
UNIT 5 COMPONENTS OF DECENTRALISED DEVELOPMENT – I: EMPOWERMENT

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5.0 LEARNING OUTCOME

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of Empowerment;
- discuss the need for Empowerment;
- explain various initiatives taken for Empowerment;
- analyse the operational framework of empowerment;
- discuss the problems and constraints coming in the way of empowerment; and
- provide suggestions for making empowerment effective and meaningful.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation has become a major element in the administrative organization of governmental services as a result of enormous increase in the variety, number and complexity of functions of the modern state. Decentralisation in terms of ‘sharing the decision-making authority with lower levels in the organisation’ (Meenakshisundaram, S.S; 1994: 10) should be understood in the context of the institutional framework of division of power. It is seen as an alternative system of governance where a people centered approach to resolving local problems is followed to ensure economic and social justice. Accordingly, empowerment, one of the main components of decentralised development, becomes important, where people would be located at the centre of power and become

the basic engine of the development process and not, as hitherto, merely its beneficiaries (Kothari, Rajani, 1994: 48).

In case of India, efforts in this direction has been made since independence. There have been strong voices in favour of empowerment of women and weaker section. A welcome step in this direction was the passing of 73rd & 74th Amendment Acts. These Acts provide one-third reservation to women as also to SCs/STs in proportion to their population and have opened avenues for facilitating social mobilization process at the grassroots level.

5.2 EMPOWERMENT: THE CONCEPT

Empowerment means different things to different people. As such, it becomes important to clarify the term and provide a proper definition. Empowerment stands for the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. According to the country report of Government of India presented at Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing, “Empowerment means working from a portion of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It would promote women’s inherent strength and positive self-image”. (Chauhan, S.S.S. and Bansal, Gaurav; 2002:10). According to Keller and Mbewe, empowerment is “a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choice and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination. (Sugana, B; 2002: 3). Promila Kapur views empowerment as “a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources-material, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision in the home community, society and nation, and to gain power. (Chauhan and Bansal, op.cit).

Empowerment means being free to explore the best way of doing things, not just doing what you are told. It means ‘giving power to’ and ‘creating power within’. It is a process that people undergo, which eventually leads to change. It refers to passing on authority and responsibility. It occurs when someone who did not have power earlier is given power – and this power makes the person who is empowered to experience a sense of ownership and control. (Lakshminarayan, P; 1999: 78). In other words, it refers to giving power to individuals in all spheres of life which are essential for the survival and overall development of the mankind.

Nelly Stromquist defines empowerment as “a process to change the distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society (Sharma, Ashok, 2002: 81)

Similarly, Lucy Lazo describes it as “a process of acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources” (Ibid). Srilatha Balliwala has rightly observed, “the term empowerment has come to be associated with women’s struggle for social justice and equality” (Ibid). According to Kiran Devendra, empowerment of women means equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in developmental activities and in the process of decision-making” (Ibid.).

Empowerment is a process in which women gain control over their own lives by knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society, viz., international, national, local and household. It is nothing but a religious, cultural and legal struggle against oppression, injustice and discrimination. In short, it is the ability to organize and mobilize for change and enable the individual group to direct their own life and reach a stage where they are more likely to succeed in whatever they attempt to do. It is an ongoing process and not an end by itself. (Reddy, G. Narayana, 2002: 515).

In nutshell, empowerment is also defined as the ability to direct and control one's own life. It is a process of enhancing human capabilities to expand choices and opportunities so that each person can lead a life of respect and value. It lends moral legitimacy and the principle of social justice to the objectives of human development. It means that women gain autonomy, are able to set their own agenda and are fully involved in the economic, political and social decision-making process. (Rao, D.P. and Rao, D.B; 6).

5.2.1 Need for Empowerment

The quest for genuine equality has laid greater emphasis on the collective rights of the vast majority of the disadvantaged groups. The disadvantaged groups have been subjected to varied kinds of social, economic and political exploitations, oppressions and harassments. They have been treated less than human.

Women, who constitute roughly 50 per cent of the total population, received only a small share of developmental opportunities. They were often excluded from education, from better jobs, from participation in political systems and from adequate health care. The United Nations Human Development Report (1993) asserts that no country treats its women as well as it treats its men (UNDP; 1993: 135). Despite their vast numerical strength, women occupied a marginalized position in society because of several socio-economic constraints. This inhibited the effective participation of women in political processes and the institutional structure of democracy. According to the Document on Womens' Development (1985) womens' role in political structure had remained unchanged, despite the rapid growth of informal political activity by them (Mishra, Sweta; 1997:16). A broad-based political participation of women was severely limited due to the nexus of traditional factors, such as caste, religion, class feudal attitudes and family status. As a result, women were left on the periphery of political life.

Similarly, a majority of the SCs/STs and OBCs are poor, deprived of basic needs, and socially as well as educationally backward. Many do not have access to sufficient amount of food, health care, housing or clothing. Moreover, caste inequalities have further added to their problems and continue to be among the most important factors affecting their access to education. Even politically, they are lagging behind as the various political parties have been using them as vote banks for their own vested interests.

In this background, it was felt that unless they are empowered and assured representation in elected local institutions, their status in the society cannot be improved. Accordingly, in order to improve their status and to ensure their participation, different steps/measures were initiated by the Government which have made the decentralised system more democratic.

5.2.2 Empowerment: National Attempts

With the dawn of Independence and the adoption of the Republican Constitution, several legal measures were taken by Parliament and the Government of India, which improved

the status of women, SCs/STs and OBCs in India. The Constitution guaranteed them equal rights of participation in the political process through the provision of universal adult franchise (Arts, 325 & 326) along with equal opportunity and rights in education and employment (Arts, 14,15,16(2) and 17). The chapter on Directive Principles of State Policy makes special provisions for improving womens' status. These directives are mentioned in Articles 39(a), 39(d), 39(c) and 42 of the Constitution. All these provisions clearly indicate that women obtained legal sanction for most of their demands. Seats are reserved for SCs/STs and OBCs in government jobs and legislative bodies (Arts 330, 332 and 335). Free-ships and scholarships provisions are there for SC/ST students. Besides, there is a provision of reservation in admissions in State-run/aided educational institutions. Their interests are also to guide the Directive Principles of State Policy (Arts 38 and 46).

Some of the other initiatives in this direction were – setting up of an exclusive Department of Women and Child Development in 1983; setting up of Women Development Corporations in 1986-87, in order to give the necessary thrust to development of women in the States; launching of Support to Training and Employment Programme in 1987; setting up of National Commission for women in 1990, to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women; setting up of *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* in 1993, to meet the credit needs of poor women; launching of *Mahila Samridhi Yojana* in 1993; launching of *Indira Mahila Yojana* in 1995; etc. A National Commission for SCs and STs has been constituted to investigate and monitor all matters relating to the safeguards provided for the SCs and STs. A National Commission for Backward Classes has been constituted.

5.2.3 Empowerment: Grassroots Initiatives

The most significant landmark in this direction was the passing of 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts, 1992. These Acts provided one-third reservation of seats for women in the rural and urban local bodies, i.e., the Panchayati Raj Institutions and municipal bodies. These Acts provides that in every Panchayat/Municipality seats shall be reserved for the SCs and STs in proportion to their population. It further provides that not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat/municipality shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat/municipality [(Arts 243 d(3) and 243 t(3)]. The Acts also provide that not less than one-third of such reserved seats shall be reserved for SC and ST women as the case may be. Besides, seats are also reserved for the office of the Chairpersons in the rural as well as urban bodies. Sp far as reservation for OBC is concerned, it has not yet been mandated by the Act. However, it has been left on the discretion of the States.

5.2.4 Empowerment: Operational Framework

Empowerment is one of the major objectives of the third generation of panchayats in India. It is not simply a statutory provision, to be given from above, it is rather a process to be reactivated with initiatives from below. It looks for a transformation in the pre-existing structural arrangements of society that legitimize the structure of subordination of women and the marginalized groups (Singharoy, Debal K; 2003:203).

Over the last decade, both intensive and extensive experimentation in this direction were undertaken by the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). The functioning of the PRIs and the ULBs during the last decade shows that the

participation of women, SCs/STs and OBCs in these bodies is considered essential not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process but also for realizing the developmental goals for them. Their participation in these bodies can be as voters, as members of political parties, as candidates and as elected members of PRIs and ULBs (Bhargava, B.S. and Vidya, K.C; 1992: 603).

The enactment of the 73rd & 74th Amendment Acts, with a view to involve the disadvantaged groups in decision-making provides psychological empowerment and a sense of political efficacy, to those who had been left powerless, to influence public decision that affect them. This is indeed a welcome, though delayed gesture, for democracy will not be meaningful in a traditional society like India without the full involvement of women and other weaker segments of society. But a constitutional provision is only a necessary and enabling step which should be followed by effective measures for their upliftment (Mathew, George; 1994: 130).

In the sense of its being an enabling and necessary, though not sufficient, condition for empowerment, the Acts are a milestone in the way of women and other weaker sections assuming leadership and decision-making position, as it makes such a role mandatory and universal for the whole of India. The initial reaction to empowerment by way of announcement of reservation for women as well as SCs and STs was one of excitement and happiness on the one hand and of bewilderment and anxiety on the other. Even scholars on women's studies and development workers were of the view that finding 7.95 lakh women to occupy the membership positions for the three-tier PRIs by the time elections have to be held all over India would be a difficult task (Kaushik, Susheela; 1995: 3).

However, the electoral outcome in terms of women's participation has been very encouraging in certain cases. Not merely in the reserved constituencies, but even in the general constituencies, women contested with great confidence. In many cases, the percentage of women who got elected to the PRIs exceeded the reserved quota. The first elections to the PRIs, after the 73rd Amendment Act, suggested that in Karnataka 43 per cent, Madhya Pradesh 38 per cent and West Bengal 35 per cent of elected positions in the PRIs were held by women (Mishra, Sweta; 1995:116). It was probably such an encouraging development in these elections that made persons like Biju Patnaik to ask for fifty per cent reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj system.

In Haryana, for the first time, a large number of women took up posts such as Panchas numbering 17,918; sarpanchas 1,978, members of Panchayat Samiti 806, Chairpersons of Panchayat Samiti 37; members of Zila Parishad 103 and Chairpersons of Zila Parishad 5 (Mahipal; 1995). In Karnataka, where elections to the grassroots tier were held in 1994, women's representation was quite encouraging. Out of a total of 80,627 seats in 5,640 Gram Panchayats 43.77 per cent were held by women (Datta, Prabhat; 1995). In their second term, i.e. 2000 elections, total number of women Adhyakshas and women Upadhyakshas elected in the Zila Panchayats were 18, in Taluk Panchayats 115 and in Gram Panchayats 4,291 were women office bearers (Subha, K. and Bhargava, B.S., 2004: 110). Karnataka has the distinction of having the highest number of women elected at all levels – 37, 689 (46.7%) for Gram Panchayats, 1,343 (40.2%) for Taluk levels and 335 (36.45%) for the Zila Panchayat. Karnataka also had an all-women Panchayat in Mydolalu village in Bhadravati taluk of Shimoga district (Ibid; 111).

When the new government of NDA coalition came to power in Bihar, in February 2006, by an ordinance it made a provision to reserve 50 per cent seats for women and also

OBCs in proportion to their population. Accordingly, in the recently concluded elections in Bihar, 50 per cent reservation was given to women, which though challenged in the court of law yet is a welcome addition in the direction of women and OBC empowerment at the grassroot level.

So far as the participation of women in the ULBs is concerned, we find more or less similar situation. A study on empowerment of women in Punjab (Gill, Rajesh; 1999:45-50) reveals that womens' participation in the three corporations, viz., Ludhiana, Amritsar and Jalandhar, had been quite impressive. This is visible from the fact that in the 1997 elections, 63 women had been elected as Municipal Councillors in these three corporations and most of these elected women (56 per cent) were below 40 years. Another interesting feature of these councillors was that more than half, i.e., 32 per cent of them had education up to matric and only 16 per cent were completely illiterate. Around 36 per cent of the councillors were either graduates or post-graduates. Of these only two were professionally qualified – one was dealing with a business in computers, while another was looking after a farm/poultry.

The elections of 2002 to the urban local bodies of Kerala proves that given an opportunity, women are capable of assuming powerful positions and making meaningful decisions and implementing them too. The percentage of women representation in the municipalities (total wards 1597) was 36.88 and in the corporations (total wards 298) it was 35.07. If we compare these figures with the 1995 elections, we find that there has been an increase in the percentage of women representation. This is visible from the Table 1: (Krishnan, U.V., and Krishnan, Santhi; 2002: 16).

Table 1: Comparison of Women Representation in Urban Local Bodies in the 1995 and 2000 Elections

Name of the urban body	Total Wards (1995)	% age of representation	Total Wards (2000)	% age of representation
1. Municipalities	1568	34.7	1597	36.88
2. Corporations	208	34.7	298	35.07

The same trend, i.e., greater presence of women in the urban local bodies is also witnessed in Trivandrum (Table 2) (Ibid: 17). Here again the increased participation is due to 33 percent reservation of seats for women in the urban local bodies.

Table 2: Comparison of Women Representation in Local Bodies in Trivandrum District in the 1995 and 2000 Elections

Name of the urban local body	No. of wards	% age of women representation (1995)	% age of women representation (2000)
1. Corporations	81	34	35
2. Municipalities	3	66.66	33.33

In another study of Jaipur Municipal Corporation (Sharma, Ashok; op.cit: 87), it was found that for 70 wards there were 333 contestants, out of which 92 were female. Of these, 58 belonged to general category, 7 to SC, 4 to ST and 23 to OBC. The women councillors were of the view that reservation has brought a sea change in the value and attitudes of society. In most of the cases, it was found that the family background helped them to become councillors as some or the other members of their family were associated with politics. This scenario was witnessed even in case of Punjab.

In case of Uttar Pradesh, where elections to all the urban local bodies were held in November 1995, 53 women were elected as chairpersons of these urban bodies and more than two-third chairpersons belonged to middle age. So far as their educational background is concerned, 30 per cent of them were simply literate, seven of them were post-graduates, seven had technical knowledge and most importantly two of them had doctoral degree (Singh, U.B.; 1997: 24).

In a study of Rohtak Municipal Council (Arora, S.C. and Prabhakar, R.K.; 1998: 35-36), it was found that 17 of them belonged to such families where some or the other member had contested the Municipal Council election earlier. Twenty-seven contestants belonged to such families which were having political affiliation to one or the other party.

The above examples clearly show that women have really been empowered by way of reservation. The reservation has thus brought into PRIs and ULBs a large proportion of women elected representatives and has provided space for them in the political process.

Apart from contesting elections and getting elected to PRIs and ULBs, women have played important roles in other fields. For instance, housewives of Shastrinagar village, on the outskirts of Konnagar (Hooghly), constructed a 1 Km. long road to teach the local Panchayat a lesson. They had long been demanding construction of a road to act as an embankment during monsoons, when roads get water-logged. But the local Panchayat was apathetic to this legitimate demand. It was then that the housewives decided to construct the road themselves (Panchayati Raj Update; July 1996:7). Coyly Devi, Sarpanch of Neemuchana village Panchayat in Alwar district of Rajasthan issued notices to her own father-in-law and husband to explain why they should not be proceeded against for encroachment of Panchayat land (Panchayati Raj Update May 1995:4). In Goa, women took a lead in training women to develop plant nursery and to prepare good variety of seeds for commercial purposes, thereby enabling them to make use of their existing knowledge in agriculture. Similarly, Panchayat women in Karnataka paved the way for the economic emancipation of women flourish by arranging to impart floriculture training to them.

In Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh, Srinivasa Kumari, Sarpanch, repaid the loan incurred by her predecessors and mobilized funds for development works in a planned and phased programme. Her focus has been on education, irrigation and other amenities to the villagers (Manikyamba, P., 204: 86-87).

Fatimabee, former Sarpanch of Kalva Village, Kurnool District, was initially hesitant and even terrified to take up the role of Sarpanch. But later on she received the best Sarpanch award of the State Government for her exemplary work in improving the conditions of her village (Panchayati Raj Update; April 1997). The fact of the matter is that initially she was the rubber stamp in the hands of her husband and the de facto Sarpanch was her husband.

In a study of Rajasthan Panchayats and women's participation in them, it was found that elected women and village women have responded to mobilization round for food, water, work, housing, violence, etc. (Sujaya, C.P. and Jain, Devaki; 2004: 70).

Nirmala Buch's findings reveal that the level of participation of women is quite high. In the three states (M.P., Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), for example, the women's attendance in the Panchayat meetings ranged from 55.5 to 74.4 as against the men's attendance range of 68.7 to 95.6 (Buch, Nirmala; 2000).

In case of Pune Municipal Corporation, the Corporator, Ms. Chandrakanta Sonkamble, (IAWS; 2002: 8-9) was doing a very good job. She fought in the corporation for providing basic amenities to the people of her ward, and thus emerged as a popular leader. Besides, she even went to the police chowky to solve fights in the dead of the night.

Speaking at the Seminar on “Ten Tears of Panchayati Raj: Problems and Prospects”, Ms. Patricia Pinto, Councillor, Corporation of the City of Panaji, Goa, (Pinto, Patricia; 2003) highlighted the role played by women councillors in Panaji, Goa. She opined that the one-third reservation has helped Indian women get a rightful place in being able to be a part of governance in their city. There may be a few women who have built in capabilities, an educational background, or knowledge and ‘will’ to handle the task efficiently. According to her, more than 50 per cent of the elected representatives did not see their role beyond “doing people’s jobs” which translates into tackling petty civic problems and help people obtain municipal licences, etc.

In case of Uttar Pradesh (Chandrashekar, B.K., 2000: 235) it was found that the empowerment processes certainly has brought about a marked change in the knowledge, attitude, status, style of life and self-identity of elected women. Empowerment and participation in election, has given them a chance to talk and understand politics and power. The elected women gave priority to issues like:

- i) employment generation for women;
- ii) improving health and drinking water facilities; and
- iii) solving the problem of atrocities against women.

Elected women in some States have taken part in protests and rallies against low wages and for drinking water. Some are reported to have participated in demanding better implementation of Government schemes and have communicated information on Government schemes to the people for whom they were meant. Panchayat women in Kozhikode district of Kerala have made concerted efforts to solve water problems in the hilly regions of the district. In Ernakulam district of Kerala, women representatives of Panchayat strived for the enrolment of children in school and towards putting an end to the incidence of drop-out from schools.

In Arunachal Pradesh, some of the newly elected Panchayat women leaders have even faced imprisonment in the process of persuading the Government to build a twelve-bed hospital for women. They also made sure that women get access to a lady doctor every week. Besides, they have also been actively involved in community services like bund making during floods in their respective districts and villages.

So far as the empowerment of SCs/STs and OBCs is concerned, almost the same picture in regard to their effective participation is reflected from such surveys. Initially, only those SCs and STs were elected from the reserved constituency who had the patronage of the dominant sections of the society and they functioned like the mouth piece of those affluent sections in the formal meetings of the PRIs/ULBs (Mishra, S.N. and Mishra, Sweta; 2002: 30). Later on, their participation improved considerably.

In the state of Karnataka, in most of the cases, the participation of SC/ST was quite effective and they were able to assert their position and powers. This happened especially in those cases, where the elected representatives were educated and experienced. Even

the participation of OBC members has been quite encouraging. Narayana's study shows that in 1995, the dominance of the numerically and economically stronger castes (Longayats and Vokkaligas – more backward classes) in the PRIs was somewhat eroded. Thus, as compared to the 1987 situation, the power base has tilted slightly in favour of the most backward classes (Narayana, K.S; 1997). A similar situation was also noticed in the 2000 elections, where about 27 per cent of seats and about 30 per cent of the chair positions in the PRIs were taken by most backward classes members. SC/ST members together hold about 30 per cent and thus, over 60 per cent of the decision-making positions were with the disadvantaged sections (Narayana, K.S; 2005: 166).

In case of Orissa, initially there were obstructions/hurdles in the participation of SCs/STs due to their socio-economic incapacities as well as illiteracy and ignorance. However, later on there was behavioural changes in their work participation as well as in the process of self-governance of PRIs and ULBs. The OBC participation was meagre initially but the provision of 27 per cent reservation to them at each level of Panchayati Raj system of administration seems to have created a kind of self-confidence that strengthens their moral character as well as the extent of empowerment in the process of self-governance (Chandrashekar, B.K.; 2000:175).

In Bihar, the Panchayat election of 2001 empowered the lower backwards. Not only have they emerged as Chairman of Zila Parishads, but a large number of them had been elected either as Mukhias (3.9 per cent) or as members of the Zila Parishad (3.5 per cent). Their presence in the power structure had at least, become noticeable and indicated new social and political equations at the provincial level (Gupta, Shaibal; 2001; 2742).

The 2001 elections showed the heightened awareness of the SCs. About 1.6 per cent of the total number of Mukhias were from the SCs and they all got elected in direct elections. Most of the SC Mukhias had got elected in the districts that have experienced the worst atrocities, like Gaya, Aurangabad, Kaimrar, Jehanabad, Patna and Rohtas. Some district of north Bihar (Darbhanga, Begusarai, Munger and Supaul), where SC did relatively better, were powerful centers of the share croppers movement led by the communists (Ibid.). This is an encouraging trend especially when the election of 2001 were held without any reservation for SCs/STs and OBCs.

From the above analysis it becomes clear that the women, SCs/STs and OBCs have come a long way since they were empowered in 1993. During this thirteen year long journey, they came across a number of constraints and hurdles, which they tried to overcome through their participation and assuming leadership and decision-making positions. The reservation given to them in PRIs and ULBs has helped them in becoming a part of the governance in their villages and cities and now they are in a position to determine their future as well as of their constituency. But, it must be remembered that a change cannot be brought about overnight and by legislation alone (Mishra, Sweta; 1997: p.21). Whatever they have achieved during the last thirteen years is not sufficient. They have to travel a long distance in order to enjoy the real fruits of empowerment. The recently passed right to information Act will further help them in the direction of empowerment.

5.3 EMPOWERMENT: PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS

Mere legislative enactments do not ensure effectiveness and viability of the empowerment process. What is more important is their operationalization. The functioning of the new

system of PRIs and ULBs reveal the fact that initially there were many complex problems and constraints coming in the way of empowerment of women, SCs/STs and OBCs.

One of the constraints which was witnessed was that initially the women, SCs/STs and OBCs were hesitant to come forward and contest the elections. These classes, after all, had been subjected to exploitation for ages and thus could not break the shackle of illiteracy, poverty and tradition overnight. As a result, at the initial stages the politically powerful made them contest elections for their own political gains (Mishra, Sweta; 2002:40). After getting elected, they worked under the command and guidance of the males, as proxies, signing or stamping on the dotted lines. In the elections, proxy battle for ballot was evident as there was noteworthy reservation for women candidates any many fielded their wives, daughter-in-laws, daughters, nieces, etc., to fulfill their own political ambitions (The Hindustan Times; 1995:3).

Apart from these, the manipulations by local power-brokers made reservations for women, initially, ineffective for the most part. In some of the villages in Haryana, it was observed that women representatives belonged to the family of the male Panchayat leaders. It was also observed in some places a woman leader was so old that she could hardly move around. In most cases, the reservation merely strengthened the grip of the rural/city elite. The funds meant for women's welfare were not used for the right purpose. Because of ignorance on the part of women about the functional procedures and their rights, coupled with improper methods of identifying and nominating women Panchayat/Municipally members, they were not accepted as equals in local bodies by men (Jhamtani; 1995:63).

The electoral outcome also showed a few instances of violence against women. While inquiring about a land deal in Kachranli village near Panipat in Haryana, an incumbent Dalit woman member, Jindan Bai, was beaten up and abused by the police. In Madhya Pradesh, in the Harpura village of Bhind district, both the hands of a woman were broken (Kaushik; 1995:85). Tapati Sarkar, a Forward Bloc member of the Chandpara Gram Panchayat in the Gaighata Thana area in West Bengal, was assaulted with an iron rod (The Hindustan Times; 1994).

Women belonging to the traditionally marginalized groups were at the receiving end because of upper caste atrocities. Instances of such caste and gender-based atrocities can be cited from many states in the country. For example, in Madhya Pradesh, the aftermath of elections to the Panchayats, held in 2001-2002 in four of its districts – Raigarh, Chhatrapur, Raisen and East Nimar, saw blatant abuses of authority. Reports such as a lady sarpanch being paraded naked, another lady sarpanch being gang raped, an up-sarpanch being tortured; and a dalit panchayat member being beaten up, have come into limelight (Mathew, George; 2003: 155-162).

Apart from these, there are some other cases of sexual harassment against them. Bhanwari, the 'Saathin' from Bassi Block in Jaipur district of Rajasthan, was gang-raped for fighting against the evil practice of child marriage (Panchayati Raj Update June 1995:2). Draupadi Bai, a woman Panchayat member of Salheona village, was reportedly stripped naked in front of the Sariya Block Development Officer, Raigarh District (Mathew and Nayak 1996: 1765). In another incident, a woman Sarpanch of Gujarkhedi in Khandwa district was subjected to gang-rape (Panchayati Raj Update November 1995:4). In Orissa, an Up-Sarpanch, Basmati Bara, Kutra Panchayat of Sundergarh district complained of sexual harassment by the Minister for Panchayats (Kaushik 1995: 86).

Another problem coming in the way of empowerment was that women were not permitted to enter the unreserved constituencies. This was revealed by one of the elected women in Andhra Pradesh. She said “the quota system for women has become a policy of reservation for men” (Quoted in Palanithurai, G., 2004: 52). She further said that beyond the one-third reservation, all other spaces are reserved”, i.e. held on for and by men.

Similarly, women leaders have complained about the roster system for reservation. The vice-president of the Zila Panchayat, Tumkur district (Karnataka), whose five-year term was over, said that “Five years ago I was in the kitchen, today I am able to chair a meeting and know how to handle administration and the public. Tomorrow I will be back in the kitchen for the rest of my life” – because the system devised for reservation namely the roster is such that she cannot be renominated to the same constituency (Ibid.).

Another major problem was widespread caste clashes witnessed during elections. For example, these clashes were witnessed in many districts of Tamil Nadu during the elections. There were instances of physical assault of dalit representatives in some cases. This hampered the representation of weaker section in the PRIs and ULBs. The powerful rural groups have not been able to come to terms with the shift in the local power structure towards depressed castes and perceive the new system as a threat to their traditional dominance and influence (Chandrashekar, B.K.; 2000: 216). In case of Bihar, it was noticed that although, the upper backwards have extended their political support base, the upper castes or the traditional elites still retain a substantial part of the social and political power at the grassroots level (Gupta, Shaibal; 2001: 2742). Moreover, representatives of SCs/STs found it difficult to mix up with general category representatives.

One of the hurdles in the way of empowerment is the dominating attitude of the male colleagues. According to Ms. Sonkamble, the Corporator of Pune Municipal Corporation, one of the hurdles she faced in discharging her duty was the attitude of her male colleagues who expected the women to listen to them in all matters. A comparison is always made between the performance of men and women and there also exists, a fear amongst the men that women may become more powerful, or go way ahead of men (IAWS; 2002:8-9).

Yet another constraint is the untrained nature of the representatives. As a result, after getting elected, practically half the term goes by only trying to understand the job and all that goes with it. Hence, they are not able to perform well and justify their position as elected representatives of the people.

Since elections were fought on party line and many candidates sought the support of political parties in order to contest the Panchayat/municipal elections, hence, after coming to power, party policies had to be followed by them. The women representatives complained that those representatives who were affiliated with the political party enjoying a majority in the panchayat/municipality were placed in a better position as compared to the others from parties with a weak strength. Due to the intervention of political parties, the working of the PRIs/ULBs gets politicised and the representatives had little say in the day-to-day functioning of the corporation (Gill, Rajesh; 1995: 54).

Studies conducted in several parts of the country bring forth the traditional caste based attitudes, gender insensitivity of the grassroots workers, illiteracy, lack of training of the marginalized women at the grassroots and the prevailing ideology of patriarchy and gender segregation. These factors have contributed towards the process of marginalisation of

women who belong to the deprived sections of the society (Singharoy, Deba K.; 2003: 206). Thus, it becomes clear that mere change in structure from a composition and representation will not bring the desired change in the empowerment process. What is needed is a proper orientation of the people and their representatives coupled with proper training and awareness programmes.

5.4 EMPOWERMENT: THE ROAD AHEAD

A look at the above problems and constraints, shows that in order to ensure the participation of women, SCs/STs and OBCs in PRIs and ULBs and empowerment to be effective, some effective steps have to be taken. These measures/steps are discussed below.

First and foremost, in order to ensure effective participation and make empowerment meaningful, it is essential that the weaker sections are made aware of their responsibilities as Panchayat and Municipal member. Many women's organizations and even government agencies had been involved in mobilizing women, SC/ST and OBC and raising their awareness as also encouraging them to come forward to stand as candidates when the elections were announced. In Bihar, the State Government itself organized a number of workshops on women's role in the PRIs at the district, block and panchayat levels to create awareness among them. The Indian Association of Women's Studies too launched, a nation-wide campaign to raise the awareness of women voters in the country. As a result of these awareness campaigns, women, SC/ST and OBC started coming up in open and participated in the affairs of the PRIs and ULBs.

Secondly, education is an important variable of empowerment in PRIs and ULBs. Therefore, education on politics, legislation and day-to-day procedures of the broader political and Panchayat/Municipal system is also important. Women, SC/ST and OBC have to be informed of various developmental policies and programmes, as well as those pertaining specifically to them. Basava Rajeshwari, the former Minister of State for Women and Child Development, opined that it would be "unfortunate" if the empowered women, SC/ST and OBC do not know what to do to solve the problems that they encountered in their areas. "Being eager to help is not enough. People in position should also know what kind of help to extend and when. Thus educating them is a necessity" (Chakraborty, 1995).

Thirdly, proper training becomes a must in order to make empowerment effective and really fruitful. Initially, at the national level, "training" for Panchayat representatives were given at the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), Hyderabad, Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), New Delhi and the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy of Administration (LBSAA), Mussoorie. The three nodal institutes prepared training modules for training the PRI representatives, assessing training needs and also determining cost effectiveness. Whatever material was prepared was sent to the State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRD) and Administrative Training Institutes (ATIs) at the State levels.

Even in some states, the process of giving training to the representatives started. Several initiatives were taken up in Karnataka for strengthening the participation of women, SC/ST and OBC representatives in the PRIs/ULBs through training and facilitation programmes, by the State Government as well as by voluntary organizations. One of the most active, enthusiastic and efficient programmes had been conducted in Tumkur district where the district authorities, the National Literacy Mission Volunteers and SEARCH, a Bangalore

based NGO, conducted training programmes for 1,693 women and 1,708 men (Janata; 1995: 13).

In Haryana, the Haryana Social Work Research Centre (an NGO) took up activities for training women for the PRIs. They had three criteria for training them. First, every mohalla should have as representative, a person belonging to the area. Secondly, all classes of people should be represented. Thirdly, all social groups (caste, communities) should be allowed to represent themselves (Centre for Development Studies and Action 1994: 11).

The Punjab, Haryana, Delhi Rural Development Foundation (PHDRDF), sponsored by the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry, undertook a Rs.96 lakh project to train 2,500 elected women panchas in the districts of Gurgaon and Faridabad in Haryana. It aimed at training and mobilizing women panchas by creating awareness regarding the issues relating to women and encouraging them to participate fully in the functioning of the PRIs (Panchayati Raj update June 1996: 7).

These trainings have made the people's representatives more aware towards their duties and improved their competence and capacities. In order to impart communicative skills and professionalism among them, it is felt that more and more special training programmes must be organized by the government for them. The training should be imparted just after the elections.

Fourthly, some minimum level of educational qualification should be mandatory for both men and women aspiring to contest elections to PRIs and ULBs. If they are educated, it is very good, as they are responsible for policy formulation.

Besides, these measures, certain other measures have been suggested by the scholars in their studies. For example, Sudha Pai in her study of U.P., suggests that reservation should be accompanied by female literacy, independent voting rights and change of status in family and society (Quoted by S.S. Malik in Chahar, S.S.; 2005: 187). Similarly, Bidyut Mohanty in her study of Karnataka suggests creating proper socio-economic and political conditions to enable the representatives to participate effectively in PRIs and ULBs (Ibid.).

Attitudinal changes among the male members in the families is required, as it can provide women the chance to take part in political activities. Attitudinal change is also required in the upper castes representatives so that the representatives from SC/ST and OBC categories assimilate with representatives of general categories with confidence (Malik, S.S., 2005: 189).

5.5 CONCLUSION

Empowerment of the marginalized, especially women, calls for sensitive, empathetic and egalitarian governmental and non-governmental initiatives. No doubt, the 73rd and the 74th Amendment Acts have made it possible for the marginalized to become part of the planning and execution process of development in relation to their local needs. It has not only brought empowerment at the grassroots level but also empowerment of women, SC/ST and OBC as a whole. The empowerment of women and weaker sections would lead to good governance and greater transparency in Indian polity. It would also ensure change in the value system of the society, bringing in greater freedom, reducing oppression and inequality through next generation. All this will happen only when women, SC/ST and OBC incumbents equip themselves well in terms of awareness, competence and

manipulative skills and when educated, enlightened, competent and representatives with strong 'political will and urge' voluntarily come forward. (Mishra, Sweta; 2002: 31). Besides, the women representatives should be made financially strong and independent and have share in family in property. Mahila Cooperatives should be set up so as to help them becoming financially independent.

Further, if we really want to see women and weaker sections participating effectively in rural and urban governance, it must be ensured that they are recognized as decision makers and 'women organisations' as well as NGOs come forward to activate them by creating the necessary political urge and interest in them. Finally, regular elections to PRIs and ULBs will prove to be a milestone towards enlightenment and social and political consciousness of women and weaker sections, making empowerment meaningful and fruitful.

The process of empowerment has been underway after the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1993. The experience bring to the force that initially women and weaker sections faced many problems and constraints. But with the initiatives of the government, NGOs, voluntary organizations and women organizations and the situation regular elections has started changing. As a result, the women, SC/ST and OBC were in a position to address the challenges faced by the PRIs and ULBs to meet the desired standards of governance. The crucial aspects that need to be further addressed are: female literacy, change in the attitude of male members as also representatives of upper castes, financial and functional autonomy and above all regular elections. And only when these are addressed to, the process of empowerment will be effective, meaningful and fruitful.

5.6 KEY CONCEPTS

- Municipal Bonds** : The debt instruments of subnational governments in the United States. Because the interest on municipal bonds is exempt from federal taxes (state and local exemptions may vary), such bonds allow jurisdictions to borrow money at lower than commercial market interest rates. The buyers of the bonds find them an attractive investment because their high marginal tax rates make a tax-free investment more advantageous than a taxable one paying even higher interest.
- Representative Government** : A governing system in which a legislature freely chosen by the people exercises substantial power on their behalf.
- Welfare State** : A governing system in which it is a public policy that government will strive to provide a universal minimum floor of economic and social benefits for all of its citizens.

5.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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5.8 ACTIVITIES

- 1) Explain meaning and need for empowerment.
- 2) Discuss the various initiatives taken for empowerment. Do you feel these initiatives will lead to meaningful empowerment?