
UNIT 18 LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT AND WOMEN

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18.0 AIMS AND PURPOSE

After independence the participation of women in polities especially in the elected bodies was very low. It has been stated in various national and international forums that participation in decision-making bodies is very essential for women to improve their status in society. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments facilitated the large-scale participation of women in political institutions at the local and regional levels. These constitutional amendments made it mandatory for 33% members of decision-making bodies in local self-government (LSG) institutions to women. The present unit discusses the quality of the growing presence of women in the local self-government (LSG) bodies. After reading this unit, you will be able to understand:

- The idea of LSG and its growth and development in India;
- The historic 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution;
- The nature of participation of women in LSG in India before and after the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments;
- The constraints to women's participation in LSG institutions; and
- The positive developments in the quality of participation of women in LSGs over the years.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

Since independence India has been following the path of popular democracy and it can boast of being the largest democracy in the world, population wise. There has never been any serious challenge to democratic order because the democratic values are strongly entrenched in the Indian society and culture. India has a vast population and in a conglomeration of diverse cultural traditions, and the lifeline of the unity and prosperity of the country is its democratic tradition that acknowledges diversity as an asset rather than a problem. Free India already has a 58-year old democratic tradition and the challenge before the nation is further consolidation of the democratic tradition. For realizing this objective, systemic and constitutional arrangements have been made to ensure the all-round participation of its people and to promote responsible and active citizenship. Making the average citizen conscious of his democratic rights and responsibilities is the only means to strengthening the democratic foundation of Indian society.

The process of construction of a democratic social order cannot be successful unless the issues of mass poverty, landlessness, unemployment, widespread illiteracy, malnutrition, gender discrimination, superstition feudal and capitalist exploitation and political apathy among the masses are addressed. The political empowerment of the people is possible only by ensuring economic development, spreading education and by making people conscious of their rights and responsibilities. Development of the critical faculty in the average citizens would also sharpen public monitoring of the functioning of the system. In brief, the future of democracy in India will largely depend on the all-round economic, social and cultural development of the common people.

Although Indian women have a tradition of rich contribution to various walks of life and to the freedom struggle, the arena of politics has predominantly been a male domain. In the traditional village *panchayats*, the *caste panchayats*, and in local bodies in village or urban administration, the presence of women was negligible both in terms of number and quality of leadership even after independence and providing constitutional guarantees of political equality. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, however, have opened up great opportunities before the hitherto neglected women to make their in the local self-governments, in the *panchayati raj* institutions in rural areas and in municipal bodies in urban areas.

18.2 WHAT IS LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT (LSG)?

In a democratic order the Local Self-Governments (LSGs) are instituted to decentralize power down to the grassroots. LSG means formally delegating some degree of power relating to administration, development and planning, and legislation and even judicial powers within the territorial limits of a particular LSG institution devolve to it. Briefly put, LSG is a local level government, which is constituted of and run with the active participation of the people of a locality, village or a group of villages in case of *panchayat*, and a ward in case of municipality or Municipal Corporation. According to the Public Administrative Division of the United Nations a local government is defined as “a political subdivision of a nation (or, in federal system, a State) which is constituted by law and has a substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to extract labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected ...” (United Nations 1961: 11). According to Whalen, each LSG body should have these minimum characteristics: “a given territory and population, an institutional structure ... a separate legal entity, a range of powers and functions authorized by delegation from the appropriate central or intermediate legislature and lastly within the ambit of such delegation, autonomy subject always ... to the test of reasonableness” (Whalen 1970: 312).

The prime objective behind the constitution of the LSG bodies in India is to strengthen the foundations of a democratic system by ensuring the participation of the otherwise neglected and backward sections (such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the women) of the society in the running of these bodies. While participating in these local bodies, the citizens of a locality become aware of their rights and responsibilities and learn to articulate their demands and grievances and thus gradually become active, empowered and conscious agents of the democratic social order and bearers of democratic values. By actively participating in the implementation of developmental programmes, the people can effectively overcome the bureaucratic bottlenecks and can maximize the benefits of the programmes. People in the local communities, irrespective of their class, caste or religion learn to work together in the local bodies and develop a sense of fraternity. The citizens elect the representatives of their choice; they can keep vigilance on the performance of the elected representatives, and can put forward their suggestions to tapping local resources for development work.

Both at the national and international levels the importance of the local government has been well appreciated. The Balwantrai Committee of 1956 recommended the setting up of *panchayati raj* by observing that: “Development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community development can be real only when the community understands its problems, realizes its responsibilities, exercises its necessary powers through its chosen representatives and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration. With this objective we recommend an early establishment of statutory elective bodies and devolution to them of the necessary resources, power and authority” (Asoka Mehta Committee Report 1978: 2-3). Based on a study of the performance of the LSGs a World Bank study has observed that “guarded optimism on the utility of decentralization in developing countries is justified”. The report has identified a number of cases of devolution where “small but clear-cut improvements have occurred” (Rondenelli et al. 1984).

Learn Form Your Experience 1

Have you heard about decentralization? What are the community level activities initiated by your local panchayat office? What are the advantages you can point out of having a panchayat level administrative system, especially for women?

18.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF LSG IN INDIA

In an Institutional form India had its first experiment with LSG with the setting up of the Madras Municipal Corporation in 1687. The two presidency towns of Bombay and Calcutta had municipal corporations in 1720. In the rural areas two institutions that took shape during early British rule were the District Board and the Village *Panchayat*. However, these institutions of LSG functioned as extended wings of the bureaucratic administration and the scope for peoples participation was extremely limited. Informally, Indian villages had long-established democratic traditions, as the traditional *panchyats* in Village Republics had been active in settling the disputes among the villagers. The caste *panchayats* were also active upholding the norms and prescriptions of the caste system. In the Famine Commission and Ripon’s Resolution of 1882 there was a clear recommendation for setting up of formal village *panchayats*. The recommendation reads: “... it is most desirable, alike in the interests of decentralization and in order to associate the people with local tasks of administration that an attempt should be made to constitute and develop Village *Panchayats* for the administration of local village affairs”. With the support of leaders of the national freedom movement many provinces gradually introduced village *panchayats* although with limited functions. With the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the national leader, *gram swaraj* became an integral part of the widely accepted Gandhian ideology.

The modern phase of tiered structure of LSGs had its roots in the *Gandhian Constitution for Free India* formulated in 1946. In the Constitution of independent India, *panchayats* found a mention in the Directive Principles of State Policy. Jayaprakash Narayan also strongly spoke in favour of *panchayats* in his ‘organic’ or ‘communitarian’ view of Indian society (Mathur 1991). It was Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, who coined the term *Panchayati raj* as an alternative to the English term ‘democratic decentralization’ and pursued the implementation of the system in the 1950s. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee on *Panchayati Raj* constituted in 1956 submitted its report in 1957. It was the first report in post-independence India to recommend urgent devolution of power to the grassroots. The report proposed introduction of a three-tier *Panchayati raj* consisting of village *panchayats*, *panchayat samiti* and *zilla parisads*. The National Development Council also endorsed the three-tier system of devolution in 1958. Rajasthan was one of the early States to pass legislations introducing *panchayati raj* in 1959. Other states introduced *panchayati raj* in the following years. The *Santhanam Committee Report* of 1963 debated the introduction of party based *panchayat* election and recommended non-political local bodies. The

Asoka Mehta Committee Report of 1978 however recommended party-based election to the local bodies. In the Constitution of independent India *panchayati raj* found mention in the Directive Principles of State Policy. It was Asoka Mehta Committee Report, which for the first time recommended for according constitutional sanction to *Panchayati Raj* (PR), and suggested transfer of substantial quantum of power from the State Government to the local bodies.

In the late 1970s and 1980s the 'Second Generation' of PR institutions, introduced in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka in the late 1970s, brought in the new role of PR as 'political' institutions. The Left Front that formed the government in West Bengal in 1977 gave a new meaning and direction to PR institutions. The Left parties introduced the new generation PR institutions and used them as organs of social reforms and thus penetrated deep into the villages organizationally and politically. The other non-Congress governments like the Hegde -led Janata Party Government in Karnataka and the Rama Rao-led Telugu Desam government in Andhra Pradesh reformed the PR institutions and introduced them with some seriousness. Following the Asoka Mehta Committee recommendations a Draft Constitution Amendment Bill was moved with the objective of making *panchayati raj* 'an organic integral part of our democratic process' (Asoka Mehta Committee Report 1978: 207). The Sarkaria Commission in its report of 1988 also reiterated according constitutional recognition to *panchayati raj* institutions. Former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took up the issue of decentralization of power seriously and mooted a comprehensive 64th Constitution Amendment Bill in 1989. However, the Bill could be made into an Act as it fell through in the Rajya Sabha. A Constitution Amendment Bill was again introduced in 1991 and both the houses of Parliament passed it in 1992. The Act came into force in April 1993 after more than half the state assemblies had ratified it. The areas covered by the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution were left out of the jurisdiction of the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992. However these areas have autonomous councils controlled mostly by the indigenous and tribal people and these councils also represent some kind of local self-governments. Now, holding of regular election to all the local bodies of *panchayat*, municipality, and autonomous council, has been made a constitutional obligation that every Indian State has to meet. These Acts have provided for devolution of power down to the level of *gram sabha*, and *gram samsad* in the villages and ward committees in the towns and cities.

Think It Over 1

What do you understand by local self-government? Do you think it is a new concept in the Indian context? Why?

18.4 WOMEN IN LSG

In the post-independence period all the Committees recommending or reviewing the *panchayati raj* have emphasized the need for participation of women. The Balvantrai Mehta Committee Report of 1957 suggested that the rural women should not become mere beneficiaries of development but should be made equal partners in its affairs as contributors. After studying the condition of rural women it recommended improvement of the economic status of the women as a means to their empowerment. The Women's Status Committee Report of 1974 suggested constitution of separate Women's *Panchayats*. The Asoke Mehta Committee of 1978, after taking stock of the functioning of the PR institutions and the state of rural development, emphasized upon the need to recognize the role of women in the decision-making process and strengthening them further. Besides recommending the granting of a greater role to women in the local self-governments the Committee stressed on the economic self-reliance of the women. The National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988, opposed the policy of 'nomination' of women members and recommended reservation of 30 percent of seats for the women in different tiers of local bodies. The 64th Constitution Amendment Bill of 1989 also proposed reservation of 30 per cent of seats of local bodies for women.

A few states of Indian Union introduced the institution of *panchayati raj* in 1961 and there was little scope for women to participate in local self-government bodies. The representatives of the landed and upper caste families largely controlled the *panchayat* bodies and the common villagers did not have enough scope to participate in local bodies. These *panchayats* were under strong control of the bureaucratic district administration and had very little role to play as agencies of rural development as they were not delegated any significant power. There was no regularity in holding elections to these local bodies. Participation of women as elected members was hardly seen in any of the states. Even in 1970s and early 1980s only nominated women members could be seen working on the *panchayat* bodies. For instance, in Maharashtra in the early 1980s out of 320 women representatives of *panchayat* samitis and *zilla parishads* 314 were nominated.

In Karnataka *Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayats* and *Naya Panchayats Act, 1983*, which came into effect in 1987, a provision for reservation of 25 per cent seats for women was made. This Act also contained a provision for reservation of at least one *Zilla Parishad* seat for Scheduled Caste candidate. In the 1980s some other states also reserved seats for a women in local bodies in the following order: Andhra Pradesh - 9 per cent, Madhya Pradesh - 10 per cent, Kerala - 30 per cent, Assam - 30 per cent, Bihar - 30 per cent, Maharashtra - 30 per cent and Uttar Pradesh - 30 per cent. Study conducted on the women elected representatives in Karnataka by the Institute of Social Sciences between 1987 and 1990 tells us that the Act passed in 1983 generated a lot of enthusiasm among the rural women. The younger women had in overwhelming presence among the elected members, although the women who contested in the 1987 election were often relatives of the political leaders. Most of the women were showing disinterest in politics and unwilling to stand in the elections. The male leaders persuaded their family members and did everything possible to get them elected. The study suggests that although the number of women increased, the real power of local bodies remained in the hands of the male leaders. The women members lagged way behind the male members in terms of education, articulation power and experience. The male members of the families of the women representatives were discharging the actual functions of the local bodies, while the women representatives were kept confined to their domestic chores. The study, however, noticed some encouraging developments in the latter part of their tenure. The women members of the *zilla parishad* gradually started taking interest, gained in articulation and experience and were much less corrupt than their male colleagues on the local bodies.

Do You Know? 1

73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act

Before the 73rd Constitution Act, 1992, the representation of women in the LCG bodies was minimal, both in terms of numbers and effectiveness. There was no uniformity among the states on the arrangement to ensure participation of women in local bodies. The male members more or less exclusively controlled *Panchayats* and there was hardly any scope for empowerment of women, who constituted more than 49 per cent of the total population. In the *panchayat* Acts in some states there were provisions for nomination and also reservation of seats for women. But this system did not make any significant material difference so far as the effective participation of *panchayat* members is concerned. Often unwilling women were nominated and there was no reservation for the post of *panchayat pradhan* or chairperson or to the posts of chairpersons of *Panchayat Samitis* and *Zilla Parishads*. Under the circumstances, the need for all-India uniformity was strongly felt and this was reflected in 64th Constitution Amendment Bill of 1989 and in the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts of 1992.

Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992, *Panchayat* Acts at the state level have reserved not less than one-third of the seats for women in all tiers of gram *panchayat*, *panchayat* samiti, and zilla parishad. The Act says: 'Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every *Panchayat* shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *Panchayat*' [Article 243D (3)]. There is also a provision of reservation of seats for SCs and STs proportionate to their share of population in the *panchayat* area. According to the rule such seats 'may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *panchayat*'. Among the reserved seats for SCs and STs not less than one-third should be reserved for the women belonging to those communities. Reservation has been confined not only to ordinary member seats but also to the offices of chairpersons; one-third of the offices of the chairpersons have been reserved for women and the number reserved for SCs and STs women would not be less than one-third of the total offices reserved for SCs and STs, which is fixed according to their share of population.

18.4.1 Growing Participation of Women in LSGs

In all the LSG elections held after April 1993 reservation of seats for women has become mandatory. As a result, the participation of women has increased dramatically. Since holding regular election to the *panchayat* and municipal bodies has become a constitutional obligation for the states, the women now get a wider opportunity to be politically active and can participate in the local bodies in large numbers. Some of the states have given a higher quota than the mandatory one-third for women. In Karnataka the quota for women is 43.6 per cent and in West Bengal it is 35 per cent. In the 1993 *Panchayat* election, out of the total 21,489 (35.2 per cent) seats reserved for women, 24.3 per cent was reserved for SC and ST. Women could also stand for the unreserved seats thus the proportion of women members can always exceed the quota.

As said earlier, even before 73rd Constitution Amendment some states were encouraging women to take active part in running the local bodies. West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala and Karnataka took early initiatives in this regard. On an experimental basis some states constituted some 'all-women *panchayats*'. Thus, in Andhra Pradesh in the 1970s there was one 'all-women *panchayat*' in Mathupalli in Kurnool district. In the 1981 one more such *panchayat* came up at Gandhinagar in Warangal district of the same state. In Maharashtra there was only one such *panchayat* in the 1970s, but in the 1989 election seven more all-women *panchayats* were added to the list. In West Bengal now we women run a good number of gram *panchayats*. In South Tripura district in Tripura there is one *panchayat* that is run by the elected members belonging to SC and ST communities. In states like Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh too there are reports suggesting encouraging participation of women in local bodies. The southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu report highly encouraging participation of women in the LSG bodies. The enthusiasm is not confined to the women who stand in the local body elections but is spread among the women in general. The voter turnout among the women has gone up in most states in all elections. As Kaushik writes: "Elections in Karnataka, Orissa and West Bengal earlier had witnessed a appreciable number of woman turning out as voters not merely in the reserved constituencies, but even for the general constituencies. In many states, the percentage of women who had got into *panchayati Raj* institutions exceeded the reserved positions" (Kaushik 1999: 243). In sum, the decentralization of power through LSG bodies has opened up a new era in the empowerment of women and this will go a long way to strengthen the foundations of Indian democracy.

18.5 CONSTRAINTS TO EMPOWERMENT

Even after the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, the all-India figures show that the percentage share of elected women members to various bodies LSG is far short of the mandatory quota. For the Gram *Panchayat* seats the share of elected women members is only 19.41 per cent, for the *panchayat Samitis* the share is 13.27 per cent and for the position of *Sarpanches (panchayat pradhans)* the share of elected women is only 0.23 per cent. (Chandra 2005: 108). In most cases, co-opted women members are filling up the shortfall in the mandatory quota. This is a clear indication that there is a big reluctance on the part of rural women to shoulder political and social responsibilities. To put the problem in a different way, society is still not ready to take advantage of the opportunities thrown open by the Indian Constitution. The large number of reluctant women members who are coaxed to take up the positions often fail to perform their responsibilities well.

The question that is hotly debated in academic circles is whether a mere increase in the number of women representatives in the local bodies would ensure qualitative and effective participation and empower the women in real terms. The pessimists argue that in the male dominated society and in the masculinized political field the women will get very little space to operate freely and develop their political selves. There are reports, which suggest that women elected members are not allowed to move freely as there is an overall fear of insecurity; their family members do not free them from their domestic chores; the women are not capable of making their own deliberations and taking independent decisions. When the women step out of their houses to take up a public responsibility the family members of the women face of lot a inconveniences and they have to step in to take care of responsibilities that were being shouldered by the women so far. There is an apprehension in the patriarchic mind that the LSG bodies will plunge into inefficiency and mediocrity and that the female members of the local bodies are actually controlled by their husbands or fathers, or influential party leaders. It is not difficult to discern that the male dominated society would not allow the women local body members a free-run. There have been complaints that the male members, who outnumber the women members in most cases, are not sensitive to the issues of gender discrimination, that they do not treat the women members with due respect, and that they often force their decisions by ignoring the points of view of the women members. There are instances of violence against the elected members in order to dishearten and threaten them. Police inquiring a land deal beat up a Dalit woman member, Jindan Bai, a woman member's hands were broken in Bhind district of Madhya Pradesh, and in another incident the sons of one member were hacked to death (for details see Kaushik 1999: 243). According to a report in the Hindustan Times (1 Nov. 1994) a woman *panchayat* member in Gaighata police station area of West Bengal was assaulted with iron rod. An *upasarpanch*, Ms Basmati Bara of Kutra *Panchayat* in Sundergarh district of Orissa complained to the National Commission for Women of being sexually harassed by the minister-in-charge of *panchayats* in the state. These are deformed expressions of a wounded masculine psyche, as the men fear losing their patriarchal hegemony over the women.

Do You Know? 2

Major Difficulties Faced by the Women Politicians

The lack of time seems to be the most widely shared problem faced by women politicians. Studies conducted in urban local bodies reveal that in Maharashtra, elected women 'continued to perform all those duties that are expected of a full time housewife' (Nanivadekar, 1997, 17). In Punjab they lamented their 'overindulgence in household affairs' (Gill, 1999, 55). In Calcutta, too, all respondents identified the perpetual shortage of time as

a major problem (Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2001, 23). The difficult task of struggling with domestic responsibilities with public obligations is familiar to all working women. But for women politicians the difficulty is even greater, because one feature common to domestic and political work is that both involve total commitment and no fixed timings.

The second major handicap experienced by many elected women is the lack of training. This is, largely also due to the fact that many beneficiaries of reservations are newcomers to politics, a state of affairs aggravated by the substantial proportion of former housewives among them. Unfortunately, Thus, none of the women representatives interviewed in Karnal had received formal training for their new job, while in Delhi 42 per cent of the women councilors had been provided some training by their respective political parties (MARG, 2000, 98–9). Indeed even in Calcutta, all the women interviewed said they had had to learn their new functions hands on, and it was only after the second municipal election under the 74th CAA, in 2000, that the Calcutta Municipal Corporation as well as the political parties organized training sessions for the newly elected councilors.

The third problem commonly faced by female representatives is male prejudice on the part of fellow councilors and of officials, which can take various forms, from not taking their women colleagues seriously to active discrimination in the distribution of important positions. Thus, Nanivadekar has noted the under-representation of female corporators in the more important committees of Maharashtra's municipal corporations, while in the 'Women and Child Development Committee,' which has 75 per cent seats reserved for women, usually all 100 per cent members are women because men find it embarrassing to be a member of this committee' (Nanivadekar, 1997, 36).

The studies conducted by the Department of Sociology, North Bengal University in the villages of northern districts of West Bengal (popularly known as North Bengal) suggest that all such apprehensions and criticisms are not totally without substance. We have found that women members were in most cases pressurized to stand in the elections by their politically active family members or influential party leaders. When a *panchayat* or municipal seat is reserved for woman normally the wife or a family member of the sitting member gets the nomination. Lack of interest in politics prevents the women members from emerging as effective leaders. The restriction on movement of the women members, particularly at odd hours in the evening is a real problem. When the movement is unavoidable a male member of the family accompanies them. We found that the women members were not really lacking in articulation or efficiency but the men-controlled political field and political parties are not prepared to grant them enough free space to develop their political selves. In West Bengal, where *panchayat* bodies are highly politicized, the *panchayat* members or *pradhans*, men or women, are actually controlled by the local parties, which are invariably controlled by men. The party leaders make all the crucial decisions, and *panchayat* or municipal bodies only ratify them. Only on rare occasions are members and chairpersons are chosen from amongst the women who are seasoned political leaders. Because of lack of political training the women members remain dependent on the male members and political hierarchy. Often, after the completion of one term the reluctant women members lose the motivation to run for the second term. Some of the members fail to strike a balance between the pressure of home management and the responsibilities of holding a public office and lose motivation in course of time. Lack of training in interpreting the government rules, circulars and orders and lack of organizational acumen in keeping the members of the opposition faction and parties united and disciplined is another reason that keeps the women members dependent on the male leaders. Taking advantage of the situation the male members continue to control the real power in running the LSG bodies while keeping the women members marginalized.

Think It Over 2

What are the constraints that elected women members of local self government bodies had which restricted their performance?

18.6 POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

However, everything does not end in nothingness. We could notice some positive developments, particularly on the question of empowerment of women. We have already discussed how after the reservation of seats for women in the local bodies the participation of women in all elections has increased across the states. We can notice that a small section of the women members are gradually developing interest in running the LSG institution and in politics and are shaping up as effective, sensitive and creative leaders and administrators. Once they learn the art of running the business of LSG bodies and gain confidence they become a threat to male hegemony in the political field. Even those women who do not pursue their political career end up being more knowledgeable and confident after serving one or two terms as *panchayat* members. They can now articulate their problems; the problems of the community, and can put forward some good suggestions drawing from their own experience.

The National Perspective Plan (1988-2000) suggested the need for adequate training of all women members of the local bodies to enable them to exercise their authority adeptly. Following this, in recent years, the Central Social Welfare Boards, district administrations, NGOs, and Centres for Women Studies (set up in various universities by the University Grants Commission) are organizing seminars, workshops, legal awareness programmes, sensitization camps all over the country. The women's organizations, associated with various political parties, are also mobilizing the women and making them conscious about their democratic rights and responsibilities. We often come across positive reports on the level of awareness and capability of women members who participate in these awareness or sensitization programmes. A report on a sensitization camp organized in Dhumra in Bihar in October 1993 suggests that the women members were intelligent and capable of articulating the systemic constraints, blemishes in the electoral practices, and the atrocities they face in their everyday life. Reports on such camps conducted in Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Haryana suggest that asked to comment on the general problems they encounter, the women members spoke of gender-based social violence like dowry, rape, physical violence, casteism, and so on. The potential women candidates attending a sensitization programme in Bhiwani (Haryana) on 20 November 1994 expressed their anxiety over the use of alcohol in elections and complained that in some areas the male members of the village were deciding who would be the "consensus" candidate in the reserved seats, thus depriving the women of the choice run in elections (for details see, Kaushik 1999: 242-243). Experience shows that the women are growing in confidence and experience while functioning as leaders of the local bodies. Our reading of the women members of the local bodies suggests that while the social constraints on them are enormous they are definitely marching ahead by empowering themselves.

The basic objective behind giving power to women at the local level is to sensitize them on gender issues and to fortify them with the capabilities so that they could work as agents of rural development. It is rather easy to notice that the *panchayats* and municipalities across the country are being given more and more powers and many of the development programmes are planned by and executed through these local bodies and the members, the women members as well, get to play a significant part in these activities. With the greater participation of women in the local bodies we can see that the programmes relating to health, family welfare, education, poverty reduction, employment generation are meeting with greater success. Self-help groups are being formed in large numbers all over the country

and the women members of the local bodies are providing leadership to this movement make the women self-reliant. There are also reports suggesting that the women members are playing a key part in identifying the “out of the school” children and in bringing them back to schools, and to the success of the total literacy campaign and ‘mid-day meal’ programme. The women members are also playing a key role in popularizing the use of contraceptives, mother and child care programmes and in fighting against superstitions.

Think It Over 3

With some suitable example explain the advantages of women being elected to the local self governing bodies to women as such and the society at large.

18.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over the years the local self-government institutions have been made stronger and an effective grassroots agencies of Indian democratic order. They operate in the form of municipalities and municipal corporations in urban areas and three-tier *panchayat* system in rural areas. These local bodies provide opportunities for the common people and particularly for the underprivileged section of society, to get politically empowered them and to participate in the planning and implementation of development programmes. This unit has explained the concept of local bodies, including a brief history of the development of the local self-government system in India.

Before the 1990s, participation of women in local bodies in rural and urban areas was minimal although there were some sporadic efforts on the part of some state governments to make them active in these fundamental units of democracy. There should not be any denying that the reservation of one-third seats in local bodies (through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts) for women is a good step forward for working out an equal male-female partnership in building democratic institutions. The steps are already bearing some fruits. However, there is no room for any magical change overnight. We have to realize that for countering the age-old patriarchal domination and mindset we have to adopt a patient yet determined approach. We have to keep motivating, training and taking positive moves and only then will the women find their rightful and free space to excel. If the women are determined and if they are prepared to face the odds heads on the system would be forced to grant them more and more political and social space.

The issue of empowerment of women through LSG cannot be addressed in isolation from the larger feminist issues, or from the issues of development. The empowerment of women ought to happen simultaneously in the economic, social, cultural and political fields. Even the familial field cannot be left aside. In order to be able to participate in a social movement the women have to free themselves from familial constraints that are imposed in patriarchal terms. Through their active participation in the LSGs and in the development programmes the women will grow in social awareness and political consciousness and would turn out to be active agents of the democratic order and activists of a silent democratic revolution. The Faster this happens the more secure would be the future of Indian democracy.

18.8 CLARIFICATION OF THE TERMS USED

Constitutional Amendment : The constitution of India lays down the basic structure of the government under which the people of India has to be ruled. It consists of 444 Articles and 12 Schedules. Judicial review

is possible by altering or changing the provisions of all parts of the constitution including fundamental rights of the constitution, provided they did not alter the basic features of the constitution. This reviewing is called as constitutional amendment.

- Social Order** : It refers to situations in which individuals are bound to one another by common social and cultural commitments.
- Decentralization** : In the political context decentralization means dispersing or distributing decision-making power to lower levels closer to the people. Decentralization can strengthen the democracy and enhance its ability.

18.9 SOME USEFUL READINGS

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