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## Foreword

**T**hough the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women, it is found that a majority of women do not enjoy their rights. This is especially so in the rural areas, where women are not even aware of their basic rights. The sex ratio, which in 2001 was 933 women for every 1000 men, is proof enough of the growing imbalance that exists in our society.

Perhaps, it is the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts, which took the bold step of acknowledging the role of women in the development of their own communities. In making the landmark provision of one third reservation for women, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act opened the space for women's participation in the political decision making processes and enlarged the possibility of change within the political discourse of the country. For the first time ever, one million women were elected to the local government. For the first time ever, there was a shift towards recognition of public voter of women

The fact remains that women are now legally empowered to participate in the decision making processes of their village. Over the years, there has been a shift from proxy candidature and submissiveness to a situation where there are increasing number of cases where women have started handling the panchayat affairs confidently and efficiently. Numerous examples may be cited from across the country where women have demonstrated their initiatives – in taking the lead in construction of link roads, building schools to closing down of liquor shops. Special mention needs to be made of Ms. Urmila Yadav, a widow Sarpanch of Kosli panchayat, Haryana. This Sarpanch succeeded in getting the encroached panchayat land vacated, negotiating soft loans and building a market complex that generated additional revenue for the panchayat, provision of safe drinking water and minimizing the risks of water borne diseases.

What is critical however, is the need for sensitivity to the exercise of leadership by women particularly at the village level, given its highly challenging nature. For one, this is a major shift from the customs and norms of a typical Indian village society, where women's voice in decision making processes is

discouraged/unheard of. Secondly, there are factors like illiteracy, compliance with social restrictions, and lack of comprehensive understanding of roles and responsibilities which hamper the functioning of women leaders. While the Central Act has provided opportunities, it also needs to be re-emphasised that customs, traditions and norms that subjugated women still persist and women have to function in this framework. The fact remains that increasing numbers of women are standing upto the challenge, carving their own space in the political structure and voicing their opinions.

This booklet captures the experiences (successful as well as negative ones) of women elected members in Panchayati Raj Institutions over the past decade. The data had been collected and compiled in the course of the interventions by PRIA and its partners in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions.

**Rajesh Tandon**  
President  
PRIA

# I

## Showing the Way

*The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act was a significant step towards opening up the space for women's political participation and in acknowledging their role in the development of their village. For the first time, in the history of this country, one million women were elected to various tiers of Panchayats. Women who have been elected to power in the Panchayati Raj Institutions represent various backgrounds – rich and poor, dominant classes and oppressed social classes, educated and illiterate. It was found in a study conducted by PRIA and its partners on 'Women Leadership in Panchayats', in early 1999 that most women elected members were in the age group of 35-55 years. The study revealed that only 20 per cent of the women, as compared to 80 per cent of men, had previous political experience.*

*The story of women elected members however go beyond sheer numerical strength to their struggle and determination to fight traditional power structures and gender barriers in the exercise of their responsibilities. Experiences point towards the beginning of a positive change process. The future challenge continues to be their will to carry forward the aspirations of millions of women they represent and in fructifying the development needs.*

*The following chapter presents some examples of effective women leadership at the grassroots level, which other women can look toward to and derive inspiration from. The case of Rummebai, a tribal elected panchayat member, for example points to the fact that women leaders have increasingly realized the power of their position and feel empowered to demand their basic rights. They may not succeed in each and every case. But the message that comes clear through these examples is the courage and commitment shown by women in standing their ground, doing exemplary work despite the odds, under the watchful eyes of the villagers to whom they are accountable.*

Given the opportunity and required support, women will assume their rightful role as leaders and decision makers, and as one woman member of Madhya Pradesh pointed out "This is only the beginning."

**CASE 1** Suranlekha, a 28 year old graduate, is the Sarpanch of Subana Panchayat, Rohtak district, Haryana. Subana is dominated by the Jats (70%) and Suranlekha also belongs to this community. Besides her, there are 4 other women members in the Panchayat. Of the 4, 3 are illiterate; but of all the men, only 1 is illiterate. Suranlekha used to teach in the village school but the increasing demands of her role as Sarpanch, made her resign from her job. She now devotes most of her time to Panchayat activities.

She was elected for the first time on a reserved seat (for women) and the decision to contest was entirely her own. She stays in a joint family and has two children. Her husband is a school teacher in the village school and her father-in-law retired as a lecturer. He has been a great source of inspiration and information to her. She too has adequate knowledge of the Panchayati Raj Act, including her role and responsibilities. She commands respect in the community and has a good relationship with the people. They see her as an effective leader and express their faith and solidarity in her.

The post of Up-Sarpanch is normally held by a person with political linkages and aspirations of becoming Sarpanch. One landmark decision taken under Suranlekha's leadership has been the removal of this post. This decision was taken in a Panchayat meeting with village elders and conveyed to the BDO and Panchayat Samiti. Under her leadership, earnings from Panchayat land and tax collection have increased manifold, as compared to under the previous Sarpanch. Gram Sabha meetings are held twice a year with the required quorum. Besides, emergency meetings are called whenever important decisions are to be taken by the Panchayat. Gram Panchayat meetings are held fortnightly, with approximately 75% attendance of Panches.

**CASE 2** In 1995, an advertisement appeared in all the leading newspapers of Madhya Pradesh stating "*Laxmi Ujjala, Sihore ki Collector Nahi hain*" with a picture of Laxmi Ujjala, suggesting that even though she is not a Collector, she has equivalent power.

Laxmi Ujjala is the Sarpanch of Lashuria Parihar Panchayat, Sihore district, Madhya Pradesh. She is 45 years old, educated up to Class X and belongs to the general caste category, in a Panchayat dominated by Thakurs and Yadavs. The Panchayat has 20 members, other than the Sarpanch (*Of these 19 are women. A land mark decision taken by the Gram Sabha, prior to the elections of 1994*). As Sarpanch, Laxmi Ujjala stayed in the shadow of her husband, who carried out all the Panchayat functions. (*He is a government employee with the Bhopal Collectorate*). Gradually she began asserting herself and started going to the Block Office to get information on the various schemes available. Her interaction with the community grew and exposure to the outside world increased. Her interest and initiative in doing Panchayat related activities grew. The foregoing advertisement was the catalyst for bringing her out of the shadow of her husband and since, there has been no looking back. She has established her credibility as a leader by getting important government schemes, particularly, programmes for women approved for her village, taking the initiative in building a temple through contributions and leading from the front, while implementing the Total Literacy Campaign in her Panchayat.

Today, she presides over Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat meetings and takes the lead in organizing the women in her Panchayat. She has even been writing letters to the Prime Minister and Chief Minister, drawing their attention to transferring a water tank, which though constructed on her Panchayat land, due to its size, falls under the jurisdiction of the Janpad Panchayat. On one occasion,

she even took some people of the village and met the Chief Minister in this connection. The issue of the water tank requires an Amendment in the Act but she has not given up and is still actively pursuing the matter.

**CASE 3** Kanchan Choudhary, a 25 year old woman, belongs to the general caste. She is the Pradhan of Bhai-Da-Put Panchayat, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh. She chose to contest and was supported by the community and her family. She has attended a 5-day training course on Panchayati Raj and has sound knowledge of the Act, her role and duties. She holds Panchayat meetings regularly and supervises the work of the Panchayat Secretary. She attends Panchayat Samiti meetings and visits the Block office regularly. She also conducted a Gram Sabha meeting where the attendance of women was much higher than the men. Other Panches rate her as an effective and good leader. The community sees her as soft spoken, aware of her role and responsibilities and actively involved in the development of the Panchayat.

**CASE 4** Shanti is the Pradhan of Madhopur Panchayat, Kushinagar district, Uttar Pradesh. She is 36 years old and a graduate schoolteacher. She belongs to an OBC category in a village pre-dominantly inhabited by the Scheduled Castes. Under her leadership, the Panchayat gained control of a piece of Panchayat land that was encroached upon by the village youth club, run by the Nehru Yuvak Kendra. Shanti took the initiative and called a Gram Sabha meeting, where it was decided, that the club should hand over the land to the Panchayat. However, the Nehru Yuvak Kendra took the matter to court. Ultimately the ruling was in favor of the Panchayat. The Sarpanch presides over and conducts Gram Sabha meetings twice a year. Besides, informal Gram Sabha meetings are held every month where people come to discuss various issues of concern requiring decisions or to make clarifications with the Panchayat and to enable effective interaction between the Panchayat members and the community.

**CASE 5** Soni Devi, the Sarpanch of Jakhala Panchayat, Rohtak district, Haryana, is a Dalit and heads an area which houses different castes. She is illiterate, wears a veil (ghunghat) when interacting with men and yet is able to achieve all that a Sarpanch is meant to do. She travels to the Block Office, interacts with government officials, gets roads constructed in her area, arranges for tube wells to be dug, meets with officials to discuss the need for more veterinarians in the area and is very confident about the role she has to play. She had no knowledge about the Panchayati Raj system prior to election and only decided to stand because the seat was reserved.

**CASE 6** The Pradhan of Khaniyar Panchayat (in Himachal Pradesh) has to travel very often to Shimla, the State headquarters, since a public interest litigation was filed against mining done in the Panchayat. This often requires her being away from home for days. She is also negotiating with Government officials as well as power groups within her village. She does not find this difficult and is determined that she will win the case, so that her Panchayat can restart mining and provide employment to the locals.

**CASE 7** Kailoshobai, Chairperson of Nahad Panchayat Samiti, had to fight encroachers from taking over Panchayat land. She received many threats to her life but continued the war unabated and has been successful in reclaiming the land.

**CASE 8** When the Baitu-Bhimji seat in Baitu block, Barmer district (Rajasthan) was declared reserved for a woman, the entire community, persuaded the MLA of Gurha Malani and his family, to allow his wife Bhikhi Devi to contest. The villagers also convinced the other candidates to withdraw so that Bhikhi Devi could win unopposed.

Sarpanch Bhikhi Devi has worked tirelessly. The grants available for development programs, especially for construction works, have been properly utilized. Her effective planning and monitoring have produced such high quality work, that it has set her Panchayat apart and gained recognition by the Zila Parishad. Considering the socio-cultural milieu of western Rajasthan, where women are considered subordinate to men and are rarely included in the decision making processes, her contribution is worthy of appreciation. The National Commission of Women recognized her achievements by presenting her with an award on 8 March, International Women's Day.

**CASE 9** This is the case of Mohini Devi, elected Sarpanch of Sonasar Gram Panchayat, Alsisar block (Rajasthan). Mohini Devi is in her twenties. Her in-laws, aware of her potential and caliber, encouraged her to stand for elections. She has however, had to fight against tradition and customs to fulfill her role as Sarpanch.

The first hurdle she overcame, was discarding the purdah. She found it difficult to talk to her elders in the Panchayat while wearing the ghoonghat. Being bold, she stopped wearing the ghoonghat. This was her first victory and from then on, there was no turning back. Initially, she was under tremendous family pressure, criticizing the way she functioned and blaming her for neglecting her family and in-laws. But she stood firm.

In the 4 years in office, she has done lots of development work. One remarkable change she brought about is the organization of a women's self help group, where they can freely discuss their problems. She organized various competitions where women could participate and gain confidence and determination to face society without hesitation. Most importantly, she has banned the consumption of liquor in the village. For this, she and the other women, sat on a dharna outside the District Collector's office till her demands were met. She gets full support from the District for all the work she does. The village men-folk tried to hamper developmental work, but she stood strong, even going to the extent of physically hitting the men. Today, most of the Block Sarpanches swear by her. She is a great example for those women who have hidden their destiny behind their ghoonghat.

While speaking to her father-in-law she says that despite being under tremendous pressure, she has handled both her work within the family and the Panchayat, efficiently. Her in-laws also encourage her to deal with Panchayat work first, even if she is required at home. Mohini Devi says that she found it very difficult at first to break social taboos and customs. She took a giant leap by discarding the ghoonghat and this gave her morale a tremendous boost.

**CASE 10** Another example of an effective woman Sarpanch is Ramgiri Devi (in Rajasthan). She is an illiterate but in her opinion, illiteracy never created any problems in the functioning of the Gram Panchayat. Initially, she got support and help from the Gram Sevak and another male literate elected representative, in dealing with the paperwork. For the financial aspects, her family members supported her. But in time, she was able to deal with the administrative and financial matters of the Panchayat herself. She visits the Panchayat Samiti to collect information related to her Panchayat and talks to the block officials to get her work done.

**CASE 11** In Khetavas village, Rohtak district, Haryana the scenario was quite different. Two women panches of the village, got the support of the Mahila Mandal and the community to actively participate in a Gram Sabha meeting held in their Panchayat. Initially, these two women sat very quietly with the crowd in their ghunghats, while their husbands occupied their seats with the rest of the male Panchayat members. No one noticed their absence, till the Mahila Mandal raised a hue and cry, pulled these women up and seated them on the seats previously occupied by their husbands. These two women were initially very shy but soon developed some confidence and lifting their ghunghats spoke briefly to the crowd. All the women cheered at this attempt.

**CASE 12** When the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh organized a Mahila Sammelan in Bhopal, chairs were laid out for the Ministers and mats were laid on the floor for elected representatives. When the meeting began, one of the woman representatives stood up and questioned the Chief Minister, *“You keep talking about women and women’s equality, you talk of reservation for women and we are in politics now, the people have selected us. Is there a shortage of chairs in Bhopal?”* The next day chairs were brought in and the Chief Minister thanked the woman representative for having raised the issue. The woman in question was Rummebai Invati, a 37-year-old member of the Kurai block Panchayat, Seoni district, Madhya Pradesh. She was elected in 1994.

Rummebai, a Gaund tribal, lives in Pathrai village. She is married and has three daughters and two sons. Her husband earns a livelihood by working mainly in the fields. When she got married and came to the village, she was the most educated of all the daughters-in-law in the village. She was encouraged to study in her maternal home and very often she got so engrossed in her studies, that she would forget the housework. Once, her mother asked her to get some drinking water and Rummebai ignored her because she was busy reading. Her mother got very angry and beat her. Upset with her mother, Rummebai stopped going to school but before she knew it, she was married off.

Her entry into Panchayat level politics was relatively simple. She had gone to the house of the Sarpanch during a meeting and started reading a note book, that listed the names of the people employed in some local project. The Sarpanch grabbed the copy away from her but decided that he would suggest her name for the post of a panch, during the next elections. Rummebai got elected but did not have a clue as to which post she was elected, her role within the Panchayat or to which party she belonged. She worked as a panch for many years and when elections were declared in 1994, the

seat was reserved for a tribal woman. Everyone nominated her and she was elected unopposed. Initially she was overwhelmed, as she did not know what to do. But she felt that since people trusted and believed in her, she should work for their benefit.

With her election to this post, Rummebai was filled with a sense of dedication and enthusiasm. She would walk into the office to find out the dates of various meetings and on attending, would raise issues concerning other villages as well as women's issues. People started appreciating her work and her confidence grew. As a result, she would often work late in the Block Office reaching home only at night. Since the Block Office was quite far from her home, the official jeep would drop her or the Block Officer would accompany her. Sometimes the jeep would pick her up from home. Initially all was well but slowly the rumors began. The jeep stopped coming and the Sarpanch or the Secretary started taking her for the meetings on a motorcycle. One day, the motorcycle overturned and she broke her leg. She was ill for two months. Slowly she stopped receiving information about the meetings. The situation worsened. Her husband contracted tuberculosis. They had to let out one room to the Patwari to earn money. The Patwari used to help her out occasionally. Then her name got linked with his. When her relatives objected, the villagers cut their crops and damaged their house. The rumors spread to the police station, the Teshil and even to the block. These incidents affected the family badly. Her daughters failed their school exams. She thought she would receive some support from the Block Office but the previous officer got transferred and the new officer was not concerned whether women attended the meetings or not.

On being elected, each block Panchayat was given Rs 1 lakh for doing development work within his/her Panchayat. The announcement had been made but before she could access the funds, she was made to inaugurate a building that had been built some time ago. On hindsight, she realizes that this was done to humiliate and insult her.

She says that her entering politics and staying on, shows a lot of courage. It is not easy being a woman and it does not make a difference that she is an Adivasi. There might be women who are bad. Women differ just as the fingers on each hand differ from one other. She has been in Panchayats for more than three years now. She has been called immoral; she has been insulted and accused. But just because she is an Adivasi woman, it does not mean that she has no shame, is immoral and has no character. She feels embarrassed talking about her life and all that has happened, but she feels that if she shares her experiences, other people will begin to understand the problems women face and maybe change their opinion about women. She asks why, if the community gave her control, power and elected her, did they turn against her? If they wanted her to stay home, they should have said so at the start. Society does great injustice to women by saying they are fallen women just because they work outside the home.

Rosanlal Invati, her husband, supports her by saying he was fortunate to have a wife who was educated till Class 5. Otherwise, who would have looked after and supported him and their children

when he was ill? She has worked hard, is well informed and aware of issues. She attends Block and Gram Sabha meetings and raises various issues. She has taken on responsibilities in a way no one else has. She speaks well and can explain the Panchayati Raj system in the area. Of course, home life did get affected. Sometimes he has to eat on his own. He and the children have learned to cook. The children have also got used to the fact that they have to handle the work on their own, but they like the fact that people call their mother 'member sahib'. It is also difficult when she has to travel. For instance, the last time she went to Bhopal, the goat gave birth and died. They lost Rs 3000. Men have the freedom to go where they want and until women do the same, they will never come up in life. His wife has done that. Other women also should come forward. He would definitely encourage her to stand for the next elections.

The community is divided in their opinion about Rummebai. Some feel that despite being a woman, she has been able to do what perhaps another woman might not have done. Others feel that because she is a woman, she should not wander around so much as this might have implications for other families. The head of the caste Panchayat of the area says, in his opinion, if women were given equal status as men, what would happen to the rest of them? Is it all right for women to become leaders and men stay at home and manage the kitchen? Men would have to form an organization to support them.

**CASE 13 Women's Participation in Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha Meetings:** Nasim Kaur a newly elected Panchayat member of Dhana Panchayat in Haryana, spoke publicly for the first time in a Gram Sabha meeting and raised the issue of several potholes on Panchayat land created by trucks passing on that road daily. In the presence of the BDO and Panchayat Secretary, she insisted that this should be put in a resolution and appropriate action be taken.

**CASE 14 Mobilizing the Support of Mahila Mandals:** Women members have also been able to mobilize the support of the Mahila Mandals active in their areas. The Sarpanch of Azadnagar Panchayat, Haryana was assisted by all the Mahila Mandal members, in the cleaning of the Panchayat lake. Similarly, Mahila Mandal members in Godri Panchayat, Haryana helped the woman Sarpanch (previously, the Mahila Mandal Pradhan), in flood relief work carried out in their Panchayat. Some Mahila Mandals have been vital in supporting women members and have encouraged them to actively participate in the decision making process. Collectively, they are succeeding in taking up pertinent women's issues in their areas.

**CASE 15** Amina Ben is a member of Panchayat Rupal in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. She has been an active Mahila Mandal member for the last 15 years and gained immense confidence and knowledge of Panchayat affairs. She is now the constant guide and support of the male Sarpanch who is a first timer and ignorant of the ways of the Block administration.

**CASE 16** Sushma Mahajan, Pradhan of Dohab Panchayat, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh stood for the elections on the insistence of her husband. The previous Pradhan was her brother-in-law. Sushma, who had never involved herself with any village activity, was now pushed into public life. She

now has to handle the affairs of both her house and the village. She is called out at any time of day or night to solve village disputes. Though her husband does offer advice and guidance, Sushma has grown out of the traditional role of being confined to taking decisions within her household, and has made the quantum leap to addressing developmental needs of the community.

**CASE 17** The tribal woman Sarpanch of Malpunchoti village of Jhabua district, Himachal Pradesh is a widow. People expect her to have little influence as a leader. However she does exercise considerable power and has substantial say in village matters. She gets work done and the community respects her. The reason being, that her son is a Panchayat Secretary and several members of her extended family are in active politics. Her power is drawn from her reference group who are inevitably male. She is also free of household work, which is taken care of by her daughter-in-law

**CASE 18** The Pradhan of Kajlot, Himachal Pradesh, Dhaneshwari Devi, was elected on a woman-reserved seat. She has lived in Chandmari village (also known as Prem Nagar) since her marriage in the 1970's. Her husband owns a confectionery shop in McLeod Gang, just a couple of kilometers from Chandmari.

Dhaneshwari contested the Pradhan's seat at the urging of her husband and friends. She already had the reputation of being a committed social worker and Mahila Mandal member in her village, before she entered politics. Prior to her election, the same man (and later his son) had been Pradhan for over 25 years. Because the seat had been reserved for a woman, the erstwhile Pradhan was unable to run for another term in December 1995. Rather than urging a female relative to contest (he considered it improper for women to do such work), the former Pradhan chose a woman to whom he was not related and supported her fully. However, his candidate lost to Dhaneshwari.

Pradhan Dhaneshwari, is a mother of three, a homemaker and an active member of many local social groups, including the Indo-Tibetan Friendship Society. She is the Pradhan of the village Mahila Mandal and is currently active in the literacy movement. She also used to be a dance instructor. She estimates that she spends about two weeks each month doing Panchayat related work. This includes attending meetings, functions, visiting the Block Office to collect payments for Panchayat projects, settling local disputes and visiting her constituency. Her roles as Pradhan, community social worker and member of the Mahila Mandal often become blurred, but to her, they are all aspects of service to the community.

Dhaneshwari made special efforts to combat petty corruption within her Panchayat. Although she does not like to talk about it, her insistence on the straight-and-narrow has caused some conflict within the Gram Panchayat. For a while, five of the ward Panches refused to sign her resolutions in protest against her strict control over the Panchayat's finances. Dhaneshwari says that she believes that women Pradhans are more successful than the men, not because they do more work, but because they are more responsible and less prone to corruption.

Dhaneshwari Devi has not had much trouble establishing herself. People have accepted her, even though she is a woman. She says that when she was first contesting, some residents of ward 1 told

her that they did not want to vote for a woman, because it seemed unlikely that a woman Pradhan would undertake the urgently needed construction of a costly bridge. Dhaneshwari took this as a challenge and when she became Pradhan, one of her first jobs was to obtain Rs 150,000 to build that bridge in ward 1. Within the Gram Panchayat, Dhaneshwari established herself as the leader of the group. It is well known that the male Up-Pradhan would often stand in as proxy for the female Pradhan. Dhaneshwari refused to let this happen. She issued certificates herself, learnt about building materials and other important aspects of the job which were new to her.

She is an ardent member of the Congress Party, and has been able to forge working relationships with some of the party's higher-ranked members. Her connections with these individuals have been crucial to her ability to procure funds for development work in her Panchayat.

Tabled below are some of the major development jobs she has carried out in the different wards, with the help of other Panchayat members.

Wards 1 & 2	⌘	Classroom for Primary School
	⌘	Footbridge (Rs 1,50,000)
	⌘	Gandhi Kutir Yojna (3 beneficiaries)
	⌘	Ayurvedic Dispensary
	⌘	Road (Rs 20,000)
	⌘	Widow Pension (Rs 15,000)
Ward 3	⌘	Handicapped Pension
	⌘	Transformer
	⌘	Anganwadi
	⌘	Hand Pump
Ward 4	⌘	Bus Route Started from the Village for the First Time
	⌘	Village Road / Pathway Construction (Rs 15,000)
	⌘	Construction of new Primary School
Ward 5	⌘	Foot Bridge (Rs 48,000)
	⌘	Bowri (Rs 20,000)
	⌘	Village Road / Pathway Construction (Rs 10,000)
Ward 6	⌘	Village Road / Pathway Construction (Rs 15,000)
	⌘	Gandhi Kutir Yojna (1 beneficiary)
	⌘	Ration Depot
Ward 7 & 8	⌘	Village Road / Pathway Construction (Rs 10,000)
	⌘	Classroom Construction
	⌘	Repair of Bridge & Support (Rs 25,000)
Ward 7 & 8	⌘	Repair of Old School (Rs 20,000)
	⌘	Primary School Room
Ward 7 & 8	⌘	School Latrine (Rs 10,000 from Indo-Tibetan Society)

₹	Room for Cultural Centre (Rs 75,000)
₹	Sewing Centre
₹	Anganwadi
₹	Ayurvedic Dispensary
₹	Transformer
₹	4 Bridges (Rs 1,00,000/80,000/40,000/ 75,000)
₹	2 Roads / Pathways (Rs 40,000)
₹	Gandhi Kutir Yojna (4 beneficiaries)
₹	Indira Awas Yojna (1 beneficiary)
₹	30 - 40 Latrines
Ward 9	₹ 2 Village Pathways (Rs 17,000)

**CASE 19** Gautama Pathania, Pradhan, Haldi Panchayat in Gujarat, belongs to the general caste and has studied up to middle school. She contested the election on her own will and got elected as Pradhan for the first time on a reserved seat for women. She has no background in politics. She received full support and cooperation from her family members and the villagers during the election campaign.

Before getting elected as Pradhan, she was least concerned about the Mahila Mandals and its activities. She had never attended any of their meetings in the past. She was confined to the four walls of her household before entering politics. After getting elected, she has started playing an active role in the activities of Mahila Mandals and settling disputes. She attends their meetings regularly. She visits different villages of the panchayat once a week, talks to the people and tries to help them solve their problems.

Gautama has sound knowledge on the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, the powers, functions and responsibilities of the panchayat members. A week long training programme on Panchayati Raj Institutions, conducted at the block level by the government has helped her develop her skills as a Pradhan. Though she does not visit the panchayat samiti or block office quite often, her mobility is not restricted by any means. Whenever required, she goes to these offices on her own. The government officials are also cooperative towards her and help her get all the information she requires, listen to her problems, and give necessary guidance whenever needed.

She facilitates the Gram Sabha meetings twice a year and the gram panchayat meetings twice a month. However, the number of men in the meetings is more than the number of women. The information on the date and time of the meeting is given to the members in advance. The main issue that emerged in the previous meeting was related to infrastructure development- installation of hand pump, primary health center, construction of link road. The issue of illegal land encroachment was also discussed and decisions taken. Though the resolutions were made and presented to the BDO, the case is still pending in the block office and no action has been taken so far.

The panchayat members appreciate her good communication skills and her decision making ability. They have high regards for her as she does not discriminate people from different castes and classes and tries to address their problems giving equal importance to each. She takes the responsibilities as a challenge and is open to suggestions given by the villagers. With her efforts, lot of infrastructure development initiatives have been taken in the village like construction of school building, craft centre for women and houses under Indira Awas Yojana etc. They rate her as a good and effective leader. But she believes that she would be able to perform in a more effective manner if more information and understanding regarding the roles and responsibilities of a Pradhan are given to her.

**CASE 20** Lathia, a sleepy village in Fathepur Mandaav block, is typical of one of the backward districts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Purvanchal), Mau. But the women of Lathia are very different from nearby villages. The inhabitants in general and women in particular, are very aware about their rights, responsibilities and duties.

Lathia is inhabited by people of the backward Rajbhar caste. The village lacks basic infrastructure like electricity, roads and potable water. The village is separated from the main road by a narrow drain, which runs parallel to the main road. The villagers have to cross the drain to reach the main road. During the monsoon, the water currents in the drain pose a problem for the residents of Lathia and Kathghara. A number of children were carried away by the fast current. Patients had to be carried on the shoulders to the hospital. Many died midway. Pregnant women also often met the same fate. The villages were in dire need of a link road.

Amar Shaheed Chetana Sansthan, working in the area, strengthening PRIs, organized the villagers into groups. They had also formed a Mahila Mandal Dal in Lathia, so as to sensitize the females and generate awareness among them, through confidence building. The women organized themselves in a group and with some effort, prepared to take up construction of the road. Soil was cut from a nearby highland and was laid down to form the road. Soon the women were half way to Kathghara. Construction had to stop at this point, due to a marriage ceremony in the village.

The dalit from Kathghara, the dalit hamlet that separate the village from the main road, misguided by some local politicians, obstructed the marriage procession coming from Lathia and demanded toll for using the road. This led to a scuffle between the dalit of Kathghara and the Rajbhars of Lathia. The dalit lodged an FIR against the inhabitants of Lathia. The Rajbhars had to get a stay order from the court, to prevent their arrest. But the end result was, that the construction of the road was abruptly stopped.

The women of Lathia regrouped and collected money to meet the litigation expenses. Meanwhile, due to the monsoons, it was not possible to complete the road. They threatened to go on hunger strike, if the administration did not clear up the matter without delay. The local MP promised to look into it, but nothing happened. In a Gram Panchayat level workshop in Lathia, when the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) visited, the members of the Mahila Mandal Dal threatened to go on a fast unto

death, if they were not allowed to build the road. Finally the SDM gave permission to complete the road, leaving a length of about 500 metres which was in Kathghara. He promised that the length would be completed by the administration, once the matter was cleared by the courts. Following this, the women pressurized the Gram Panchayat to call an open meeting of the Gram Sabha. The meeting took place on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2001, and it was decided that immediately after the harvest, construction work would start, leaving the disputed length of road. Another open meeting of the Gram Sabha was scheduled for 25<sup>th</sup> February 2001, to decide details like the direction of the road, its width etc. Construction work was set to resume within a month after harvest. The women of Lathia won in their endeavor and have proved that “where there is a will, there is a way”.

**CASE 21** In 1961, Chailo Devi was born into a *gaddi* family, in the village of Bandla near Palampur, Himachal Pradesh. Since there were very few primary schools in the villages and a girl’s education was not considered important, Chailo Devi did not go to school. Her childhood was spent learning household chores. At 16, she was married to an 18 year old boy of Kand Bagiyara village. With time, she became the mother of four children.

At the time, Chinmaya Tapovan Trust, an NGO in Sidhbari, was working on the issue of rural health. They had set up a health centre in Kand Bagiyara and were looking for a local health worker. Chailo Devi took up this work and received training from CTT. She was hardworking and enthusiastic. The fact that she was illiterate, did not inhibit her at all. She encouraged the illiterates in her village to join adult literacy classes with her and was a major source of inspiration for all. After a time, her awareness levels increased and she started a Mahila Mandal. She was unanimously elected Pradhan and immediately after, she started visiting the Block Office to start development schemes for her village. She started a DW CRA group of 10 women who made shawls.

In 1995, when the post of Pradhan in the Kand Bagiyara Panchayat got reserved for women, Chailo Devi filed her nomination. Though the other contestant was an educated woman, Chailo Devi’s hard work and efforts were rewarded and she was unanimously elected Pradhan.

Chailo Devi has come a long way - from being a shy, illiterate village woman to a dynamic leader. She takes decisions quickly and confidently. Under her leadership, a lot of developmental activities have taken place. A primary school and an adult literacy centre have started. She is a source of inspiration for the illiterates in her area and following her example, many have learnt how to read and write. A large number of water taps have been set up. Road construction has also been a major activity in this remote, mountainous village. She carries out her responsibilities as Pradhan with dedication and sincerity. She regularly visits the Block Office and has got a number of government schemes for her area. She is very articulate, though only in the Kangri dialect. Whenever she gets an opportunity, she attends conferences and seminars organized by NGOs and others, and expresses her views and opinions on issues related to Panchayati Raj in general and women in particular. She is without doubt a very successful Panchayat leader, who has carried out her duties and responsibilities to the best of her ability. She has got due recognition for her work and has been rewarded on a number of occasions.

**CASE 22** Women on the top rung of politics often face discrimination. In Ramilaben's case, the entire opposition and some top bureaucrats rose up against her. She faced five no-confidence motions as the President of the district Panchayat, Ahmedabad (Gujarat).

Despite having a rural background, Ramilaben is highly educated. She is M.A., B.Ed. After her studies, she considered starting a school to provide education based on Indian tradition and culture. She and her husband met Minister Anandiben Patel in this regard. Anandiben was most impressed with Ramilaben's idea, intellect and leadership potential. She advised Ramilaben to join politics so that she could work for the masses from a larger platform. This meeting proved to be a turning point for Ramilaben. (Her initial opinion of politics was a cesspool with no ethics or character.) Now Anandiben became her political mentor and guide.

In 1995, she contested the Panchayat election from Kashindra, Ahmedabad. Despite Party and family support, she was not confident of winning, given the fact that she was new and her opponent came from a very strong political family. But with her leadership and excellent oratory skills, she won with a record margin of 7600 votes. Subsequently, she was unanimously elected President of the district Panchayat, Ahmedabad.

She now had to face the top bureaucratic brass at the Panchayat Bhawan. She recalls that the people there were not willing to accept a female President. The Vice President forced her to accept his instructions by threatening that he could make her resign within 15 days. Her accessibility to the general public and transparency in her work, made her very popular, but her opponents, were very jealous. This resulted in 5 no-confidence motions against her, from which she emerged as the winner each time. Finally the High Court ruled that only 1 no-confidence motion could be brought against the President of a district Panchayat in the five year term. However, this was still not the end of her ordeal. In 1996, a total of 16 writ petitions were filed against her in court causing her suspension, but an appeal to the High Court reinstated her. This mellowed her adversaries

Ramilaben wants to be known for her work not her position. She is always ready to help the needy. Regarding her future she says that she would *"like to help and encourage other Ramilas to join politics."*

**CASE 23** Dev Kumari Thapa, aged 48, is a matriculate and a Gorkha by origin. Her husband is a painter by profession. Until 2 years ago, Dev Kumari was just another village housewife, taking care of her family. Through the reservations provided by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, Dev Kumari became a ward member in the Khaniyara Panchayat, Kangra block, Himachal Pradesh. This Panchayat, with a large Gorkha and SC population, is very close to Dharamsala, the district headquarters of Kangra. Of the 13 wards, 6 have women panches. Of these 6, only Ward 7 was a general ward and it is from here that Dev Kumari Thapa was elected.

Assessing herself, Dev Kumari rates her level of awareness level and participation in panchayat matters to be good. She is articulate, confident, self reliant and independent. She carries out her duties single-handedly with minimal interference from her family. She gets full co-operation from other

officials, irrespective of their gender. She perceives no difference in the way she or any male PRI member is treated. In spite of all this, Dev Kumari does feel that she would, perhaps, have carried out her activities more efficiently had she been male. She acknowledges that being a woman is a handicap. There are certain things a man can do which a woman cannot. For instance, she cannot go out to intervene in a quarrel in the middle of the night. But a man can.

**CASE 24** Suman Kumari is from Nerti village which is 1 km from Rait, in Rait block, Kangra district. She is 38 years old and a mother of three. She has studied up to high school, while her husband is a graduate and a teacher by profession. He is the only earning member of the family. Her uncle is an active member of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The villagers of Nerti persuaded Suman to contest for the seat of a Panchayat Samiti member. She won from a reserved constituency. During and after the elections, she got a lot of support from her family, in the form of helping her to adjust to the new environment, which involved understanding the new Panchayat Act, organising meetings, talking formally with other PRI members, government officials and community members. Whenever she faced any problems in her work, she would discuss it with her husband and mother-in-law. Her work as a member of the Panchayat Samiti is always given priority over her domestic work. She also works with the Nerti Mahila Mandal and helped in the establishment of a Mahila Mandal in Tatwani village.

Suman Kumari faced resistance on many occasions, while carrying out development work. For example, she made the effort to get the plan, for the construction of a road, sanctioned. But the Pradhan took responsibility for constructing the road, which was of very poor quality. As a result, she was held responsible and accused of being corrupt and siphoning off Panchayat money. But no matter what the odds are, she fights tirelessly for the right cause, striving continuously to make her village a better place. She is a source of inspiration for women in her area.

**CASE 25** Sudha Patel, aged 25, is perhaps India's only blind woman Sarpanch. At the age of 21, after defeating 7 other women contestants, she got elected Sarpanch of Changa village, Anand district, Gujarat. Her father (a Sarpanch himself for over a decade) and a close friend, encouraged her to contest the seat reserved for women. A group of villagers objected to government officers stating that a blind person would not be effective. But her supporters insisted that anyone who had right to cast a vote, had the right to ask for a vote. They further argued, that she was the first blind woman postgraduate from the university, which was proof enough of her capability. Sudhaben is proud of the fact that she gave no bribes or spent a single paisa on the election, whereas her opponents spent a couple of lakhs each.

She is in the Panchayat office every morning, accompanied by a friend, who helps her to check documents, applications and files before she signs them. She recognizes each villager's voice and is familiar with all the narrow by-lanes of Changa village. *"I have a sharp memory",* she says *"This helps me recall dates and even the exact timings of events that may have taken place years ago."* Under her supervision, Changa has been transformed from a backward village into a livable place with good roads, adequate drinking water and other amenities.

Her determination and sincerity has caused her to receive international recognition. On November 18, 1997, the Sarpanch was awarded the “Young Person of the World, Junior Chamber International Award”, the youngest person ever to win this award. The same year, the President of the Philippines presented her with the “Outstanding Young Person of the Nation Award” conferred by Junior Chamber International. To add to her achievements, Sudhaben was recently honored with the “Outstanding Woman Panchayat Leader Award”, conferred by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi. The citation recognized her efficiency, noting that under her leadership, Changa Panchayat had initiated a number of development programmes. Incidentally, Patel's first award, the “Neelam Ranga National Award” from the National Association for the Blind came in 1996, less than a year after she'd taken over as the Sarpanch.

**CASE 26** Savitaben Bharat Singh Pasaya, is the Sarpanch of the Pandri Gram Panchayat, Garbara Taluka, Gujarat. She is well-known to Government officials as well as to the public of Dahod district. Savitaben completed her graduation from Dahod College. In 1993, on the insistence of the villagers, she contested and won the Sarpanch election from an open seat. In 1996, after the implementation of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, she was once again elected Sarpanch, but this time from a reserved seat.

Using her education to advantage, she was able to check the Talati's (Panchayat Secretary) attempts at malpractice and misappropriation of money. She made public his attempts to change the beneficiary list for the Indira Awas Yojna; thereby ensuring that only genuine persons benefit from the scheme. She also refused to support a contestant for the Assembly elections. He subsequently alleged that she and her husband had stolen some cattle, 10 kg silver and cash from a villager's house. His application had 135 signatures and was subject to a police inquiry. He threatened to get her husband suspended. He demanded Rs 1 lakh to withdraw his case. Savitaben refused to be cowed down or pay a single paisa. She called a Gram Sabha meeting and invited the District Development Officer (DDO), Taluka Development Officer (TDO) and Mamlatdar. Addressing the meeting, she presented the facts of the case against her. All the villagers were unanimous in their support for her and her husband. With all the facts laid forth, the officials present ordered a police investigation. Later, all the “stolen” articles were found in the house of the villager's relative. *“Since then he never confronts me and the people have realized that I have not committed any offence.”* In her early days in office, she faced a ‘no-confidence motion’ which was later withdrawn. After that, she has not faced any problems from her colleagues. *“I am now happy with my job. Everybody knows my nature, my character and so they never try to offer me any bribes. Government officials are also sure that one day, my Panchayat will be the best Panchayat of the State.”*

**CASE 27** Sarpanch Nalini Devi of Mahloi Panchayat, Pusor block, Raigarh district in Madhya Pradesh, is 40 years old and literate. She was urged by the villagers to file her nomination. She neither discussed this nor took the permission of her husband, who works at the Collectorate in another district.

Despite the fact that Nalini Devi was working for her people, things weren't easy because she was

a woman. At every step she crossed traditional boundaries and broke age-old taboos and norms. Elders were aghast to find a woman getting involved in Panchayat activities. Both encouragement and discouragement came in equal measure. At times she felt that she was neglecting her own household. She took some time to understand the complexities of situations and face them head on. Gradually things changed. Today, she has gained confidence and knowledge and enjoys the support of family and fellow-villagers. Things like 'purdah' are no longer a part of her life. Her many visits to Janpad and Zila Panchayats and her determination to approach Bhopal or even Delhi if the need arises, indicates her interest in public affairs. The villagers feel that their decision to elect her as Sarpanch was correct, as she has initiated a lot of development work, although some villagers do feel that things have been easy for Nalini Devi because of her husband's job in the Collectorate. Undoubtedly, her higher socio-economic position, family and village support, education and exposure to the world outside the village are a privilege few enjoy.

**CASE 28** Gadgaon is an ordinary tribal village in the Tamnar block of Raigarh district in Madhya Pradesh. The inhabitants depend mainly on agriculture and the collection of tendu leaves for their livelihood. The women are very hardworking and run the family. Some voices in the village were raised in protest against the presence of Indal Steel Industries. Lok Shakti, an NGO involved in development activities in Raigarh, formed a Mahila Mandal in the village. This was intended to organize the villagers against the various bribes being offered by the factory. The Mahila Mandal created a "Anna Kosh" and a savings group consisting of 42 women who deposited Rs 10/- per month. Today they have savings of around Rs 5000, which provides grain to the needy on a loan basis. This move by the women, however, has not been without its share of protest and discouragement from the men. Nevertheless, it has demonstrated that Mahila Mandals can be effective in addressing various issues related to women's empowerment, corruption and in creating unity amongst people.

**CASE 29** Rajendra Kanwar a PRI member of Khatoli Gram Panchayat, Kishan Garh Panchayat Samiti, Rajasthan led the women of her area to close liquor shops in the Gram Panchayat. The men-folk strongly resisted but failed to deter them.

**CASE 30** Sarpanch Alka Sapkal from Khanapur, Maharashtra, is married with two children and her husband works in a bank as peon. Her father-in-law is socially active and is a Kirtankar (*Kirtan is a traditional solo presentation of religious and mythological stories through song*). He uses this medium to convey new values and create awareness among the villagers. Alka often consults him on Panchayat related matters.

Alka herself is very independent and active. In the previous Gram Panchayat panel where she was a member, she learned a lot about functioning, through observation and discussions with various people. She was also actively involved in the local women's group. These experiences made her

more aware, informed and capable of planning and handling her duties confidently. Alka is currently pursuing an innovative concept called "Gramsachivalaya", which will provide all services under one roof. She has made a detailed plan for this program, thought of financial planning and ways to raise funds.

**CASE 31** Kamal Thakur is an anganwadi teacher and a member of a male headed Gram Panchayat in Solu, Maharashtra.

Kamal is a single woman, closely associated with the local women's group. Her husband re-married when she came to her maternal home for her delivery. (Kamal's daughter is now married.) Kamal made several attempts at reconciliation with her husband. She even agreed to share their home with his second wife. But all attempts failed. Her father however, supported her and let her stay with him. Kamal completed the Balwadi Teachers Certificate Course and is a very child friendly teacher. Her involvement with the women's group has given her moral support as well as exposure and realization of her potential. She is confident, has left her past behind and is heading into the future.

She contested and won the election. Being vocal about women's issues, she knew that her involvement in Gram Panchayat work was not going to be smooth. She dealt with any opposition very diplomatically. She says that women will suffer from male dominance when they express their capabilities. She only has her brain and her ability to think, both of which she uses to confront men as well as organize women. Kamal is well informed about various schemes and financial procedures and uses this information to make the schemes faultless and beneficial. She has pursued problems like water and sanitation in the village. In the Mahila Mandal, she often discusses the role of the Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha and how to access various schemes for mutual benefit. She has earned the women's confidence and support through these interactions with them.

**CASE 32** Janabai Ugale, the deputy Sarpanch from Ugalewadi, Maharashtra says she entered politics because her family members wanted it. Some villagers opposed her saying they did not want a woman deputy. Gradually, Janabai learned and understood Gram Panchayat functioning. She participated in training programmes which helped her to gain confidence. She also got involved in a women's organization and became aware of the specific needs of women, which has broadened her perspective.

**CASE 33** Sudershan Kaur, Sarpanch of Kot village, Barwala block, Panchkula district, Haryana took the initiative to secure many developmental schemes for her village. She also tapped multiple sources including community contribution to construct a Primary Health Centre, shared by 3-4 villages.

She has been nominated Vice-President in the Network of Sarpanches in Barwala block. She is an active member of this network, represents women's voices and addresses women's causes through the mechanism of the network.

**CASE 34** Women like Dhanpati, Sarpanch of Godri Panchayat, Haryana kindle hope. She was illiterate but with the help of the Total Literacy Mission, the Mahila Mandal and her own initiative, can now read and write. She checks all the Panchayat documents before signing; she is confident, articulate and visits the Block and District offices alone to demand development for her Panchayat. Both the community and Government officials perceive her to be an exemplary leader.

**CASE 35** Kailashobai, the Chairperson of Nahad Panchayat Samiti, in Haryana, was actively involved with the ruling political party, which was instrumental in providing her with a lot of exposure to the outside world. Having done lot of good work in her Panchayat Samiti, Kailashobai had aspirations of standing for an assembly seat through her party. She was confident of winning, since her constituency regarded her highly. At the last minute however, the party refused to give her a ticket. Disappointed but not defeated, Kailashobai stood for the post of Chairperson in the Panchayat Samiti again and won.

**CASE 36** Kukurda is a tribal village in Raigarh district in Maharashtra. For the last few years, the Sarpanch had leased the pond to outside entrepreneurs for pisciculture. It was an open secret that the Sarpanch was a partner in the business. Lok Shakti, a voluntary organization working in the area, mobilized the Mahila Mandal to breed prawns in the pond, as an income generating activity. The Sarpanch was very uncooperative and objected, citing Panchayat finances. The women offered the Panchayat Rs.500/- more than the earlier party was paying. They also insisted that the amount be transferred directly to the Panchayat account from the Mandal account. Leaving the Sarpanch with no choice in the matter, the women went ahead with their plans.

**CASE 37** Traditionally, the Sangarh area of Kota in Rajasthan has had a Gujjar Sarpanch. When this seat was declared reserved for a Dalit woman representative, the village women requested Pushpa Devi to contest, which she did and won. During the campaign, the opposition tried to get her nomination cancelled on the grounds that her name wasn't on the voters' list. However, she proved them wrong by getting a copy of the electoral list.

**CASE 38** Surekha Dhamishte, former Sarpanch of Vadgoan Dhairi in Maharashtra and presently member of the Zila Parishad, is a self made person . She is a widow with three children. She was denied her property rights by her in-laws after the sudden death of her husband, almost ten years ago. Surekha was only 25 years old then. She was supported by her parents, who stay in the same village. Surekha approached the village Sarpanch to plead her case with her in-laws, but he refused. Surekha then approached a women's organization and filed a law suit. She then decided to acquire power so as to help women like herself in distress. She became Sarpanch in the next election. Though she faced a lot of opposition, she took the support of a political party. She implemented a number of schemes and initiated awareness programs for women, gaining her acceptance. She is now working as a member of the Zila Parishad and the Education Committee.

**CASE 39** Sitabai Kale, 55, a member of the Ghodegoan Gram Panchayat, Maharashtra, is associated with a leading political party. She is also active as the Taluka President of the women's wing. She works for a women's organization and helps women in solving family problems by providing legal

support. She faced strong opposition from a rival party and was threatened by local thugs, not to contest the election. But she faced all this courageously. She is mainly interested in social work and empowering women. She views politics as a means and an extension of social work.

(Note: Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents.)

## II

# Violence Against Women

*Reservations per se have provided an opportunity for the legal empowerment of women. But the actual process of empowerment, it is seen, has not been a very easy process. This is mainly because the efforts at empowerment are greatly affected by the prevailing mindsets of people regarding the traditional role of women and the dominant influence of the powerful elites. This has led to stiff resistance/opposition resulting in violence and oppression. It becomes all the more ruthless when the person in question is a woman belonging to the marginalized sections, where she faces twin oppression. In such situations, it becomes highly difficult for women to discharge their required responsibilities.*

*What comes out clear from the below mentioned examples of violence against women is that the change that is envisaged through reservations provided by the Constitutional Amendment is inevitable. However the transition of power from the male and powerful elites is a very slow and at times a painful process, where women and their families are made victims. For instance, on the day of counting during the panchayat elections, the vehicle of Sangeeta Rather of Gohad Panchayat Samity in Madhya Pradesh, was fired upon and she had to flee for her life. She stated that it as difficult even to call a Panchayat Samiti meeting because of the fear of violence and abuse.*

*There have been two reports from the Nimad region of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, again illustrating violence against women. In the first incident, a woman Up-Sarpanch of Piplod Khurd in Khandawa district, allegedly instigated her family members, to drag another woman out of her house, and parade her naked through the village. The second incident is more shocking. The Zila Panchayat President of Khargone, Sildar Patel assisted by the Sarpanch of Dabal Panchayat, allegedly kept a woman teacher in illegal confinement for 7 months and repeatedly raped her. The fact that he used the official car for the abduction shows a wanton misuse of position.*

*In both cases, the Panchayat representatives got active support from their families. Both incidents smack of a complete misuse of power for settling personal scores or for satisfying lust. In the first case, the woman was completely humiliated because her husband had an illicit relationship with the daughter-in-law of one of the Panchayat representatives. In the second case, the teacher's only fault was that she was a woman. Both women were victims of a system that denies women their rightful place in society.*

**CASE I** Shobha Bai is Sarpanch of Chote Patni Panchayat, Basana block, Raipur district, Madhya Pradesh. She is 35 years old and belongs to the Kewat Caste. The first impression one gets of

Shobha Bai is of a demure, indecisive person. But Shobha is a Sarpanch with a difference. She is single-handedly fighting for justice against an assault made on her, by the son of the ex-Sarpanch.

Shobha Bai was elected Sarpanch after defeating the wife of Sarpanch Dharmu. Her problems began almost immediately. The ex-Sarpanch and his gang would disrupt Panchayat meetings. He would continuously look for reasons to influence her supporters against her. It was at this time that the Panchayat, especially the women panches, decided to protest and close down the village liquor shop. This decision infuriated Dharmu because he had a major hand in that business and in the gambling activities of the village. When the women of the village, including members of the Jan Jagriti Sangathan, closed the liquor shop, he threatened them with dire consequences. Shobha Bai did not take him seriously. She thought that he was angry at losing a source of income. On the night of April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1996, Shobha Bai was attacked by Dharmu's son and was badly injured. Bleeding profusely, she took the help of some women and without seeking any treatment, lodged an FIR the next day at the police station at Basana.

Four months passed and no action was taken. Dharmu continued harassing her and disrupting Panchayat activities. She has tried everything to get herself heard. She lives in constant fear for her own safety and the safety of her family. This incident did not deter her however, from doing her work. She only wishes she had more support from the Block and the police. She agrees that this incident would not have occurred, if she were a man.

**CASE 2** In the Karmai Gram Panchayat, in Madhya Pradesh, the Dalit Sarpanch, Janakibai Prajapati and her husband were kidnapped, on the day of the no-confidence motion vote, locked up and beaten by the dominant castes. Despite the absence of the majority of elected representatives, the Government official still held the vote. Janakibai was dislodged and replaced by a Sarpanch who was controlled by the upper castes.

**CASE 3** Even after being elected, women have been subjected to resistance, manifested through violence, against her and her family. The perpetrators are usually the ex-Sarpanch, Up-Sarpanch or political parties (her own as well as the opposition). The atrocities inflicted on these women often force them to submit or step down, as in the cases of Fatima Suhra, President of Puthigae Panchayat, Kasaragod district, Kerala and Lissy John, member of Chunkathara Panchayat.

Fatima Suhra, a school teacher, was motivated and encouraged by her party to contest elections, but threatened by the same party when she refused to take bribes, allocate tubewells only to those wards dominated by her party or issue cheques for work not undertaken. Political *gundas* threatened her husband too with his life. Although she was determined to fight and held on till the last moment, she eventually gave in to the persuasion of her family members.

Lissy John, an independent candidate who was actively involved in Mahila Mandal activities, was similarly threatened, defamed through posters depicting her as a prostitute and finally forced to step down when political *gundas* burnt down her house.

**CASE 4** The woman Sarpanch of Rattewali, Haryana has been struggling to reclaim Panchayat land

from encroachers. Several court cases have consumed her time but she is determined to claim the land which rightfully belongs to the Panchayat and generate additional resources for the Panchayat. She is also generating income for the community by paving roads. She has faced several physical assaults and filed a PIL against the culprits under the SC/ST Atrocity Act. The hearing is still awaited.

**CASE 5** Similarly, Chandrawati, an SC woman Pradhan of Barhal Panchayat, Jalaun district, Uttar Pradesh, was initially supported by the ex-Pradhan (belonging to a higher caste), but who threatened to kill or defame her when she started taking the initiative to carry out developmental work in the Panchayat. Chandra Devi laments that she is a villager and has to live in the village. Her husband was not strong enough to take a stand against the Thakurs. Therefore she had to obey the ex-Pradhan, since he supported her in the election.

**CASE 6** Men from Kallapanahalli tried to stop Nagarithinam from contesting the elections by influencing her husband. They argued that if she got elected she would disrespect her husband. Convinced, her husband first tried to dissuade her from contesting but when she insisted, he drank heavily and beat her up.

**CASE 7** When Ramkali Devi, a Scheduled Tribe candidate was elected Pradhan, of the Janwa Gram Panchayat, Shankargarh block, Allahabad district, Uttar Pradesh in 1995. The former Pradhan, a Brahmin, refused to hand over charge. Ramkali's husband, Ram Jatan went unsuccessfully, from one officer to the next, trying to get the matter sorted out. Finally when nothing seemed to materialize, Ramkali went on a fast unto death. The former Pradhan tore up the banner and ensured that the administration did not delay in prosecuting her. Meanwhile the Chief Development Officer assured Ramkali that he would see that she got charge and persuaded her to give up the fast. Some time later, Ramkali and her supporters blocked the Allahabad-Banda road, and the blockade was lifted only on the assurance of the Allahabad District Magistrate. Both husband and wife were arrested and put behind bars. In the meantime, one Gram Panchayat member, Jagjivan Singh was designated Up-Pradhan and given charge. When the couple came out of jail, they tried again to get charge, but in vain. Finally they went to High Court. After much thought, on November 21, 1997 they again blocked the Allahabad-Banda road. An hour later, the station officer tried to end the blockade and beat Ram Jatan when he refused. Ram Jatan insisted that the blockade would only be lifted when the District Magistrate arrived. In the scuffle, Ram Jatan was killed and his brother injured. Following this, the police lodged an FIR against the Pradhan but did not take any action against the culprits.

**CASE 8** Mishri Devi, a tribal of Thikri village, Dausa district, Rajasthan was elected Sarpanch from a seat reserved for an ST woman. This idea was unacceptable to the upper caste males because she was an untouchable. On August 15, 1998 she was not allowed to hoist the National flag during Independence Day celebrations. She was humiliated and even the sweets she brought were thrown in a drain.

**CASE 9** Fatima Suhra, the President of Puthigae Gram Panchayat in Kasaragod district, Kerala, was perfectly happy as a lower primary school teacher. She had no ambitions of becoming a Panchayat member. She was respected for her role in the literacy campaign and was at the forefront of school activities. She was also an active member of the local teachers association and the Mujahith, a Muslim organization. Her husband, Abdul Salam, a teacher in the Angadimugar High School was a prominent political party sympathizer. All these reasons made her a suitable candidate and her party virtually forced her to contest the election, on a party ticket.

She won with a large margin and was then elected President. Though she had no experience whatsoever of Panchayat activities, the party assured her of their support. Troubles began almost immediately. She was offered a bribe for making an adjustment in the development schemes. But she did not yield, instead complained to the state secretary of the party, stating that the party was trying to force her to be corrupt. She also requested that the state secretary should advise the local leaders to follow the straight path. Her complaint was ignored.

A party sub committee was formed to assist in the administration of the Panchayat. Her views were ignored from the beginning, with the excuse that she knew nothing about party affairs. The party took the stand that the primary role of the Panchayat President was to protect the party's interests rather than the people's welfare. They felt that she was against the party's interests, but she insisted that her view for safeguarding the interests of the Panchayat, be respected. She was invited for a sub-committee meeting, where they insisted that she implement their decisions.

Following the drought, a decision had to be made regarding the tube wells to be dug in the Panchayat. The party decided that tube wells should be dug only in the five wards dominated by the party. She objected and sanctioned tube wells to all the wards. The party leadership did not approve and there was serious conflict, which was then sorted out. Later Fatima insisted that she would not approve of undeserving programmes nor would she issue cheques for work not done. But the secretary insisted that she comply with party decisions. Following this, they put pressure on her to resign and said the discussions could be continued after her resignation. She refused. They then began to threaten both her and her husband. A gang of men accosted her husband threatening to kill him if his wife did not resign.

The day before the siege organized by the party, the Police Circle Inspector warned Fatima not to attend the Panchayat meeting the following day. She stood firm and did attend. She had the present opposition party as well as a large crowd of supporters with her. The police stood by for action. Fatima was told by the local party leaders that conflict was avoided only because of the self-control of the party workers, also that the party would resist and defeat those sections trying to create conflict in the Panchayat by taking advantage of internal problems.

Shortly after the publication of this report in a prominent journal, on September 23, 1997 the papers reported the forced resignation of Fatima Suhra. She held out till the last minute, but finally yielded to the persuasion of her father Mr P.Moideenkutty Haji and her in-laws.



# Challenges

*Being elected to office is of course a major step taken by women to enter the political arena. But this is only the first step. The real test of women's empowerment begins when they start exercising their rights and responsibilities – participating actively in the decision making processes of their village, developing their confidence and establishing their qualitative presence in the power structure. A study conducted by PRIA and its partners on 'Women leadership in Panchayat' highlighted some of the factors which adversely affected the active participation of women: illiteracy and low education levels, compliance with social restrictions, lack of comprehensive understanding of their roles, caste system, patriarchy, political affiliations and indifferent attitude of government officials etc.*

*A great hurdle faced by women elected members is the legal provision of no confidence motion, which was often misused by the influential sections and upper caste to thwart the enthusiasm of the women elected members and the marginalized groups. Spread of malicious rumours by vested interests is yet another constant fear that women face. In the case of SC/ST members the prejudices of government officials are discernible. Used to interaction based on a well-defined caste hierarchy, these officials found it hard to re-orient themselves in dealing with women and SC/ST elected members.*

*The following chapter highlights some of these challenges that women face in their day-to-day political functioning. Women who have stood up to these challenges are those who have attempted to gain an understanding of their own oppression and utilized their offices to break away from the oppression that they along with other women in the community faced.*

**CASE 1** Draupadi was overjoyed when she was first elected Panchayat Samiti member in Thuamul Rampur block, Kalahandi district in Orissa. The rotating reservation system introduced after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, catapulted this matriculate tribal lady into prominence. Draupadi was happy at the thought that there was light at the end of the tunnel. However the tunnel turned out to be endless. She complained bitterly about the reservation policy of the Government. While tribals are predominant in the entire block, the post of Samiti Chairperson is reserved for an SC woman, who would naturally turn a deaf ear to the problems of tribal people; be it a demand for information or delegation of responsibility. There is complete non co-operation from the Samiti Chairperson. This is precisely because she is well aware that Samiti members are of no use once the election is over. A Chairperson's impeachment is

a remote possibility, as Panchayat Samiti members cannot agree and political casteism rules. As a Samiti member, Draupadi cannot do much at the Panchayat Samiti nor has she any say in Panchayat affairs. Take the example of education in the Panchayat. Draupadi formed a co-ordination committee to encourage the value of education. She tried to persuade those teachers, who were irregular, to attend. Repeated requests to both the teachers as well as the Block, were of no use. Worse, the teachers have started threatening her. She says if the teachers had been local, this would never have happened.

**CASE 2** Leela Devi is the Sarpanch of Badraula Panchayat, Bahadurgarh block, Faridabad district, Haryana. She is 50 years old, illiterate and has no previous political experience. She told us that she had not attended any training program after being elected, and has no knowledge of the Act, other than what her husband tells her. She is not aware of any Gram Sabha meetings in her Panchayat, but has attended Gram Panchayat meetings a few times. These meetings are however, conducted by her husband, who takes all necessary decisions.

**CASE 3** Nachtar Kaur is an upper caste woman Sarpanch of Mastpur Panchayat, Ambala district, Haryana. She is 35 years old, illiterate and was a Panchayat member for 3 years prior to the implementation of the new Act. Her knowledge of the act is good. She makes rounds in her Panchayat, settling small disputes. However, Sheela Devi, the Scheduled Caste elected representative of the Panchayat maintains, that Nachtar Kaur never calls her for any meetings to discuss Panchayat matters. All development work is directed towards the affluent families and nothing is done for the lower castes. Ironically, the Panchayat Samiti Chairperson of that block is also a women. Yet neither Nachtar Kaur nor Sheela Devi have had any interaction with her.

**CASE 4** Balukhedi Panchayat is in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh. In terms of population, this is the largest Panchayat in the district. Due to its proximity to Sagar, numerous colonies and housing estates have come up in the village. Balukhedi Panchayat consists of 21 members including the Sarpanch – 12 men and 9 women. The Panchayat owns a block of shops on the other side of the main highway and earns revenue for itself through the auction of these shops. In addition, it raises money by charging toll tax for usage of the road. Various government schemes have also been implemented for the village.

With the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, when the post of Sarpanch was reserved for a Scheduled Caste woman, Durga Bai, encouraged by her husband and family, stood for and was elected Sarpanch. Her in-laws are very active at local level governance – block member, mayor of Sagar municipality etc. She however, was totally unfamiliar with the working of a Panchayat. She is quiet and unassuming. She has studied up to class 5 and is the mother of six daughters and three sons.

A few months after the election, a controversy arose in the Panchayat, which completely divided its members. The issues were auction of the shops, collection of toll tax and usage of the Jawahar Rozgar Yojna money. Apparently, in 15 days, vouchers worth Rs 95,000 were filed. Members of the Panchayat accused the Sarpanch of misappropriation of funds. Additionally, members of the Gram

Sabha felt that the Sarpanch did not present the expenditure statement to the village nor were decisions regarding work and finances taken with the consent of the villagers. Durgabai was further accused of preventing the no-confidence motion against her from being presented in the Gram Sabha, due to technical reasons. Most of the people felt that she was refusing to address the charges and that their grievances were not being addressed at the Block or Zila levels because of her contacts.

Durgabai feels victimized because she is a woman. She says that she has been accused because she did not give the other members a percentage of the money received by the Panchayat. Members frequently asked her to get them money for development work in the village, like the construction of roads and electrification. They also asked for Balukheri village Panchayat to be declared a “nagar” or town Panchayat since the total population exceeded 20,000.

The local people, who earn their livelihood through labor or running small businesses, feel that the Panchayat is full of prosperous people. They do not feel connected to the Panchayat at all. The people who have moved into the flats and colonies that have recently sprung up, are not concerned at all with the functioning or non-functioning of the Panchayat. They feel that they earn more than the Panchayat can give and so do not look to the Panchayat for any support. Though she is a panchayat representative, Durga Bai is having to work as an elected urban representative and the expectations of the community are more than what she could offer initially. The community assumed that Durga Bai, with her laid back nature, would not take her responsibilities seriously because a Sarpanch's job requires a lot of interaction with people. She has however, been forced to be active and take decisions that could affect some groups negatively. The community feels that she is not quite the person that they knew and elected. On the other hand, Durga Bai feels that she has learnt a lot after her election.

**CASE 5** 13 km from the Gohad Tehsil headquarters in Bhind district, Madhya Pradesh lies the Chamhedi village Panchayat and headquarters. This Panchayat has 13 ward members, all women. The Jatav community is predominant. Land ownership is in a few hands and since there are few alternatives for livelihood, most people depend on agriculture to earn a living.

In 1994, the post of Sarpanch of Chamhedi Panchayat became reserved for a Scheduled Tribe woman and the community elected Ramshribai. She is an illiterate, 65 year old widow. She depends on her son to help her with her work. When her husband was alive, she was limited to looking after the house and working in the fields, while her husband interacted socially. After his death, she had to take on a more active role within the village, but she never ever thought that she would become the Sarpanch.

In the first year, work within the Panchayat ran smoothly. The Sarpanch and her son maintained Panchayat accounts as well as developed working relationships with Block Officials. Slowly her self confidence increased. However differences began to come up among the ward representatives. Two neighborhoods fought regarding the placement of a new road. The Panchayat Secretary embellished the accounts and the Sarpanch faced problems at the time of audit. The Panchayat transferred the Secretary.

Two years after the election, the State Government declared that the ownership of mines of minor minerals, would pass on to the concerned Panchayats. The villagers were very happy, since Chamhedi possessed a mine of stone chips, as well as held a contract for bones and leather. The Panchayat as well as the unemployed youth felt that the village would now benefit financially. Until now the mines and contract were given on lease to contractors by the "Khanij" Department. The Panchayat called a meeting to discuss details of this law and to decide what would be the criteria for selection of contractors, so as to maximize Panchayat income and provide employment for the village. According to the Sarpanch, details of the meeting were leaked to the contractor who held both contracts. He stormed into the meeting and when the Sarpanch protested, she was physically manhandled and abused by the contractor and his supporters. The matter was reported to the local police station but not registered. The contractor threatened the Sarpanch repeatedly. The police took no action. Finally, the new officer in-charge registered her complaint. No progress was made and the Sarpanch realized that she would only get justice if the case was moved out of Bhind. Therefore, she went to Bhopal and met the Chief Minister. He passed a directive to the Collector to see that appropriate action was taken. Yet nothing happened. The Sarpanch felt cheated because no one was taking her complaint seriously. She felt that nothing was going to change. She approached the newspapers and got the case published. The villagers also decided to go on a fast to call attention to the troubles that their Panchayat was facing. The day of the fast, the contractor and his supporters surrounded the Sarpanch's house, shot bullets in the air and threatened everyone. As a result the fast did not happen, since everyone in the village was frightened of the contractor and his display of muscle power. She went back to Bhopal to follow up and in the meanwhile, the contractor was able to pass his application in the Panchayat.

Bhagwan Singh, the Sarpanch's son, was very upset with the whole incident. He felt that he worked with his mother so that she would have some support and no one would take advantage of the fact that she was illiterate. With reservation, his mother was elected. The moment they started working, powerful people in the village started protesting. Their muscle power and show of guns threatened supporters. Witnesses were pressurized into withdrawing support, by putting them under the purview of the Dalit Act. They were tired of fighting and were worried for their lives. No help was forthcoming.

The wards members in Chamhedi Panchayat do not know what to do or whom to support. They feel that inspite of the Panchayati Raj, nothing has really changed. It is still the government officials who have maximum control. The government might have transferred mine ownership to the Panchayats, but the officials would still like the contractor to retain control.

The elected women representatives feel cheated. Although they are called for meetings, they are not allowed to speak. All the male members of the Panchayat take the decisions and the women are asked to sign on the papers. If the women question, they are taken to task by their husbands at home. A lot of them do not understand why they have been made members if no one is willing to listen to them.

A very disheartened Ramshri Bai feels that there is no value to the post she holds. Allegations about it being her son who takes the decisions are roughly brushed aside by her. She states that her son assists her. He does what she tells him to. She needs someone to read the papers before she signs them, so she doesn't understand why people talk.

**CASE 6.** Kumni Devi, a landless SC Sarpanch is totally helpless. Her husband, a migrant laborer, often stays out of the village. She is dependent on the OBCs in the village, who though fewer in number, are dominant. She puts her thumbprint on whatever is put before her. Meetings are held in the OBC bastis, often late in the night, ensuring a majority for upper caste decisions. Some of the other elected representatives too, are economically dependent on the OBCs. Landlessness and patron-client relationships determine the functioning of the Panchayat. Despite all these odds, Kumni Devi does speak-up, if not in Gram Panchayat meetings, then in Block or District headquarter meetings and her sound observations impress officials.

**CASE 7** According to Sarla Devi, Pradhan of Prithivipur Gram Panchayat, Vikas Nagar block, Dehradun district, Utranchal, the male Pradhans of the nearby Panchayats, were managing development funds from the Block Office for their respective Panchayats. However, she was unable to do so because she would not compromise with the corruption that was expected of her. Despite her training, she found herself helpless in this situation. Coupled with this, was a conspiracy by a male Up-Pradhan to dislodge her.

**CASE 8** Shyamala Bai, Sarpanch of Dhanora Panchayat, Chindwara district, Madhya Pradesh explains, that because she refused to comply with the demands of the ex-Sarpanch, a no-confidence motion was passed against her. She is subjected to immense pressure because she will not be a puppet. She adds that because she is a woman, she is expected to be weak and stupid. This is a problem common to all women Sarpanches.

**CASE 9** Surindar Kaur, Sarpanch of Amipur village, Ambala district, Haryana and the Sarpanch of Jeer Panchayat, Sidhi district, Madhya Pradesh share a common problem. The government officials they deal with, have no respect for the women and often ridicule them.

**CASE 10** Several women Chairpersons in Panchayats have still not been officially handed over the charge by the previous Chairperson as witnessed in Banda district, Uttar Pradesh. There are also instances of women not being aware of their election as Panchayat leaders, as this was done without either informing them or seeking their approval.

**CASE 11** In Himachal Pradesh, the Secretary of Bhadrol Panchayat, in connivance with some community members, tried to prevent a woman candidate from winning, because of his personal bias against her and his unwillingness to work under a young woman (the Chairperson, Suman Sunita was 24 years old). On not succeeding, he was very non co-operative, refused to attend meetings, show her any records or cash books or support her in any Panchayat related work.

**CASE 12** Kripa Devi, the Sarpanch of Bhesravali village, Haryana is a middle aged woman belonging to the OBC category. She comes from an influential and affluent family. The village is dominated by

Gujjars and Pundits, with a few scattered SC households. The Sarpanch is illiterate and hesitates to handle her responsibilities. Her son handles all Panchayat related activities. Other panches say that Gram Panchayat meetings are conducted either by her son or the Up-Sarpanch and the Gram Sachiv. Gram Sabha meetings have never been conducted in this Panchayat, though records state otherwise. Though the Sarpanch interacts with the community, she has never interacted with the SC community of her village. She has no knowledge of financial matters of the Panchayat and very little knowledge of the government schemes available to the Panchayat.

**CASE 13** Lakshmi Devi, Sarpanch of Pakasma Panchayat, Rohtak district, Haryana, belongs to the dominant Jat community (90%). She is illiterate and indifferent to her status, taking no interest in Panchayat activities. She was persuaded by her family to contest the elections, since it was a reserved seat. Her husband contested on a Panch seat and won. He is now the Up-Sarpanch and in effect, the Sarpanch. All Gram Panchayat meetings and Gram Sabha meetings are conducted by him. He goes to the Block Office for information on government schemes and carries out all other Panchayat related activities.

**CASE 14** Kunthi Devi is the Pradhan of Dhangarh Panchayat, Sidhi district, Madhya Pradesh. Dhangarh is a small tribal village, where the traditional Panchayat is more powerful than the new Panchayat. The new Panchayat is only used for getting government schemes and for the selection of beneficiaries. In traditional tribal Panchayats, women are not allowed to become members. Nobody in the village knows of Kunthi Devi. Everybody refers to her husband as the Sarpanch. All Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings are conducted by him. Only when money has to be withdrawn from the bank does Kunthi Devi go to the bank to sign. She and her husband are both illiterate and totally unaware of the financial matters of the Panchayat. Finances are handled by the Secretary, who is a male Government employee, appointed to assist the Sarpanch in Panchayat work ; and the Panchayat Karmi, an educated person from village, nominated by the Panchayat and approved by the Janpad, to assist in the administrative work of the Panchayat.

**CASE 15** Mishri Devi is the Sarpanch of Azad Nagar, a small village in Rohtak district of Haryana, totally inhabited by the SC community. Her colleagues at the Mahila Mandal say that she is an active member and works very hard. However they also say that she seldom goes for rounds in the community and does not have any power or control over Panchayat matters. These are handled entirely by her husband.

**CASE 16** Neela filed her nomination for Kallapanahalli Panchayat, Kariamangalam block, Karnataka, with the strong backing of the women's Sangham. Some of the men in the village decided to use her son, to force her to withdraw her papers. Neela's son, an uneducated, unemployed youth, was offered a job in the local milk co-operative on the condition that his mother would withdraw her papers at the last moment, without the Sangham's knowledge. Succumbing to pressures from her husband, who was enticed by the prospect of their son getting a job, Neela withdrew. By the time the Sangham members realized the situation, it was too late to take any corrective measures. It is another story that

Neela's son did not get the job.

**CASE 17** Madhubala, Sarpanch of Lahat Panchayat, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh, is a young woman in her early thirties. She is newly married and has no prior political experience. She is very interested in learning about her role as a leader and has attended all the trainings organized by the local organization. But as she is the daughter-in-law of the Panchayat, social customs do not permit her to attend any meetings nor interact with people in other wards. This is the big obstacle in her functioning.

**CASE 18** Neelam Rani, from Huroli village, Ratia block, Fatehabad district, Haryana, is a graduate, successfully running a Village Information Centre. In her case, deep caste politics were played coming out in the form of opposing an educated woman. Neelam contested for the post of Sarpanch in her village but was forced to withdraw due to community pressure. She believes that her being educated was the problem as people could not accept an educated, independent woman Sarpanch. The community feared that a woman would not listen to peoples' grievances. Being in a position to take independent decisions, they felt that they would be unable to influence her or approach her through her husband. So they mounted pressure on her to withdraw and allowed an illiterate woman to replace her.

**CASE 19** The Sarpanch of Mau Gram Panchayat (Rajasthan) is a 27 year old married woman. Educated up to high school, she is very dynamic and energetic. A first timer in office, she claimed to belong to the party in power. She very effectively handled Panchayat work and implemented many development programmes. The people accepted her leadership. When the opposition came to power in the state, the situation changed drastically. She faces real difficulties in getting funds released. Drunkards constantly intrude and hamper Gram Panchayat meetings.

**CASE 20** Women representatives face a huge obstacle in the form of a gender insensitive bureaucracy, which finds it easier to align itself with the rural elite male. This is best illustrated in the case of a woman Pradhan, Sarla Devi of Prithvipur Gram Panchayat, Vikas Nagar block, Dehradun district (Uttar Pradesh). She lives with her in-laws, while her husband lives and works in a prominent residential school in the city. According to the workers of the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK) she was an educated leader, who would not compromise with the corruption that was expected of her. She would not wine and dine officials at home or bribe them for the release of funds or do anything that would compromise her name or her family's. But they felt, if she did not follow the example her neighboring male Pradhans were setting, was she not in effect depriving her Panchayat of benefits? RLEK's post-election training program equipped her to take all the right decisions and she did. However she was helpless and struggling to come to terms with this situation, when she was confronted with yet another problem. The male Up-Pradhan of her Panchayat conspired with the former Pradhan to initiate a vote of no-confidence, on the grounds that she was unable to procure any development funds for the Panchayat. If this succeeds, the Up-Pradhan will officiate till the next elections are held.

**CASE 21** The following examples from Rajasthan highlight that the highest number of no-confidence

motions have been brought against Mahila Sarpanches.

- 1. Sarpanch Chaggal Bai of Rasoolpura Gram Panchayat, Shrinagar Panchayat Samiti, Ajmer is a Bheel by caste. She was never given due respect by the Gram Sewaks. She was not shown any accounts and held responsible for a fraud of Rs 2 lakhs. The Up-Sarpanch bribed all the ward panches to pass a no-confidence motion against her.
- 1. In the Baran Gram Panchayat, the Thakurs unsuccessfully tried to oust Rampyari in a case of embezzlement for Rs 80,000.
- 1. A Dalit woman Sarpanch, Munni Devi from Araj Panchayat Samiti, Ajmer faced two no-confidence motions. She won the first time but lost the second. Her case is currently pending in the High Court.

**CASE 22** Golwada village in Gujarat has a woman graduate Sarpanch, whose husband presides over all Panchayat activities. He is known as 'Sarpanch Pati'. What is alarming is that not only is the signature of 'Sarpanch Pati' on all resolutions and cheque books, but it is officially valid too.

**CASE 23** Surbaya Panchayat in Madhya Pradesh was reserved for adivasi women. In 1994, Bhakti Bai, 45 and illiterate, was elected unopposed to serve as a prop for the influential Up-Sarpanch, Anil Sharma. Bhakti Bai, heavily dependent on Sharma, initially functioned as his rubber stamp. This soon changed. In a land feud between Anil Sharma and an adivasi (Narpat), the Sarpanch sided with Narpat. She also began occupying the Sarpanch's chair in Sharma's presence. Insulted by this power play, Sharma used his influence and instituted a no-confidence motion against her, citing her illiteracy as the reason. The Sarpanch signed the no-confidence motion against her, ignorant of its content. Matters followed routinely and the date was fixed for re-election. Bhakti Bai, attending the last rites of her son, was unable to come on the appointed day. Another Adivasi woman, Sajende Bai was chosen as the Sarpanch. Ironically, Sajendi Bai has no idea how she became Sarpanch or even who appointed her!

**CASE 24** The Panchayat of Bhunkeher, Sohabal block, Satna district, Madhya Pradesh, is dominated by the SC community and is reserved for SC women representatives. Elections have taken place twice in the past five years.

The first Sarpanch, an illiterate woman, was falsely implicated by the Panchayat Secretary in connivance with her own son.

The Panchayat Secretary, belonged to a small but influential, Brahmin, land-owning community. He was involved in a number of corruption cases. Fearing arrest, he allegedly conspired with other upper caste influential people of the Panchayat and bribed the Sarpanch's illiterate and alcoholic son to implicate her. The Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat, similarly influenced, did not consider her case in the village. The District Collector later suspended the Sarpanch under Section 40 and ordered fresh Panchayat elections. Another SC woman was elected. Though illiterate, the newly elected Sarpanch comes from a politically active family. Her husband was also elected as a panch.

**CASE 25** Salehona village of Baramkela block, Raigarh district, Madhya Pradesh comprising mostly

of tribals belonging to the Sidar community, has been the centre of serious conflict between members of two political parties. Durpati Bai, the elected Sarpanch of the village, tried to start development activities, but a corrupt secretary began to put obstacles in her path. An amount of Rs 1.35 Lakh was sanctioned for the construction of a school, which was taken up by the panch, on contract. The work was, however, stopped halfway. When questioned by the visiting BDO and the Overseer, the panch demanded an additional Rs. 50,000. On rejection of this demand, the panch turned hostile, and the BDO and the Overseer had to run out of the meeting. Later in the Gram Sabha meeting, the Sarpanch was asked to submit details of expenses incurred in the construction of the school. When she asked for four days to comply, the Gram Sabha turned hostile and violent. She tried to escape, but people from the opposition pulled off her sari and no action has been taken against them.

This incident created a lot of controversy, and the law, taking its own time, followed its own procedures. The villagers in the meantime declared Durpati Bai an outcaste. All development work was stopped. The Panchayat Secretary left the village and another from Raigarh took over. He seldom visited the Panchayat and finally opted out. Today, the village has a new Secretary, but the incident has cast gloom over women members.

**CASE 26** Usha Ojha (OBC), aged 40, of Bhadera Gram Panchayat, Pohri block, in Madhya Pradesh comes across as a very articulate and informed Sarpanch, answering questions about her work with interest and knowledge. *(She even mentioned that she had to resort to bribery to get development funds sanctioned for her village.)* Recently, an unfortunate incident dampened her enthusiasm for public service. The lineman of the village ignored her repeated requests to undertake repairs in the village. Finally, she complained against him and pursued the case. The lineman retaliated by abusing her husband. In anger, the Sarpanch's husband slapped him. Subsequently, a false case was launched against her husband. Though the Sarpanch had called the police station the night of the incident, to lodge an FIR, she was directed to go to the police station only the next morning. When the Sarpanch arrived the next morning, her husband was declared a defendant. According to Usha, matters worsened because her relationship with a particular officer in the police station was strained, since she had contested the election against one of his relatives. The collective nexus exploited her dependence on her husband and crippled the spirit of a dynamic Sarpanch.

**CASE 27** Mathuri Bai, Sarpanch of Kharpa Panchayat, Madhya Pradesh is totally disillusioned. She is an illiterate but can sign her name. Her husband's friend, the Up-Sarpanch helped her win the elections. All the Panchayat work was handled by her husband, on her behalf. Once in the absence of her husband, taking the advantage of her illiteracy, the Up-Sarpanch made her sign on some documents which he misused, resulting in the mismanagement of Rs 15,000. Presently, there is a case against her.

**CASE 28** The Thakurs of Baran Gram Panchayat in Ajmer district, Rajasthan are dominant - economically and socially. They could not accept Ram Pyari as Sarpanch and initiated a no-confidence motion against her.

**CASE 29** The Sarpanch of the Brahminon Ki Saneri Gram Panchayat, Asind Panchayat Samiti, Rajasthan, Bheelwada said, that government officials feel that women Sarpanches are ineffective, thereby giving more power to the Gram Sachiv. In fact, the Gram Sachiv deceived her by taking her signature on a false muster roll. Later she was suspended on grounds of financial irregularity.

**CASE 30** 25 year old Usha, is Sarpanch of Gavgada village in Maharashtra. She has a postgraduate degree in economics. Her husband is a high school teacher and they have 2 children. She is a housewife and lives in a joint family with her in-laws. Her father-in-law is a farmer and the family is economically sound.

PRIA team met Usha initially at her house, with her in-laws present. Usha said that she contested the election on the advice of her father-in-law and husband. They cooperate with her fully in her work in the Panchayat. Later however, she took the PRIA team to a neighbor's house to meet a friend. In the absence of any family member, she expressed herself very honestly. She said that she would have liked to work more actively and independently as Sarpanch. Her in-laws constantly interfered and she was expected to consult with her father-in-law or husband before taking any decision. Despite being highly educated, she was not considered capable of understanding her work. Panchayat related matters were seen in the context of family prestige and Usha had no say. She too, was expected to put family prestige first and her duties as a Sarpanch later. This situation put pressure on Usha and she felt helpless.

**CASE 31** Indubai, 35, is the Sarpanch in Markal in Maharashtra. She stays in a nuclear family with her husband and works as an aanganwadi teacher. Her husband persuaded her to contest but she herself is not interested in this work. She feels burdened with housework as well as the aanganwadi work. She has no time to work as a Sarpanch. She doesn't think there is anything wrong with her husband taking care of her Panchayat responsibilities, since he keeps her informed.

**CASE 32** Vatsala Kale, 45, is the Sarpanch in Dhondmal, Maharashtra. She is also a member of several village level committees and helps people in settling disputes. A village group supported her nomination but when she became Sarpanch, some within the group opposed her on the grounds of her being a woman. Being one of the villages under the Government's "model" village programme, their opposition drew a lot of media attention and became a big issue. The village boycotted her but Vatsala refused to give in. Taking the support of a women's organization and some local women, she fought back. The opposition faded over time. Vatsala is a very active and informed Sarpanch and is keen to bring government development programmes to her village.

**CASE 33** In Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings, women are rarely given an opportunity to speak or express themselves. Several women have complained that their opinions were not taken into consideration in decision making and they were made to sit quietly at the back. On speaking, they were silenced, as in the case of an SC woman Panchayat member of Ratbai Panchayat, Gwalior district, Madhya Pradesh. She had asked about the progress of a proposal on widow pension raised by her in the previous meeting and was told by the Sarpanch (also an SC), that it was none of her business. She is no longer informed or called for any of the Panchayat meetings. Lack of confidence, fear of ridicule, shyness, lack of information and the presence of elder males were some of the reasons that prevented women from participating in meetings.