The 64th and 74th Constitution Amendment Bills of 1989 and 1990 were the other abortive attempts made in this direction. (The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992). In the next unit, you will learn about the Committees Constituted by Government of India.

4.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Write the historical significance of local government in India.
- 2) Evaluate the post- independence developments related to local governance in India.
- 3) Do you agree that local governance is the most efficient ways of functioning. Write your critique.

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- The unit adopted (some sections) from the course MPA-016. Modifications are done as per the requirement of the BGS-013

UNIT 5 COMMITTEES CONSTITUTED BY GOVERNMENT OF INDIA: INITIATIVES TAKEN BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT

Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Learning Outcomes
- 5.3 The Context
- 5.4 Balwantrai Mehta Committee
- 5.5 Ashok Mehta Committee
- 5.6 G.V.K. Rao Committee
- 5.7 L.M. Singhvi Committee
- 5.8 Initiatives Taken by the State Government
- 5.9 Unit End Questions
- 5.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.11 References
- 5.12 Suggested Readings

5.1 INTRODUCTION

When it comes to local governance in Indian context, the period before the emergence of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, that is, the period from late 1940s to 1980s is of utmost importance. In fact, the period from 1947 to 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1993) had witnessed a wide range of development and change in local governance. For perspective, the term ‘Panchayat’ had not been explicitly mentioned by the makers of our Indian Constitution, however, in 1992 the Parliament made the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) as an integral part of the Constitution.

The current Unit will make an attempt to trace the evolution of PRI in the post-Independent (1947-1992) phase by answering the following questions: (i) What were the various Committees that gradually shaped PRI as the third-tier governance body? and (ii) What was the role of the Government appointed Committees in institutionalising PRIs? To have an understanding about local governance context and its relevance today, you need to study the various Committees appointed by the Government of India and the initiatives taken by the respective state governments until 1980s, as after the implementation of 73rd CAA, the modus operandi of state governments has been similar.

5.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the vital role of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report in institutionalizing Panchayati Raj;
- Describe the contributions made by Ashok Mehta Committee in streamlining the functions of Panchayati Raj; and
- Spell out the initiatives taken by the respective State Governments (select state governments) in line with the Government appointed Committees.

5.3 THE CONTEXT

The period 1951-58 witnessed the implementation of the first Five Year Plan. Significantly, the year 1952 can be called as a crucial year for the evolution of Community Development Programme (CDP) and National Extension Service (NES). The Government of India acknowledged the role of rural communities and villages as basic units of development process. To develop these basic units, that is, the villages, various projects were implemented by the concerned departments/agencies/ministries vis-à-vis food, health, and education. The launch of CDP and NES can be undoubtedly considered as vital factors for the growth of rural development and especially for the progress of Panchayati Raj. For perspective, the CDP focused on the establishment of Community Development Blocks (CDB). Indeed, the institutional focus of CDP was not the villages but the newly established CDB. With a Block Development Officer (BDO) heading the Block, the CDB served as an administrative entity between the district and the village. In fact, BDO had a team of Extension Officers (also known as experts) who were allotted various departments, such as, agriculture, cottage industries, healthcare, education etc. For the implementation of development projects, CDB received funds from both Central and State governments. Similarly, NES was also established, however, it was equipped with few financial and human resources. While CDP focused on short term development targets, NES focused on long term plans and strategies.

The intended outcome of CDP was to enable a self-reliant rural populace with enterprising spirit and indeed both CDP and NES did create a rural ecosystem for itself. However, CDP and NES were understaffed and underfinanced and could not realise the intended outcome (Dayal, 1966). To evaluate the development impact made by CDP and NES, the Government of India appointed a committee in 1957. The Committee was headed by Balwantrai Mehta to evaluate and propose appropriate recommendations. In 1958, the Committee came up with certain recommendations which will be discussed in the ensuing Section.

5.4 BALWANTRAI MEHTA COMMITTEE, 1957

The recommendations of Balwantrai Mehta came to be known as the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (BMCR). For the first time in the post-Independence phase, the Committee spoke the need for democratic decentralisation and its relevance for rural reconstruction. The Committee emphasised the need for statutory support to people's representations as: "Public participation in community works should be organised through statutory representative bodies" (Ministry of Panchayati Raj). In fact, the Committee asserted that without an agency at the village level to assume leadership and responsibility for community development programmes, real rural construction could not be realised. The recommendations of BMCR have been mentioned below:

- i) To establish a 3 tiered/layered Panchayati Raj system vis-à-vis Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level. And the role of BDO is to act on behalf of village panchayat. All the three tiers/layers should be linked together. The role of Gram Panchayat would be to execute public services and routine administrative tasks. The role of Panchayat Samiti would be to plan and execute all development schemes, and the role of Zila Parishad would be to supervise and coordinate the Panchayat Samitis.
- ii) Genuine transfer of power and responsibility should be enabled to the functionaries so as to achieve the development targets.
- iii) Besides transfer of adequate resources to the panchayat bodies, all development and welfare schemes should be implemented through these bodies.
- vi) The Committee envisaged that adequate people's participation in community welfare projects should be channelized wherein vulnerable sections including women would get adequate space to involve.
- v) Above all, the Committee recommended for co-opting two women members in development works related to women and children. Unlike male members who were to be elected, the Committee emphasized the relevance of women members to be co-opted. And one member each representing the Scheduled Caste/Schedule Tribe community.

BMCR gave a generic blue print for democratic decentralisation and encouraged the state governments to chalk out appropriate working structures in their respective states. In 1958, the National Development Council (NDC) endorsed the value of democratic decentralisation as envisaged by BMCR. During the first decade of Independence, the term 'Panchayati Raj' gained a prominent status of governance. On October 2nd, 1959, the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the 3 tier Panchayati Raj in Nagaur, Rajasthan. Indeed, BMCR set the tone for pushing democratic decentralisation into the national agenda.

With impetus brewing around Panchayati Raj Institutions post BMCR, the Government of India elevated the status of Department of Community Development to a Ministry.

5.5 ASHOK MEHTA COMMITTEE

In 1977, the Government of India constituted the Ashok Mehta Committee to study the causes for poor performance of Panchayati Raj system. Unlike BMCR, the Committee recommended for a two-tier Panchayati Raj vis-à-vis Zila Parishad and Mandal Panchayat and asserted the need to have compulsory taxation powers to mobilise their own financial resources. It also asserted the need to protect Panchayati Raj and decentralisation of powers. For perspective, the Committee stated: “the establishment of democratic bodies below the State level is an imperative from the political and socio-developmental perspectives. Democratic institutions with periodic elections at all levels will provide a forum for the assertion of their strength in large number by the weaker sections” (Ashok Mehta Committee Report). Indeed, it was one of the major Government appointed committees to talk about social justice perspective at the local level. For instance, it focused on inclusion and representation of weaker sections of the society into the local politics.

To sustain the momentum of rural development, technical expertise should be made available at all levels below the state. In fact, the Committee considered district as the first point of decentralisation which would come under popular supervision. It proposed that the decentralised structure needs to be big enough to cater to the technical, administrative, and financial requirements but also small enough to ensure accountability to the grieved citizens. To materialise this arrangement without any practical difficulties the Committee recommended for grouping of villages. These group of villages were referred as Mandal Panchayats with a population of 15,000 to 20,000. In fact, the recommendation regarding grouping of villages corresponded with the already enacted legislations of Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972, and West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act, 1973.

Coming to the block level (Panchayat Samitis) agencies, the Committee suggested them to function as transitional units until the Committee’s recommendations get implemented at a full swing. In fact, major change in their recommendation was in the abolishment of Panchayat Samitis. One of the reasons for recommending the abolishment of Panchayat Samitis was the growing disconnection between development programmes and panchayats between 1964-1977 (Mitra, 2015).

At the village level, people would be involved in Mandal Panchayats through Village Committees. The Committee left it to the discretion of the states to make structural arrangements of Panchayati Raj, nevertheless, they emphasised on ‘directly elected element’ to prevail over any administrative agencies. In terms of elections, the Committee had recommended for inclusiveness wherein Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) would get adequate representation based on their population. It also suggested that the Chairman of Zila Parishad would be indirectly elected.

Similarly, the President of the Mandal Panchayat would be either directly or indirectly elected, as decided by their respective states. When it comes to elections, the Committee had recommended that once in four years elections should be conducted and it should be simultaneously held.

- **Composition of Zila Parishad**

With regard to the composition, the Committee had recommended for six types of members vis-à-vis elected members from electoral divisions, Presidents of the Panchayat Samitis as an ex-officio member, nominated members of large municipalities, nominees of district level co-operative federation, two women who secured the highest percent of votes in the Zila Parishad elections. In case of no women contenders, the Zila Parishad can co-opt for two women. Two other co-opted members vis-à-vis one University/College teacher and another member with special interest in rural development.

- **Composition of Mandal Panchayat**

The Mandal Panchayat would comprise of vis-à-vis 15 members directly elected on village-cum-population basis, representatives of Farmers' Service Societies, and two women who secured highest proportion of votes in the Mandal Panchayat elections. In case of no women contenders, the Mandal Panchayat can co-opt for two women. Reservation would also be made available for SCs/STs. The President of Mandal Panchayat would be elected by the directly elected members or the post may be directly elected by the state. Besides, there would be a committee led by all women members in the Mandal Panchayat to ensure that all decisions connected to development programmes of women and children were made by women themselves.

The Committee suggested that the following functions to be decentralised: agriculture and allied sectors, health, education, communications, rural industries, marketing, welfare of backward classes, family welfare, etc. However, the Committee recommended that certain functions mentioned above can be retained by the respective state governments depending on its significance. The Committee was quite sure that those items that transcends district boundaries/jurisdictions need not be transferred to Zila Parishads, rather, retained by the states.

The Committee asserted that: "the Zilla Parishad will handle all the decentralised State programmes and plan for them at the district. The Mandal Panchayat will handle the implementation work" (Ashok Mehta Committee).

- **Minister for Panchayati Raj**

Owing to the increase in complexity of development works, the Committee recommended for a periodic study of state-level departments that caters to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). To ensure efficiency to the development works undertaken, the Committee recommended for a Minister for Panchayati Raj whose task would be to ensure:

- i) enactment of Panchayati Raj legislation;

- ii) conduct of elections to PRIs;
- iii) training of elected representatives and administrative officials;
- iv) administration of all training centres that caters to the training needs of PRIs;
- v) promotion of audit of Panchayati Raj accounts;
- vi) review of Panchayati Raj activities and present a report to the respective state legislatures; and
- vii) promotion of camp training of panchayat elected members.

5.6 G.V.K. RAO COMMITTEE

A Committee was appointed under the Chairmanship of G.V.K. Rao to examine the issues related to rural development. The title of the Committee was 'Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programmes' and it submitted the report in 1985. Though the focus of the Committee was to reform the existing development and poverty alleviation programmes, it did recommend concerning Panchayati Raj. The Committee's concern for decentralisation and people's involvement can be implicitly traced through the following statement: "local initiative must be encouraged and the detailed strategy worked out by local people" (G.V.K. Rao Committee Report). Concurrently, the Committee recommended to activate PRIs across the country and provide them adequate support to evolve as effective organisations. In the long run, the Committee believed that PRIs would be able to handle people's grievances. Further, the Committee suggested to hold regular elections to PRIs.

Reiterating on this, the Committee suggested to consider districts as the basic unit for policy planning and programme implementation. Further, the Committee proposed that Zila Parishad can evolve as the principal body of managing all development programmes (socio-economic). The Committee went one step ahead in advocating empowerment of PRIs to plan, implement, and monitor development programmes.

- **Zila Parishad**

The Committee suggested that the President can be elected directly for a term co-terminus or for one year each based on Mayoral pattern. It can work based on the number of sub-committees that were elected on the basis of proportional representation. In a way, the Committee intended to promote participatory democracy.

- **District Development Commissioner**

The Committee recommended for a post of District Development Commissioner (DDC) to supervise and coordinate all the development related activities of the district. In fact, DDC was suggested to be made as the Chief Executive of the Zila Parishad in states where PRIs carry out the responsibility of planning and implementing development programmes. Indeed, the Committee suggested that the post of DDC should be of higher

status than the District Collector.

By doing so, the G.V.K. Rao Committee re-affirmed the recommendations made by the Ashok Mehta Committee Report in making 'district as the entry point of decentralisation'. The G.V.K. Rao Committee Report did not make an immediate impact on state legislation, however, it impacted the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) (Mitra, 2015). For perspective, the Plan acknowledged that grassroots participation through Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zila Parishads would foster local-specific development solutions as it would integrate poverty alleviation programmes with area development (Mitra, 2015).

As the Plan explicitly referred to poverty alleviation, there was a shift of focus from agricultural and industrial development to social development (Mitra, 2015). In line with the Ashok Mehta Committee, there was stronger inclusion of representation of women, SCs, and STs.

5.7 L.M. SINGHVI COMMITTEE

The L.M. Singhvi Committee published its report in 1986. The report discussed the matters connected to PRIs. The Committee examined the failed take-off of PRI and discussed a plethora of challenges, such as, inadequate resources, lack of political will to implement legislation, lack of national commitment to promote participatory democracy and alike. Based on examined issues, the Committee proposed to revive PRIs. It reaffirmed the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee and acknowledged the role of PRIs as political entities and not as mere administrative agencies of the respective state governments. By doing so, the L.M. Singhvi Committee advocated the bottom-up approach to development. In bottom-up approach, PRIs would have adequate funds, functions, and functionaries to plan, implement, and monitor development programmes. In fact, one of the drawbacks for failed take-off of PRIs in the post BMCR and Ashok Mehta Committee was the top-down model of development. Under the top-down model of development, the PRIs role was that of an administrative entity and scope for planning and monitoring was nil. It is in this context, the L.M. Singhvi Committee proposed for the introduction and strengthening of Gram Sabhas, corporate village assemblies as the basis for democratic self-government.

Indeed, the Committee advocated for introducing a constitutional provision for Panchayati Raj which can be inferred from the following statement: "PRIs should be constitutionally proclaimed as the third-tier of government" (Mitra, 2015). The idea of a constitutionally sanctified entity was a paradigm shift in the field of local government and paved way for understanding the significance of such an entity in empowering PRIs vis-à-vis political, economic, and social. When it comes to structural arrangement, the Committee proposed to integrate administrative, technical expertise, and cadres of special departments at district level with Zila Parishads. The Committee also recommended to provide constitutional provisions for training officials and volunteers at the panchayat level and envisaged to

evolve research institutes for providing training and evaluation of PRI functionaries.

- **Brief Overview**

The period between 1977-1992 witnessed a lot of committee reports and their recommendations brought forth the necessary impetus to the constitutional backing of PRIs and it was made acceptable and desirable by the successive governments. For instance, prior to the publication of Ashok Mehta Committee Report, the idea of a constitutional amendment bill was instituted. Further, the environmental factors, such as, having a solid government at the local level, political parties showing enthusiasm towards winning local body elections, need for women's reservation, SCs and STs reserved constituencies and above all the need to empower PRIs fostered the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill, 1992. This was enacted and came into effect in the year 1993.

In the ensuing Section, let us discuss the initiatives taken by select state governments.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) *Name at least three recommendations made by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (BMCR).*

5.8 INITIATIVES TAKEN BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT

Let us study about initiatives taken by the state government.

- **Uttar Pradesh**

In line with the recommendations of the BMCR, Uttar Pradesh (UP) implemented the Kshettra Samitis and Zila Parishad Adhiniyam of 1961. Kshettra Samitis were equivalent to the Panchayat Samitis of BMCR. The 1961 Act directly took reference of BMCR as the reason for enactment in UP. Besides paving way for implementing the three-tier structure, the Act put forth the relevance of Kshettra Samiti (at the block level) and Zila Parishad (at the district level). BMCR indicated that state could implement the reforms based on their respective political-administrative context. For perspective, the Act of 1961 instead of conducting direct elections at the village panchayat, the village sabha directly elected the representatives from block level. The elected Pradhans were considered as the principal officers of the village sabha. The Act also insisted to co-opt women members where the female representations were less than five. Secondly, at the block level, the Act recommended for at least five women to discuss the matters related to women and children. Further, at least eight Scheduled Caste (SC) members were to

be co-opted.

In the three-tiered structure, for instance, Kshetra Samitis (block level) catered to the following services, such as, education including primary education, health and sanitation, vocational education, increase in agriculture production, minor irrigation, fisheries and poultry production, seed management, establishment of cooperative societies, development of small-scale and cottage industries. In addition, they were in-charge of constructing and maintaining roads, bridges, and other public buildings that come under their jurisdiction.

Unlike BMCR, Zila Parishads were given more responsibilities under Schedule II of the 1961 Act, say for example, it was given responsibility to provide training centres meant for promoting small scale industries, public works, public hospitals, emergency relief services, establishment and coordination of facilities meant for the poor and the orphaned. Its focus was more on planning and supervise the development plans at the block level.

Moreover, under Schedule III of the Act of 1961, those functions that were formerly executed by the state government and its agencies were devolved either to the block or to the district. In fact, this devolution of powers included creation of staff positions, administrative control of the panchayat secretaries with regard to disciplinary procedures, transfers, levying taxes, etc. For example, a number of administrative positions were created to implement the directions as given by Kshetra Samitis and the Zila Parishads. In financial context, both Samitis and Parishads were allowed to levy fees for using public property (roads, bridges) and license fees for businessmen and traders (Mitra, 2015).

To establish the three-tier Panchayati Raj system as recommended by BMCR, all states, except Kerala and West Bengal, had enacted their respective legislations by 1964. Although with variations, in majority of the states the structure and functions of the Panchayati Raj system (for example the three-tier system) came as a resultant effect of BMCR. For perspective, within five years of BMCR, states, such as, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Madhya Pradesh implemented the recommendations and in fact directly responded to the ideas proposed. During this period, the convergence of three-tier Panchayati Raj structure was evident across India and one cannot ignore till date the contributions made by BMCR in democratic decentralisation.

- **Madhya Pradesh**

In the aftermath of the Ashok Mehta Committee Report, Madhya Pradesh was one among the few states to enact legislation. It made an attempt to reflect few of the recommendations made by the Committee. Majorly, it focused on consolidating and amending the existing legislation – Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Adhiniyam, 1981. Some of the aspects that reflected Ashok Mehta Committee Report included: strengthening village by providing compulsory income sources, limiting the scope of functions of Gram Panchayats, social welfare with respect to women, SCs and STs.

One of the major changes the state government enacted legislation was the

term 'Gram Sabha' was not mentioned. Unlike the Ashok Mehta Committee that recommended for two-tier Panchayati Raj structure, Madhya Pradesh state legislation retained the three-tier system. However, the official designation of Village Committees was changed to Gram Samitis. Also, in the composition of the Zila Panchayat there was inclusion of the representatives of the Public Health, Agriculture, Veterinary, and Education. The Gram Panchayat was entrusted with 29 specific duties and prominent change found was the omission of agricultural and industrial duties. The state legislation defined certain functions in the areas of public health, such as, disease prevention and assistance in vaccination programmes, birth and death registration, social welfare including the prevention of discriminatory practices and family planning, public works like construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, supply of drinking water, provision for village street lights. In addition, the Gram Panchayats were expected to implement the projects and programmes as entrusted by the state government (Mitra, 2015).

- **Karnataka and West Bengal: Observations made by G.V.K. Rao Committee**

While studying the impact of Ashok Mehta Committee Report on state legislation, the G.V.K. Rao Committee made some observations on West Bengal and Karnataka. They are as follows:

- a) Both the states had made district as the first point of decentralization below the state which was in line with Ashok Mehta Committee's recommendation;
- b) It was found that Zila Parishads in both the states were based on direct elections;
- c) The Chairman of the Zila Parishads were only from the directly elected members;
- d) In Karnataka, to comply with Ashok Mehta Committee Report, the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) ceased to exist, rather, its functions were merged with the Zila Parishads. Further, district heads of line departments would come under the Zila Parishad. Above all, each Zila Parishad would be headed by a Chief Secretary.
- e) In West Bengal, the District Magistrate would simultaneously head the Zila Parishad as the Chief Executive Officer. The Chairman of the Zila Parishad would be the Chairman of District Planning Committee and DRDA.

In line with Ashok Mehta Committee, the state of Karnataka opted for one-tier below the district, that is, the Mandal Panchayat. On the other hand, West Bengal opted for two-tier, namely, Panchayat Samitis (block level) and Gram Panchayats (village).

Check your progress-2

- 1) *Spell out at least four recommendations made by the Ashok Mehta Committee with reference to Minister of Panchayati Raj?*

5.9 LET US SUM UP

Through this Unit, you were able to understand the various Committees appointed by the Government of India vis-à-vis Balwantrai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, G.V.K. Rao Committee, and L.M. Singhvi Committee. The period from late 1940s to 1980s is of utmost importance. In fact, the period from 1947 to 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1993) had witnessed a wide range of development and change in local governance. The contributions of the above-mentioned Committees played a pivotal role in institutionalising Panchayati Raj in India. As per the local ecological factors these Committees worked out on the practical aspects of Panchayati Raj and came up with appropriate recommendations. Above all, these Committees gave a strong constitutional backing to establish PRIs as grassroots entity in our country.

5.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Name at least three aspects brought forth by Uttar Pradeshin the aftermath of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (BMCR).
- 2) Write down at least three observations made by G.V.K. Rao Committee about West Bengal and Karnataka?

5.11 REFERENCES

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5.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 6 73RD AND 74TH CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ACTS

Structure

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Learning Outcomes
- 6.3 Contending Notion of Gram Swaraj
- 6.4 Local Governance: A Synoptic History
- 6.5 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts
- 6.6 Mis(representation) of Women – Case of *Mukhiyapatis*
- 6.7 Deepening Democracy: Understanding PESA
- 6.8 Challenges or Opportunities
- 6.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.10 Unit End Questions
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6.1 INTRODUCTION

The earliest references about the idea of local governance and its democratic structure in India can be attributed to the ancient period be it the existence of tribal assemblies like *sabha*, *samiti* or *vidhata* during the Vedic period or be it the rise of the republican states during the later vedic times. Such institution largely remained absent during later ancient and medieval times. A probable reason for this could have been centralisation of power in the ruling monarchies of those times. The existence of assemblies of people at local levels cannot be ruled out completely; however, such bodies largely operated under the influence of local power structures and were guided by ruling ideology of the state and many a times under the influence of cultural considerations of the ruling elites belong to caste, class, religion, gender etc. Even during the colonial rule, such local bodies functioned and issued decrees, though their legal legitimacy always remained questionable. Thus, we do have instances even in contemporary times where local *panchayat* (likes of *khap-panchayat*) issues order about excommunication, social boycott and even corporal punishment which comes at loggerhead with modern jurisprudence. With adoption of the Indian Constitution, there has been a paradigm shift in imagining the idea of local governance which has been an integral sub-set of declared larger goal called ‘*swaraj*’ during India’s struggle for independence.

6.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this Unit you are able to:

- Know basic historical knowledge about local governance.
- Understand what led to the 73rd and 74 Constitutional Amendments and inherent promise of decentralization and democratization.
- Learn the basic features of the Panchayati Raj system and its functioning.
- Evaluate challenges coming on the way of functioning of the local bodies particularly due to continuing notions of caste, class and gender superiority.

6.3 CONTENDING NOTIONS OF GRAM SWARAJ

Inequality is all pervasive. Equality is a utopia. In phenomenological sense of the terms, 'inequality' is something which is pre-existing and can be described as 'what is. On the other hand, 'equality' has to be achieved through a process and hence can be explained as 'what is ought to be'. A noted scholar Granville Austin has rightly dubbed Indian Constitution as a 'living document' for egalitarian principles of equality or justice that it promises to endorse. The basic principle of equality is thus enshrined in the Constitution of India and guarantees all its citizens 'equality before law' irrespective of caste, creed, or gender as per Article 14 and Article 16. It is pertinent to underline that there were contending visions even among the builders of modern India and their way to look at the villages let alone village panchayat. While Mahatma Gandhi celebrated the idea of gram-swarajya to an extent that he believed India began and ended in villages. On the other hand, Jawaharlal Nehru saw building block of India as a synthesis of three components namely autonomous village community, caste and joint family system. Ambedkar saw Hindu village as hierarchal in nature (Jodhka, 2002, 3343). Thus, Ambedkar was vehemently opposed to village level self-government and he had his own valid reasons for this. Having born and brought up in an ex-untouchable family his experiences were lived rather than learnt from the texts. He saw villages being deeply caste-ridden; dominated by the upper castes resulting in exclusion of the backward castes and to the most disadvantaged for dalits who were largely engaged in menial and inhuman occupations. Adivasis in any case stayed outside the geographical periphery of a village.

6.4 LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A SYNOPTIC HISTORY

The ideals of decentralisation have had deep roots in the Indian past. If one attempts to trace and evaluate working of local governance, it is fairly established that India has generally fared quite well in terms of working of the local bodies and its democratic functioning when compared to most countries of the world (Manor, 2010:61). It is too early, however to make any value judgement about the successes and failures of the bodies created out of two constitutional amendments. The same bodies may reflect different orientations and different styles of functioning across the length and breadth

of the country. There is no denying the fact that a leap towards decentralisation necessarily presupposes deepening of democracy. The bodies of local governance are merely a means to achieve that democratization.

The first and foremost point one needs to understand is what led to these two amendments. One popular view remains that they resulted from an upsurge from the below supported by people's movement at the bottom. However, the evidences suggest the contrary. It is apparent that the idea of decentralisation was in a churning process for quite some time especially during the colonial times. Lord Rippon's Resolution of 1882 is one such early intervention in this direction. Similar initiatives were case in point, like discussion in the Constituent Assembly in the late 1940s on local governance during colonial times. Later, in the post-independence period, formation of a series of Committees to explore the possibilities of local governance like Balwantrai Mehta Committee, 1957; Ashok Mehta Committee, 1977; and L. M. Singhvi Committee, 1986 (deSouza, 2003, pp. 102-103). Thus, the idea of decentralisation particularly in the post-independence scenario seems to have emerged from the sloppy experience with the democratic institutions and its delivery mechanism. What is dubbed as 'Nehruvian-socialism' was gradually losing its way as the percolating effect of the governmental schemes were too sluggish and were failing in benefitting the least advantaged particularly those residing in the rural parts of the country.

Nehru as Prime Minister sought some rightful solutions and thus constituted Balwantrai Mehta Committee which suggested the principle of 'democratic-decentralisation' as worthy solution. This principle in practise resulted in three-tier institutions of local governance situated at village, block and district levels. A noted Indian political scientist, Rajni Kothari informs us that as early as in 1960, Jawaharlal Nehru was interested in panchayats. Kothari himself was assigned with a national study on democratic decentralisation and also a study group that met and briefed the Prime Minister on this subject. S. K. Day, one of the cabinet colleagues of Nehru who held the portfolio of Cooperation Panchayati Raj (1957-1962) gave lot of impetus in favour of panchayats and hence known as one of India's prominent advocates of decentralisation (Manor, 2010:63-64).

But neither Nehru nor his successors like Lal Bahadur Shastri or Indira Gandhi could bring any concrete legislation in this regard. In contrast, at state level, there emerged two political formations which became ruling parties in two states namely West Bengal and Karnataka propelled fresh air in the demand for democratic decentralisation. In West Bengal, it was CPI (M) led government headed by Jyoti Basu in 1977 and in Karnataka, it was by the Janta Party led government headed by Ramkrishna Hegde in 1983. The immediacy for demand of decentralisation was generated due to ongoing centralising tendencies of Indira Gandhi headed Congress Party led government at the centre. Though, the Janata government of 1977, intended to implement Panchayati raj at national level, they could not pursue for the lack of stability as well as short span of its tenure. It is not surprising at all, why Congress government led by Indira Gandhi once retuning returning to power in 1980 never pursued it further.

The initial years of Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister was fraught with ambiguities on this subject, however, he made attempts towards consultations with bureaucrats posted at district level by 1987-1988. It was only towards early 1989 – the year which would witness general election that he started consultations on a large scale and it was towards May that a bill was hastily introduced for amending the Constitution for creating panchayats with substantive powers at three tiers namely village, block and district. And then he made an announcement of his after-thought about another amendment seeking similar arrangements in the urban areas (Manor, 2010:64). But in a dramatic turn of events a government with absolute majority was voted out of power in the general elections that were held in autumn of 1989. The government headed by two prime ministers in quick succession namely V. P. Singh and Chandrasekhar could hardly push the pending bills on the matter of local governance owing to various factors including turmoil created by frenzy of Mandir and Mandal.

It was only during the Congress led coalition government headed by P.V. Narsimha Rao, that these two bills were re-introduced in the parliament. The old-fashioned commentators of Indian politics would see this as a homage paid to Late Rajiv Gandhi, however, keen observers of Indian politics like James Manor considers Rao as a genuine supporter of the principle of decentralisation. Manor informs us that the Karnataka government headed by Hegde in 1987 had invited the then Union Human Resource Development Minister, Narsimha Rao to inaugurate newly introduced Panchayati raj programme. In Bangalore, while addressing a huge crowd of panchayat representatives, Rao had quipped, "...Mr Hegde may belong to Janata Party and I may belong to the Congress party, but we both belong to panchayati raj party" (Manor, 2010:64).

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) *Write in brief the emergence of local self-government.*

6.5 73RD AND 74TH AMENDMENT ACTS

With the promulgation of these two amendments acts by the Indian Parliament in 1993, the two-tier federal governance system in India transformed overnight to the three-tier federal governance (deSouza, 2003, p.99.) As de Souza has rightly pointed, the sheer scale of the outcome of these two legislations was humongous. As per the then data put forth about local governance, the number of newly created *gram-panchayats* (village councils) was 2,27,698, the number of *panchayat-samitis* (block councils) were 5906 and number of *zila-parishads* (district councils) as a result of the aforementioned legislations were 474. These corresponding numbers for

these three tiers have further swelled up to: 2,53,268; 6614 and 630 respectively (for details see Basic Statistics of PRI, GOI:15). These changes does not reveal that huge numbers of institutions are represented by additional number of elected representatives in addition to the existing number of Members of national Parliament or the Members of various Legislative Assemblies of respective states. This has led to huge federal and democratic expansion.

These amendments changed the whole demographic picture of the governance in rural as well as urban India. The demographic dividend of democratization, however, is most evident in the rural hinterlands of India where society continues entrenched in what Ambedkar described as 'graded-inequalities' of caste. With coming of these amendments into force in 1993, it was mandated that about one third representatives (approximately 10,00,000) would be women. Similarly, about 7,00,000 members needed to be belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes alone (deSouza, 2003, p.100). The proportional representation for the SCs and STs respectively would be 15% and 7.5% as has been the case corresponding to their population share. It is heartening to note that one third of even the reserved seats for the SCs and STs had to be reserved for women. These numbers have naturally increased further, in these close to three decades by now.

Moreover, some of the state governments have made their bodies more inclusive in terms of representation. For instance, the state government in Bihar took an unprecedented step of enhancing the women representation raising it to 50% since 2006. This simply entails, apart from existing reservations for SCs, STs and Backward Classes or OBCs, fifty percent horizontal reservation have been extended to women belonging to both reserved and unreserved categories. The state legislatures have the liberty of making provisions in these institutions of Panchayati Raj for the members belonging to backward classes. It needs to be reiterated here that the central government had already implemented one of the recommendations of the Second Backward Classes Commission (popularly known as Mandal Commission) by implementing 27% reservation in favour of those citizens belonging to OBCs since August 1990 (although this decision was challenged in the Supreme Court of India, until cleared in 1993 of course with a caveat of creamy-layer in the landmark judgement *Indra Sawhney v/s Union of India*). Thus, this decision of granting the state legislatures to extend the reservations in favour of backward classes may be read as a resonance-effect of the 'Mandal moment' in the contemporary Indian polity.

Many state governments have exclusive Ministry and Department at the state levels designated to carry forward the responsibilities relating Panchayati Raj. On a similar vein, there have been offices of the State Election Commission created for the purpose of conducting elections of the local bodies in a sense to assist the Election Commission of India. But owing to the mammoth size of these micro and macro institutions, one wonders about their successes and failures. Some of these developments have been assessed and some are yet to be assessed in time to come. But what it intended to achieve in the at least in a decade after passing of these two amendments have rightly

been summed up by Peter Ronald deSouza: "...the package of institutions produced by the amendments contains several important innovations that, if they function according to their design, will make democracy in India more inclusive and representative..." (deSouza, 2003:100).

6.6 MIS(REPRESENTATION) OF WOMEN – CASE OF MUKHIYAPATIS

Recently, there emerged a controversy after election of the Hon'ble President of India Srimati Droupadi Murmu. India has had a woman President earlier but newly elected President holds much higher significance in terms of deepening democracy in India in terms of identity and diversity. The leader of opposition in the lower house of Indian parliament addressed the President as *'Rashtrapatni*. As expected, there was a furore on the floor of the Lok Sabha, footages of which can be accessed from digital archives. No parliamentarian's attention caught attention to the fact that hundreds of elected representatives in the Panchayat system are referred to as *Mukhiyapati/Pradhanapati* or the *Sarpanchpati* as the case may be. The reference to this episode intends to establish that there is semantics of each and every term and there is further context towards its usage. Many women were pushed as candidates in these local bodies' election for the requirement as per the new legislation which provided women with horizontal reservations. Even after getting elected, many of these women lacked awareness about their own rights and privileges as people's representatives. So, it was usually their husbands who acted as dummy representatives on behalf of their wives who were elected representatives. Hence, they were usually referred to as *Mukhiyapati* etc. But the later researchers suggest that many things have changed over a period of time and are continuously changing. There are enough evidences to suggest how the real power was wielded in the husbands of the elected women representatives. But gradually things changed for better. An ever-growing number of elected women gradually developed an agency and started asserting and executing their own powers and privileges, refusing to act as dummies or rubber stamps.

Check your progress-2

- 1) *Write your views on 73rd and 74th Amendments.*

6.7 DEEPENING DEMOCRACY: UNDERSTANDING PESA

PESA stands for Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act. It was enacted by the United Front government in 1996. Since there have been growing demands from the indigenous people about their rights and claims on natural resources which these communities have so laboriously and religiously conserved and nurtured. The International bodies like the United Nations recognised these voices from the margins and made meaningful interventions in this regard. In India to with the people's movement mostly under the garb of social movements, environmental movements, civil society movements were clubbed as new social movements recognised the genuineness in the demand for *jal, jungle, jameen* as they are popularly referred to by the indigenous people. It has been realised that the communities who reside in the regions of hills and forests have far more serious and sincere understandings about flora and fauna and hence their 'say' in this regard could be of utmost importance.

The exploitation and plunder of the natural and indigenous resources started with the colonisers. But even in the post-colonial years, an unholy nexus between forest contractors and governmental officials kept on growing. It was in this context that the Government of India had already enacted the Forests Conservation Act as early as in 1980. This law snatched away the rights from the state governments towards their monopoly to convert forest land and bring to use for non-forest purposes. Subsequently, the old Indian Forest Act of the colonial times were reviewed in the light of a Supreme Court judgement in the same year 1996, PESA was passed. This redefined the forest land in terms of including even those areas which were earlier referred to as village forest or revenue land. The tussle on the ground thus grew leading to violence on altercations related to land use.

It was in this context, that the PESA was enacted with special powers to enable 'Tribal Self Rule' in those regions of the country which were earlier designated in the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. PESA therefore, has to be read in the immediate context of 73rd and 74th Amendments. And in that sense fundamental target for this act was the areas scheduled in the Fifth Schedule. This act enabled full power an authority to gram sabha and panchayat rather than to the delegation. Thus, it paved space for participatory democracy. The areas as scheduled in the Sixth Schedule, however, are not covered under this act, since most of these areas belong to north-eastern areas where 'tribal autonomous councils' already exists. The PESA enables state governments to endow the gram sabha and panchayats to function as full-fledged institutions of local governance. The Act, further allows local bodies of these scheduled areas spread over in some nine states of India to approve plans and programmes relating social and economic development including poverty elevation.

6.8 CHALLENGES OR OPPORTUNITIES

One of the major challenges since the time when India got independence has remained about the disbursement of governmental schemes in a democratic way. There has been deep rooted nexus between three axioms namely, red-tapism, favouritism and corruption. Very recently in 2018, while delivering a verdict on UID/Aadhar, the Supreme Court of India made a reference about an observation made by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1985. During one of his visits to the draught prone Kalahandi region of Orissa, he had remarked that out of one rupee spent by the government on welfare schemes for the downtrodden only 15 paise reach the intended beneficiary. The implementation of these two amendments in a sense has a mechanism where the local representatives may be made accountable for right disbursements to the beneficiaries. The digital technology has further helped schemes like direct transfers to the beneficiary's bank account.

The social exclusion of several social groups in India like adivasis, dalits and shudra castes who are known as STs, SCs and OBCs in Constitutional parlance is an established fact. In addition to them, the women of all spectrums have been victims of age-old patriarchal mindset. These excluded groups along with religious, linguistic and gender minorities like LGBTQI+ are often at the receiving end of caste, ethnic and gender-based violence. The public spheres in rural India are harbinger of prejudices and humiliations being meted on these social groups. It is in these circumstances that the legislations empowering local governance are pointers for larger democratisation at the grassroots. Thus, be it the selection of Aishwarya Rutuparna Pradhan in the Orissa Financial Services in 2016 or the election of Gyaneshwar Kamble who created history in 1917 by becoming first Sarpanch of Tarangfal village in Malshiras taluka of the Sholapur district in Maharashtra. Both of them belong to transgender category.

Another distinct challenge emerged as soon as these legislations aimed at deepening local governance relates to intersectionality of caste and gender. The patriarchy existing in India can best be understood as a notion theorised so eloquently by Uma Chakrabarty as 'brahmanical patriarchy'. Thus, it was realised that initially there were discomfort in the so-called upper caste savranas in accepting an ST, SC or OBC pradhan or sarpanch or as a member of zilla-parishad. But since these reservations for some of these marginalised sections were continuing since independence; it already had gained some legitimacy. But violence and atrocities against some of these elected representatives were always reported in the decades of 1990s and 2000s. But gradually they are being accepted of course with evident reluctance. But now that the government officials too are on tight ropes, with growing consciousness and assertion at the grassroots owing to tools like right to information, information technology and active social media, things are changing fast. But we are aware all habits die hard. James Manor, for instance was informed by hundreds of non-Dalit male villagers in varied Indian states that they viewed reservation for women 'as far more shocking and objectionable' when compared to the reservations for the dalits (Manor, 2010:70-71).

Case Study-I

SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

Rajbala and Ors v/s State of Haryana and Ors 2015

Author: J. Chelameshwar

Bench: J. Chelameshwar and Abhay Manohar Sapre

This landmark case of the Supreme Court refers to Writ Petition (Civil) No. 671 of 2015. The petition challenged the constitutionality of the Haryana Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act, 2015. The Government of Haryana passed this amendment and already published in its Gazette Notification dated 7th September, 2015. This amendment appended a list of additional eligibility criteria by amending the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994. In an intriguing move it made educational qualification up to 'matriculation' as a necessary requisite to contest the local body elections for general candidates; 'middle pass' for women and scheduled caste candidates and 'fifth-pass' for women belonging to scheduled caste to contest for the post of 'panch'. The Supreme Court in this case with long deliberations based on the data of National Population Register found that a large section of population would be barred from contesting election. And despite observing, 'right to vote' and 'right to contest' are constitutional rights of the citizens, the highest court validated these arbitrary qualifications in the election for the local bodies which are not there even in the case of election for Member of Legislative Assemblies or Members of parliament.

Case Study- II

SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

Shakti Vahini vs Union of India 2018

Author: D. Misra

Bench: A M Khanwilkar and D Y Chandrachud

This case relates to a writ petition filed by Shakti Vahini, an organisation which was earlier entrusted by the National Commission for Women to conduct a research study on the subject, "Honour Killings in Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh" where this practice is still prevalent. Honour killing simply means homicide of individuals belonging to one family or other family on a belief that cultural and traditional principles have not been adhered to and hence has brought shame to the kith and kin of a family. It is evident that several Khap panchayats issued orders towards such honour killings. The petition sought intervention from respective state governments and central governments towards a concrete action plan to combat cases of such killings in the name imagined honour. The Court judgement in this case observed by quoting Joseph J. Ellis, "...we don't live in a world in which there exists a single definition of honour anymore, and it's a fool that hangs on the traditional standards and the hopes that the world will come around him..." It further observed that the very existence of women in patriarchal atmosphere is dependent upon the

male view of the reputation of family or community or clan. Although such killings are not a unique phenomenon for India alone, repeated cases of such killings brought bad repute at international forums. The Court took a serious contingency and suggested concrete preventive as well as punitive measures to be complied by concerned governmental agencies.

6.9 LET US SUM UP

It can be observed that the 73rd and 74th Amendment has lived up to the promise of decentralization and democratization. There have definitely been challenges in its implementation owing to various societal and political reasons. But there is no denying the fact that with these two amendments the democracy is reaching to the grassroots every day. In the Indian context, we do have some unique challenges in terms of its implementations. The two specific challenges may be understood through the prism of the two legal cases mentioned in the boxes of this unit. While the first case study reflects on how democratically elected government too can enact legislation throttling the very spirit of the democracy, the second case embodies the fact that there exists huge gap between the 'social' and the 'legal'. The Khap-Panchayat, we all know have no legal validity but they still enjoy huge social and emotional support. Thus, the affiliations of various kinds like caste religion and ethnicity are few of the major challenges that often act as barriers to decentralization and democratization.

6.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Write an essay on local governance.
- 2) Evaluate the contribution of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in the context of decentralization and democratization.
- 3) Discuss the salient features of the Panchayati Raj system.

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UNIT 7 CHANGEMAKERS AT GRASSROOTS AND PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN IN GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE

Structure

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Learning Outcomes
- 7.3 Role of Changemakers
- 7.4 Setting the Context
- 7.5 Women Changemakers at the Grassroots
- 7.6 Challenges Faced by Women in Grassroots Governance
- 7.7 Let us Sum Up
- 7.8 Unit End Questions
- 7.9 References
- 7.10 Suggested Readings

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Can women who often been considered as homemakers become Changemakers of the nation? This question has been enquired time and again by various experts and stakeholders. Our nation has witnessed women's leadership and collective action at multiple levels of governance. Especially, at the grassroots level, we have been witnessing umpteen number of Changemakers who were able to mobilise community action for various programmes, such as, health and nutrition, education, water, energy, afforestation, menstrual hygiene, etc. In grassroots context, Changemakers are leaders who are able to build the capacities of the grassroots organisation in terms of human resources, tangible and intangible resources. In addition, they build the morale of their members, devise plan of action, and enable community leadership. To illustrate, Sunita Rajawat, an erstwhile Ward Panch (member of the Village Council) from Vanasthali Gram Panchayat in Rajasthan had motivated the village women to take part actively in local politics and share their views spontaneously. In fact, there are many Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) like Sunita who have been promoting and excelling women's leadership at the grassroots governance. In this Unit, we shall be discussing such Changemakers along with the challenges that they have faced in carving a niche for themselves.

7.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- Appreciate the role of women Changemakers in grassroots governance;

- Infer the realities of women in grassroots governance; and
- Identify the challenges faced by women in grassroots governance.

7.3 ROLE OF CHANGE MAKERS

Margaret Mead, the American Cultural Anthropologist had once insisted “*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world*” (Mead,n.d).Indeed, we have come across citizens’ role in rebuilding communities and impacting lives throughout the world. Let us discuss about two women Changemakers in the ensuing paragraphs.

First, Dhapu Devi from Rajasthan did not receive any formal school education but she has been passionate to eradicate malnourishment and anaemia among women and children through production of Amritchuran (a nutritious mixture that is also known as Super 5). With the aim to cater to the healthcare requirements of women and children, she has established a production unit to manufacture Amritchuran. Through a network of women entrepreneurs, she could supply the nutritious mixture to nearly 40 villages of Ajmer district covering 24,000 beneficiaries (CII, 2019). Second, Ritu Pandram, a Sarpanch (2006-2011) from Chhattisgarh tackled various social issues of her village in Bilaspur district vis-à-vis water scarcity, education, sanitation etc. Despite her higher education in Biotechnology, she pursued to develop her village. In fact, during her tenure she had organised social campaigns to improve village sanitation and motivate girls to pursue higher studies. For example, with one of her social campaigns on Open-defecation free village, nearly 600 households were enabled to construct indoor toilets. With a population of about 9,000, Ritu intended to transform her village and village community (Deccan Chronicle, 2016).

It could be inferred from the above examples that Changemakers have the capacity to unite human efforts, time, and power to influence people for a social cause. In fact, Changemakers are people who have a drive to tackle social, economic, and ecological challenges. They are highly effective people who strive to achieve social well-being. Significantly, they can be found in all sectors vis-à-vis public, private, and third sector and are familiar with the local problems. In the process, they try to focus on aligning their passion with social well-being.

Did you know that after several months of hardships posed by the pandemic, the governments and communities across the world look for a dynamic ecosystem driven by vibrant Changemakers to make the world a better place? Indeed, we are evolving to a new age work where every single cog in the wheel needs to be valued. Especially, at the grassroots level, each person needs to evolve into a Changemaker and even a consistent tiny contribution can be impactful in the long-run. From the above examples, you are able to understand the role of Changemakers in co-creating a better world. In the ensuing Section you will understand the context behind women’s participation in grassroots governance.

7.4 SETTING THE CONTEXT

A major breakthrough to ensure women's entry into grassroots governance was the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution. With its mandate to provide one third of representation to women to serve as a prominent voice in local political process, it had not only opened doors for equal opportunities but it had managed to break stereotypical images of women in social space. When we include women in political decision making it means that we are enabling her to share responsibility and development goals at least at the grassroots level. Development goals refers to ensuring freedom, rights, equality, equity, fairness and justice. Owing to the constitutional framework, the ratio of women's participation at grassroots have witnessed a sharp rise. For perspective, the proportion of women's representation at the village panchayat level had gone up to 30-50 percent (Shanker, 2014). Interestingly, this increasing trend of women's political space can be witnessed across the world. In fact, based on data available from 133 countries women's representation ratio at the grassroots level is higher than the parliament (UN Women, 2021).

The UN Women Report (2021) indicates that as on January 2020, there are 1,375,914 EWRs in India which constitutes 44.37 percent of elected seats held by women while men's participation comes around 55.63 percent. Although yet to equal men in terms of representation, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has indeed initiated and promoted an effective strategy for women's political inclusion and provide them opportunities to develop their leadership capabilities. In fact, the presence of women political leaders at the local level encourages women in the community to share their problems and concerns without any inhibitions. To illustrate, Meena Behen, a woman Sarpanch in Gujarat opines that ever since the panchayat has had evolved into an all-woman Panchayat board, women from the community open up to the women panchayat members with much ease (JaagoRe, n.d). Indeed, Meena comes from a patriarchal family where women were not allowed to step out of their residences. However, with grit and self-confidence she rose to head the all-woman Panchayat Board and able to build networks with other women in providing roads, hospitals, and schools to her village. Didn't Meena break the stereotypes that was constructed by the society and serve as a Changemaker of her village?

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) *What did you learn from the examples of Women Changemakers vis-à-vis Dhapu and Ritu*

7.5 WOMEN CHANGEMAKERS AT THE GRASSROOTS

Although many unsung women Changemakers are present across the country, five women Changemakers have been selected to make you understand their meaningful role at the grassroots governance level.

7.5.1 Nauroti Devi

In 2010, Nauroti Devi was elected as a Sarpanch of her village Harmada, Ajmer district, Rajasthan. She belonged to a poor Dalit family and never had the opportunities for formal schooling. During 1980s, her livelihood depended on cutting stones at a road construction site. It was during then she herself realised as the champion of the labourers. Nauroti raised voice against wage discrepancy between men and women and was supported by a non-government organisation to take the case to the Supreme Court. As it turned out to be successful, Nauroti felt the need to learn basics of legal entitlements, ability to read government documents etc. from learned people. It was then she committed to overcome her illiteracy problem and joined Barefoot College, Tilonia for a six-month literacy training programme. Being a quick learner, she was adept in computer training. During the 2000s, she had created awareness about girl education and exhibited her leadership ability to fight against any form of injustices. Soon, she became the champion of local people's rights that some people of her village wished her to make an entry into panchayat elections. As anticipated, she won the panchayat elections in 2010. During her five-year stint she committed herself to construct water bodies, toilets, houses, installation of hand pumps. Above all, she took bold steps against alcohol mafia. Her computer literacy enabled her not just for village administration but also to explore women empowerment issues and concerns, helpline information, health issues, agriculture, rights of daily wagers etc. (Singh, 2016). In fact, she trained the panchayat secretary on how to use computer for routine administration. As a Sarpanch she had to face all odds. For instance, a burial ground which was occupied as a dumping yard for decades was cleared and she succeeded to erect a compound wall around it. Likewise, she succeeded in erecting a fence around the land allocated for a government health centre. She left her office with a surplus amount of Rs. 13 lakhs in the panchayat account (The Hindu, 2016).

7.5.2 Parveen Kaur

At the age of 21, Parveen Kaur became the youngest woman sarpanch of Kakrala Kuchiyan village, Haryana in 2016. During her tenure she was able to install CCTV cameras for security of women, water coolers, solar lights, etc. As soon as she assumed office, she interacted with the villagers to understand their problems and narrowed down on addressing water scarcity. As people walk for miles to fetch water, Parveen managed to install water coolers in several areas of the village. Subsequently, she mobilised resources for erecting Panchayat Ghar so as to interact regularly with the community members. Parveen was assertive about bringing change in the youth perception towards education, hence, established a library within the

Panchayat Ghar (Agrawal, 2020).

With the objective to achieve clean neighbourhood, she could arrange for dustbins and get the sewer lines cleaned. By interacting with the villagers and solving their problems, Parveen wanted to renew community faith on panchayat members. For being a Changemaker, Parveen had been honoured both by the state and central governments. Her tenure ended in January 2021, however, she was able to inspire many women and girls to step out of their residences and contribute meaningfully to the society.

7.5.3 Sumathi Chidambaranathan

Sumathi became the Sarpanch of Adigathur Panchayat in 2006. Her husband Chidambaranathan also served as Sarpanch in 2001-06. During her tenure, Sumathi was able to tackle social and environmental challenges of the Panchayat. In 2017, when the entire state of Tamil Nadu faced water crises, people of this panchayat did not face the brunt, rather they were self-sufficient, thanks to the community mobilisation efforts of Sumathi. To illustrate in her own words, *“Ten years ago, we faced severe drought and water scarcity. Fetching water every day was a struggle. As a result, our villagers were forced to abandon farming and they started going to other states as daily-wage labourers (Think Change India, 2017)”*.

With farming community abandoning agriculture, Sumathi being inconsolable found the sarpanch position as a gamechanger. However, there were numerous challenges in tackling the water crisis. One of the challenges was despite erecting borewells thousands of feet deep, there was no traces of water. Eventually, she managed to dig ponds to conserve water. Her water conservation efforts had been credited to Rajasthan's waterman Rajendra Singh. Indeed, Sumathi accompanied by few farmers travelled to Rajasthan to learn about the best practice. The team was in Rajasthan for 10 days to learn about the techniques of water management. Nevertheless, the next challenge for Sumathi was to implement the model in her village as its landscape was entirely different from Rajasthan. She consulted the community and renewed the traditional methods of water conservation that was in vogue generations before. As a resultant effect, the village community could revive a total of nine ponds and interestingly, there was a gradual rise in the ground water level. The villagers also collectively involved in (i) waste segregation and (ii) plantation drive through which they were able to plant nearly 2000 trees. Adigathur was also honoured with one of the cleanest villages in India during Sumathi's tenure.

7.5.4 Chhavi Rajawat

“If it wasn't for the reservation policy, I don't know if I would be here and whether the development we've achieved would have happened.”

- Chhavi Rajawat (Former Sarpanch) (Rajawat, 2012)

Chhavi Rajawat became the Sarpanch of her village Soda (Rajasthan) in the 2010 panchayat elections. An erstwhile corporate professional,

Chhavi didn't want to disappoint her villagers when they approached her for contesting elections. Having hailed from the same village she felt that it was her responsibility to develop her ancestral village and build a strong interface with the government, multi-national corporations, individuals, non-government organisations etc.

During her tenure as a Sarpanch, Chhavi managed to revive part of a reservoir with the help of the village community. Besides, she succeeded in constructing roads, toilets, installing power and piped water supply. She managed to mobilise young volunteers who were roped in registering the village's most needy people for food subsidies. One of her primary duties was to persuade State Bank of India (SBI) to set up a branch at Soda with an Automated Teller Machine (ATM). As on 2017, the Bank branch had opened nearly 20,000 savings accounts to cater to the financial needs of Soda as well as the adjoining villages (Thomas Reuters Foundation, 2017).

Yet another significant issue of Soda was to contain youth migration to cities in search of jobs. To address this unemployment problem, she managed to organise various career counselling and soft skills training programmes. Additionally, she organised youth clubs for plantation drive and encouraged them to volunteer for cleaning the streets of the village every Sunday. To illustrate, Chhavi in association with a NGO organised an initiative called as Soda's Youth Empowerment Programme (Goswami, 2013). The purpose of the programme was to hold daily sessions about self-discipline, positive attitude, social interactions and cooperation.

With reference to women economic empowerment, she managed to mobilise 70 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with 500 women having trained in tailoring, handicrafts, paper mache products, grinding spices, and candle making etc. Through her networking skills, she could arrange for tables and benches for middle school girls (Goswami, 2013).

To raise funds for community development, Chhavi in collaboration with Levi started a hashtag campaign called #IShapeMyWorld. Through this campaign she invited not just funds but people's time and expertise to develop Soda. Chhavi who relied on youth power had invited student community to intern in the village so as to give them a perspective about problems faced by rural populace. Through such village exposure, she believed to harness their potential in providing creative solutions. For example, she invited people to train her village youth and women about simple skill sets so that they could have a regular income (Elle, n.d).

Among her other achievements, to name a few, Chhavi succeeded in promoting transparency in the village council office, inculcated the habit of saving among women and girls, extended support to the agrarian community to get out of the trap of money-lenders, and motivated parents to send their children to schools. For perspective, Chhavi mobilised resources to provide non-contaminated drinking water to Soda and built toilets in more than 800 houses.

Nevertheless, Chhavi got re-elected as Sarpanch in 2015.

7.5.5 Jabna Chauhan

For Jabna Chauhan age is just a number and has already won people's hearts as a Sarpanch. She had been honoured by the state government of Himachal Pradesh as the Best Pradhan of Mandi district at a young age of 23. In terms of clean village, her Panchayat stood first in the district in 2017. Before becoming a Sarpanch, Jabna worked as a journalist to support her family. As a journalist, Jabna brought the challenges of marginalised community to the limelight and managed to take it to the notice of government authorities. She focused her attention towards gender bias and other social injustices that within a year she became a popular personality of the district. Apparently, when the 2016 panchayat elections happened, Jabna was requested by her villagers to contest in elections. After initial inhibitions, she found that as an opportunity to contribute to her village. To illustrate in her own words, "You need to jump into the sea to clean it, it is impossible to just sit at the shore and wait for the change to happen" (Katoch, 2017). One of the serious issues of Thajun village was alcoholism and majority of men were addicted to it. It was observed that when women used to work for long hours in the farms as well as in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) projects, the men would grab all their hard-earned money to satisfy their addiction.

With a mission to solve the problems faced by women, Jabna spearheaded to mobilise Mahila Mandal groups of the panchayat as well as the local youth volunteers. The volunteers along with Jabna and Mahila Mandals were well connected through WhatsApp group. For perspective, in less than a year of her assuming office, she led a delegation from her panchayat to the District Deputy Commissioner's office and submitted a memorandum to close all liquor vendors in her locality. Following this, she convinced the residents and other panchayat members of her village to ban the sale of alcohol. Finally, on March 1st, 2017, a Gram Sabha resolution was passed to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol and tobacco products in public places. Jabna didn't stop here, rather, she built rapport with the panchayat members of the neighbouring villages and persuaded them to initiate similar campaigns against alcoholism and tobacco. For example, the Panchayats of Cheuni, Lambathatch, Baga Chinogi and Sharan have also passed a resolution to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol and tobacco. Interestingly, the Gram Sabhas also passed a resolution to ban serving liquor in marriages and those who evade this rule would have to pay penalty. Besides developmental activities, her efforts could also be seen visible in solid waste management as well as in elimination of plastic. Jabna envisions to institute a degree college in her village and establish an NGO that focuses on women's economic empowerment.

7.6 CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE

7.6.1 Patriarchy

When it comes to grassroots governance in general, patriarchy can be

considered as the foremost challenge. With exceptions like the Changemakers we have discussed in previous section, you must have come across in news that EWRs runs the panchayat office only as a rubber stamp or proxies to their family members or the elite class of the village. One of the women Mukhiyas in Bihar stated that ever since she assumed office, she attended only a couple of meetings with the Block Development Officer (BDO), District Magistrate and District Development Commissioner etc. and majority of the official meetings would be attended by her husband (Malhotra, 2014). It is said that when women get elected as Mukhiya, her husband gets tagged as ‘Mukhiyaji’ and the official name of the husband of woman Mukhiya is Mukhiya Pati (MP). And it is to the Mukhiya Pati that the villager’s approach with their problems. One of the EWR in Bihar stated that *“My husband does all the work and has all the information”* (Malhotra, 2014).

In another Indian village, the villagers opines that the EWR can neither meet visitors nor hold discussions without accompanied by their housemen. Such patriarchal situations can be found across the Indian villages. A woman sarpanch from Odisha had authorised her husband to discharge her official duties owing to household chores. One of the social workers of a village asserts that since women are mere rubber stamps and all activities have been done by the husbands or sons or fathers, there has been a rise in corruption and bribery. It is unfortunate that despite getting elected in a democratic way, due to inadequate training and education, and powered by patriarchy, EWR continue to get restricted to their household chores (Malhotra, 2014).

Another dimension of this challenge is, Chhavi (Changemaker) had to confront patriarchal attitude of low-ranking officials who never wanted to pay heed to women in high positions. She also had to face her political opponents who often tried to pit residents against her developmental works, such as, plantation drive, computer literacy training centre etc. (Thomas Reuters Foundation, 2017).

7.6.2 Caste System

Another major challenge is the caste system wherein women from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities are not allowed to function rationally and independently. Their leadership are yet to attain open acceptance from the powerful class of the village. Even today in certain villages, SCs and STs have been discriminated in using public places vis-à-vis water bodies, taps, temples, tea stalls, community bath, roads, etc. The inability to acknowledge them in social space also gets reflected in political space. And that too when it comes to SC/ST women grassroots leaders, discrimination is on heights. As a result, women’s inclusion, representation, and participation in grassroots governance still remains a big challenge. The prolonged exclusion of SC/ST from political decision making at grassroots level had been resolved through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act. Although, SC/STs constituencies have been constituted by the Act, in reality, they are yet to achieve social inclusivity. In villages where atrocities are high, EWRs have been assaulted, attacked, thus threatening their

Fundamental Right to Life (Article 21).

Caste Atrocities on Women Changemakers

Krishnaveni, Former Sarpanch

Krishnaveni, a Dalit and a former Sarpanch (Thalaiyuthu Panchayat) fought against caste prejudices, patriarchy, and even a company that eyed on a village land. She actively mobilised resources for removal of encroachments by higher castes and had constructed toilets for village women. Nevertheless, all was not hassle free for Krishnaveni. Krishnaveni stated (Rao, 2017) that she had to bear the casteist slurs used by other castes people. To state in her own words, *“They would call me ‘you Sakkiliar woman’ and never by my name.”* Sakkiliar is a Dalit caste in Tamil Nadu. Since she never compromised on her social ideals, Krishnaveni, was brutally attacked in 2011 by upper castes. However, she was saved by her husband and daughter.

7.6.3 Inadequate Training

The training requirement of EWRs are complex in nature and majority of women lack awareness in the following areas, such as, leadership, communication skills, computer knowledge, gender and law, women empowerment, monitoring development projects, participatory planning, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) etc. As of 2018, nearly 18,578 EWRs across 14 states were provided training by the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD). As the number of EWRs in the country is more than 14 lakh, it has been planned to expand (PIB, 2018). It is to be noted that many EWRs owing to lack of such skills and expertise, stumble while executing their official duties. Even Nauroti Devi was able to shine as a Changemaker only after receiving due training from various agencies.

7.6.4 Other Challenges

When Jabna (Sarpanch from Mandi District) went ahead to ban liquor and tobacco, men who were addicted used to verbally abuse her and also threatened her of consequences. Likewise, while discharging her panchayat duties, Chhavi, faced resistance from bureaucrats at the district and block levels and also from local politicians. Since she was found to be educated and competent, she had to face the brunt of such men. Chhavi lamented that the panchayat is completely at the discretion of these government authorities (Rajawat, 2012).

It is to be noted that many studies have been conducted to devolve 3Fs – Funds, Functions, and Functionaries to the local bodies not just in letter but also in spirit. Apart from these challenges there are other challenges that includes lack of cooperation from the community, lack of adequate staff in the panchayat office, lack of security to women sarpanch, and lack of adequate administrative and financial powers to women sarpanch etc.

7.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, you were able to understand how women as Changemakers in grassroots governance have contributed meaningfully for the welfare of various development activities. You were also able to infer the role of Changemakers in mobilising people's efforts, community resources etc. However, the challenges being faced by women in grassroots governance are due to the existing patriarchal system, caste system, lack of adequate training and skills etc. In order to bridge the gaps, various stakeholders have joined hands to enable the homemakers into Changemakers of the nation.

7.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What were the efforts taken by Jabna in banning the sale and consumption of alcohol in public place?
- 2) Write down any two challenges faced by women in grassroots governance.
- 3) Write an essay on women changemakers in grassroots governance.

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